

THE TRAP OF ACE


EVA ZAHAN

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by Eva Zahan

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PROLOGUE



I stared at the girl before me. Her nervous eyes behind those black-rimmed glasses were also set on me. Tentatively, I tucked a strayed strand behind my ear and bit my lip. She mimicked.

I blinked. So did she.

“You done with your staredown match with yourself, Em?” A huff came from behind me. “For God’s sake! You’re doing this for the last five minutes. You’re creeping me out now!”

I glanced at my best friend through the mirror. With folded arms on her chest, sitting at the edge of my bed, she scowled at me.

My gaze went back to my reflection. “I don’t know, Beth. Do you think he—he’ll like my look?”

“After we spent two hours to doll you up? Yes, we think he’ll like your look. And won’t reject you when you announce your undying love for him,” Cassie said, my other best friend, standing beside Beth.

Reject. The same word has been haunting my dreams for years now. I’ve been waiting for this day for six years. The day he said those words to me. I’ve been waiting since.

And if he rejects me today... I don’t know what I would do.

“Will you be my prince, Ace? I want to be your princess.”

I asked my brother’s best friend after he gave me a Cinderella dress on my ninth birthday.

He laughed at my silly question, almost breaking my heart. But seeing my crestfallen face, he crouched down before me, looking at me with his stormy gray eyes. “You’re my princess.”

“Really?” I lit up like a Christmas tree. “That means you will marry me?”

He bit his lip, his eyes lit up with amusement. “I’m sorry, Rosebud. But I can’t.”

“Why not?” I pouted.

“Because it’s not the right time. You’re still so young.”

“Then when will be the right time?” I gazed up at him with so much hope.

“When you turn into a blooming rose from a rosebud.”

I waited for the day to bloom into a rose. I didn’t know what it meant at the time. But to remember and understand, I had written those words in my diary.

And Cassie said at this age we were big enough to have a lover. Well, she already had one at the age of fourteen, and was on her fourth at fifteen now.

I knew whatever Ace had said that day was because he didn’t want to break a nine-year-old’s naïve heart. But I didn’t care. I was ready to confess my feelings to him today. For real this time.

“Em, you’re looking stunning. Though I preferred your long wavy hair. But it’s all right, this suits you too,” Beth commented.

I had cut my waist length hair to my shoulder and tamed my wild waves into straight. Just like Tess, my sister. She and my brother, Tobias, were twins. So obviously, Ace was her best friend, too. I had once heard him say he liked Tess's hair. So, I turned my hair just like hers. Though hers is blonde where mine is chestnut.

“Short hair is in fashion now. And Ace likes them short,” I replied, checking my manicured nails. Just like Tess's.

Just like Ace preferred. All his girlfriends were just like my sister. Beautiful and classy. Yes, I was jealous of them. But then they all were temporary. Once we'd be together, then there wouldn't be anyone else in his life other than me.

I blushed at the thought.

So, I decided to be like them, taking inspiration from my sister. Maybe he would notice me then?

And today's whole makeover was the proof. Dressed like Tess, styled like Tess. I even sneaked her favorite perfume from her room.

“Isn't this dress too short, Cassie?”

Though I wanted to wear something like Tess, I was uncomfortable in them. She looked good in those tight little dresses. She had a good amount on both front and behind. While I was flat in both sections. Well, a fifteen-year-old couldn't have any more.

“Is not! You're wearing that and that's final! Don't you want to make Ace notice you?” She raised her brow.

“Fine!” I said, taking a deep breath.

Come on, Em. You can do this.

“Let’s go now. Otherwise, we will miss your brother and sister’s grand entry,” she chirped, sauntering outside.

Today was my older siblings’ nineteenth birthday. And every occasion at Hutton family was known to be grand. No one wanted to miss this special event. Almost half of the renowned families of the town were invited today.

When we all reached the hall, I kept fidgeting in my place. My hands were clammy, and my chest thudded. I was nervous for tonight’s meeting with Ace. And my too short dress made me even more uncomfortable.

I spotted my parents in the crowd. They stood close to each other, as always.

They were always joined at the hip. Even after twenty years of marriage, they were so madly in love with each other. And that made me hope. If Ace and I would be like that someday...

“Em!” Mom’s voice broke my daydream.

Smiling, I padded towards them.

“Oh, my! Look at you. My little baby is looking so beautiful today!” she gushed. Her smile was blinding.

“You think?” I blushed.

“Of course, baby. You should do it more.”

Dad stayed quiet. He didn’t seem to be pleased with me dressing up like that. Opposite of my nature.

“You didn’t like the gown I brought for you, princess?” he asked.

I did. Very much. But Ace wouldn’t like that.

“Of course I did. But... I couldn’t find matching jewelry with it,” I lied.

He nodded.

Mom had a knowing look on. She knew, everyone knew, of my crush on Achilles Valencian. But they didn't know it was more than just a mere crush.

He became my dream prince from the day he stepped into our house with Tobias when I was just seven. I still remembered that day clearly in my vague memories. But the day he saved me from some bullies in my school, he became my hero. And with time, he became my heart.

I stopped the urge to cover my flushed cheeks.

Where was he?

I looked around. People were gathered in small crowds. Some sipped on their drinks while some were engrossed in heavy conversations. He should've been here by now. Last month when he played chess with me, he promised me he would be here tonight. And he never broke his promises to me.

He used to come here everyday. But after the tragedy his family faced a year ago, his visit to our home lessened. He changed. Carefree, playful Ace turned into a lost and always angry Ace. He was always gentle with me, though. He would come and see us once a month. And of course, play chess with me.

The crowd cheered as Tess and Tobias descended the stairs in a dramatic way with the spotlight on them. In a pink mid-thigh fairy dress, Tess looked like a real fairy. Tobias also looked good in his black tux. They smiled down at the cameras as their friends clapped and whistled wildly.

But there wasn't any sign of Ace.

Excusing myself, I aimlessly wandered around the people.

Where are you?

“Oww!”

Colliding into a hard chest, I stumbled back. A pair of arms soon circled around my waist.

“I’m so...” Looking up, my breath hitched at my throat.

Stormy gray orbs stared down at me.

His dense stubble was gone, revealing his chiseled jaw. Jet black hair was gelled back and the ring on his right brow wasn’t there tonight. Even though there were dark shadows under his beautiful eyes, and he had lost some weight, he still looked breathtaking.

“Rosebud?” His forehead creased as he straightened me on my feet. Gray irises roamed up and down my body, his jaw clenching. “What’re you wearing?”

The Greek accent was deep in his voice.

And it happened whenever he was angry.

My eyes widened. Didn’t he like my appearance?

“Uh, why? Don’t I look good?” I bit my lip. “I thought you would like it.”

His frown deepened as he watched my hair and heavy makeup. But then he shook his head.

“You don’t need my approval in anything, Emerald. It’s your choice whatever you want to wear.” With that, he walked away.

My heart fell.

I looked down at myself. Was anything wrong with my look? Why was he so distant?

He has been like this since his dad died. Our families weren’t close, they always preferred their privacy. So, no one really knew what happened to his

dad. But whatever happened, it changed my Ace drastically. And it made my heart ache for him.

Running upstairs, I changed into the white gown Dad had brought me and removed my makeup. Once satisfied with my new, much natural look, I headed back downstairs.

Ignoring Cassie and Beth's raised brows, I went to find Ace again.

Tobias and Tess were busy chatting with their friends, but he wasn't there.

"Hey, Em!" Tobias called out.

Smiling, I walked to them.

"Aren't you forgetting something, little sis?"

Chuckling, I hugged him tight. "Happy birthday!"

He lifted me off the ground, getting a squeal out of me.

"Where is my gift?" he asked once he put me down.

Tobias loved his birthday gift from me. He loved the red velvet cake I baked him since I honed my skills in baking. And so did Ace.

"You will get it after the party. It's in the fridge," I replied, my gaze going back to the crowd for a moment.

And there he was, standing at a corner beside a table. With a drink in his hand, he looked deep in thought.

"Happy birthday!" I wrapped my arms around Tess.

"Thanks!" She pulled back. "You changed?" Her eyes raked over my gown.

Mark, a boy in their group, slapped Ace's back, greeting him. He didn't

reciprocate the gesture. And when Mark went to reach for the glass in his hand, a sharp look from him made the poor boy back away.

“That dress was slightly uncomfortable,” I said absentmindedly. My eyes set on him. “I will be back in just a minute.”

When I went to move, she caught my arm and dragged me away from her friends’ earshot. “You’re going to confess tonight, aren’t you?”

I let out a gasp. How did she know?

“Don’t.” Her tone was sharp. “You will only be heartbroken.”

Frowning, I snatched my arm from her grip. “How do you know? Who knows, maybe he likes me too.”

“Don’t be foolish, Em. Just because he is soft with you doesn’t mean he harbors any kind of feelings for you,” she said. “And you and I both know he only cares for you as a brother, not a lover. So don’t embarrass him with your stupidity. He is already disturbed with his own problems.”

Her words stung. I always feared his kindness towards me might be just a brotherly love. But deep down, I felt there was more than that. It may be stupid and nonsense, but my heart told me not to lose hope.

I won’t know unless I confront him, right?

“I won’t embarrass him. And you don’t know everything. So why don’t you just enjoy your party and let me be on my own?” My tone matched hers.

“Stay away from him, Emerald. He isn’t the one for you.”

My anger flared. “I will do whatever the hell I want, Tess. It’s none of your business! So, leave me alone.” Turning on my heels, I walked away.

Once I had padded close to where Ace stood, I took a calming breath and smoothed my hair. No one could stop me from expressing my feelings today.

“Hey!” My voice came out meek, gone was the confidence in the air. Nervousness fluttered in my tummy.

His gray orbs lifted to mine. This time, his gaze didn’t hold displeasure. But there wasn’t any pleasure either. They were just cold.

He was in a bad mood.

Should I do it today?

But I had to gather so much courage to make up my mind. I didn’t know if I would have that much guts anytime soon.

“Won’t you play chess with me today, Ace? I’ve been waiting for another match.”

Maybe after the game his mood will be lighter?

He thought for a second and then nodded. “Yeah, sounds good. This party is boring me, anyway.”

My grin was face splitting. “Let me get the board ready. In the library, as usual?”

He nodded, taking a sip. “I will be up in a few.”

Failing to contain my excitement, I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tight. His exotic cologne made me giddy.

“I will be waiting for you.”

His shoulders tensed. His touch on my back was almost non-existent.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled me away by my shoulders. His lips pursed in a straight line. “Go.”

Nodding, I skipped off to our small library and started to make the board ready. I could barely contain myself from dancing around. I was finally going to tell him.

Tell him I loved him.

Ten minutes passed, but he didn't show up. Then it turned into twenty. And there was no sign of him.

He said he'd be here in a few.

Letting out a sigh, I got up and went downstairs again. The party was going on in a full swing. Most elders retired for the night. There were only the youngsters, dancing and drinking wildly.

I spotted Cassie dancing with my brother while Beth chatted with some girls. But I couldn't see him anywhere. The loud music and sharp smell of alcohol almost made me gag.

Where is he?

Making my way through the half-wasted dancing population, I padded towards the balcony. But he wasn't even there. Did he forget about our match and left already?

But he never forgot our match.

Sighing in disappointment, I decided to go back up to my room.

Maybe another day.

Just as I turned to go, I heard something. Some strange noises. I didn't fully enter the balcony earlier, I was at the doorway.

Curious, I slowly moved inside and looked to my right.

I froze.

My heart stopped in my chest, breath hitched in my throat. My hands shook at my sides as I took in the sight before me.

His hands were wrapped around her waist and hers were around his neck; one hand tugged at his black hair as their mouth worked on each other in a

passionate kiss. Not even an inch of space was left between them.

Their every moan and groan hit my heart like a thousand stabs of knives, shattering it into millions of pieces.

My feet stumbled back, and tears fell from my eyes.

His hands roamed over her body as he pulled her closer.

My heart squeezed so hard I had to clutch my chest. A sob threatened to escape my lips.

Slapping a hand over my mouth, I ran away.

I didn't stop until I was inside my room. Closing the door behind me, I let out an agonized sob. Tears blinded my vision with my hand over my heart. It pained physically.

I felt my insides breaking, falling into irreparable pieces.

Several knocks landed on my door, and my best friends' concerned voices reached my ears. But I couldn't speak, I couldn't move. All I could do was lie on the floor in the darkness of my room and cry my heart out.

The visions of them tangled around each other flashed across my mind again and again.

He didn't know, but she did. Her betrayal just intensified the pain more. Betrayal of others could be tolerated, but betrayal of loved ones?

How could she do this to me? How?

I stayed on the cold floor for the entire night, cradling my heart, mourning the loss of my love.

The love my own sister took away from me.

ONE: BACK IN THE CITY



I glanced at my wrist.

Nine-thirty.

“Ma’am, please turn off your cell phone. The plane is about to take off,” the flight attendant said in her angelic voice.

“Yeah, just a minute.” I threw her an apologetic look.

Nodding, she walked away.

“Mom, I need to hang up now. The crew already warned me for the second time.”

“All right, all right! I will let you go now. You’re coming to me in some hours, anyway. We will be waiting outside the airport when you’ll land.” Excitement dripped from her voice. A sudden homesickness filled my mind. It’s been two years since I met them.

“And keep that boy at arm’s length,” Dad spoke in the background.

Shaking my head, I let out a chuckle. “I will see you at the airport.”

“Love you, honey!”

“Love you too!”

Sighing, I looked out the window. Another plane took off the runway,

flying high in the sky. It'd always fascinated me. Though I always struggled with myself not to flip during the taking offs.

A figure slumped beside me, making me turn my head. Letting out a huff, he settled against the seat.

“How’s your stomach now?” I asked, seeing the perspiration on his forehead and flushed cheeks.

“Not good. I shouldn’t have eaten the leftover macaroni last night. God, I swear I won’t ever touch leftovers again.” He groaned.

Poor guy. Even in this crisis, he agreed to come with me.

“I’m so sorry you have to travel with me in this state, Warner. You should’ve stayed back, you know?”

He flashed me a boyish smile. His brown eyes were warm. “Don’t be. It was my decision to tag along, even after knowing my condition this morning.”

“But it was me who asked you to come with me,” I said, guilt crashing on me.

“Don’t be silly. I can do anything for you. And this is just a slightly uncomfortable journey. It will go away just in a day. I’ve already taken medicine.” He grasped my hand, entwining our fingers.

I smiled, a grateful one.

“I love you,” he said, looking into my eyes.

The smile on my lips threatened to fall, but I managed to keep it on and squeezed his hand in return. The announcement of the flight attendant for every passenger to fasten their seat belts saved me from another awkward situation.

We've been dating for six months now. And known each other since I joined college. We were good friends from the beginning. After my several failures at keeping up on dating a guy for more than a week, I gave up on kindling any kind of relationship with anyone. And when Warner one day asked me out at a friend's get-together, I couldn't turn him down.

He was everything a girl would want in an ideal boyfriend. Handsome, intelligent, humble, honest. And most importantly, he knew me so well. After all, we've been friends for three years now. So, when he'd asked me to be his girlfriend, I said yes.

But even if he'd confessed his feelings thousands of times before me, I couldn't just bring myself to reciprocate. It's not that I didn't like him, I did. He was a great guy. Maybe it'd take some more time for me to feel more deeply for him. And I was waiting for that day.

"Ma'am, would you like some coffee?" The air hostess' voice broke my trance.

"Do you have tea?"

* * *

AFTER HOURS LATER, when we finally landed in Los Angeles, I found my parents right where they told me they would be. Holding a placard that said 'welcome home,' Mom met me with her more than usual enthusiastic hug, where Dad had a satisfied look in his eyes now that I finally came home. Though it was just for two weeks until I would go back.

From the day I decided to move to New York for my high school, he took the world of worry for me on his shoulders. They both did. It wasn't easy for me to stay so far from them, but it'd have been more difficult for me to stay here in Los Angeles.

I needed time to heal myself. The distance was necessary. As soon as the memories of that night started to flood in, I shut off my mind, burying them in the pit of my brain. Just like I did for the last seven years.

I've moved on.

“Welcome home, little mouse!” The moment I stepped into the threshold, I was tackled into a bone-crushing hug. “Look at ya. You’ve grown up!”

I rolled my eyes at my brother. “You just met me two months ago.”

“Yeah, but it feels like ages since I irritated you,” he said, eyes warm with nostalgia.

I smiled. I've missed him. Even though he visited me often in New York whenever he was on his business trips.

“You better keep your stupid ass away from me, I’m warning you!” I feigned a serious look.

He chuckled, and then his gaze fell on Warner who looked blue in the face from his marathon to washrooms every ten minutes. He seemed on the verge of fainting at any moment. He was extremely embarrassed when he had to run for the washroom before he could even shake Dad’s hand.

Way to impress my parents.

I wanted their first meeting to be good. Dad couldn’t dislike him anymore for that.

“He is too good to be true,” Dad had said once on the phone. I didn’t know why, but he didn’t approve of him the moment he heard we were dating.

“Hey, Warner! It’s good to see you, man.” Tobias gave him a side hug. “You all right, though? You look sick.”

“Nothing serious, just a stomach bug. And it’s nice to see you too.” Suddenly, his expression twisted like someone punched him in the gut. “Uh, if you don’t mind...”

“Go right and then straight up, the first door. You will find the guest room,” Dad said with a displeased tone.

Heaving a ‘thank you,’ he ran inside.

I sighed.

I will have to talk to Dad about this. Though Warner didn’t notice his tone now, he’d soon.

“Poor boy,” Mom murmured, subtly sending Dad a look of reprimand, which he proudly ignored and padded inside. Shaking her head, she looked at me. “Honey, why don’t you go to your room and freshen up. I will make something quick for you.”

Getting a nod from me, she followed Dad. Definitely to give him an earful.

Tobias threw an arm over my shoulder as we climbed up the stairs. “So? You’re determined to keep this one, huh?”

Like Dad, he also wasn’t fond of my boyfriend. But when Dad was blatant about it, he was sneaky.

“He is a good guy, Tobias. And the best thing is, he is my best friend.”

“Is it just it? You will keep him because he is a good guy and your friend?” He raised his brow.

“Isn’t it enough?”

He shrugged. “What about feelings? I don’t see you look at him the way you used to look at A—”

I put a hand up, not letting him finish the sentence. “I like him. I think it’s enough for me to stay in a relationship with him. And you should be happy for me, don’t you think?”

Something flashed in his warm blue eyes he inherited from Dad. A look I couldn’t decipher. Then he smiled. “If that’s what makes you happy, Em.”

My lips curled up. “Thanks for understanding.”

Once he left me in my room to freshen up, I left a message to Cassie and Beth, letting them know about my arrival and prepared for a long warm bath. It’s been so long since I’ve seen them, though Face Timing was regular between us. They’d wanted to join me in New York for college, but Beth couldn’t do it because her boyfriend was here. And Cassie, well, she’d left her studies for her modeling career.

Good thing it was the right decision. Her career was growing day by day. And I couldn’t be more proud.

At dinner, Warner looked much better. Tonight was our family dinner, so delicious dishes made by Mom were the specialty. If I missed anything all these years besides my family, it was her cooking.

When she placed a plate of apple-pies before me, I gaped at her, my face splitting into a greedy grin. “My favorite!”

Chuckling, she took her chair beside Dad.

When Tobias tried to pick one, I slapped his hand away. “Don’t you dare touch them. They’re all mine.”

He frowned. “But that’s not fair. I also love them!”

“Toby, let my daughter have whatever she wants. You had them these years all by yourself, now it’s her turn,” Dad said.

“This is partiality!” he complained, making us all laugh. Mom’s irises twinkled, watching us banter like old times. Then her gaze fell on my left wrist.

“What a beautiful bracelet! When did you get it, honey?”

I gazed down at it. An involuntary smile touched my lips. It was a thin golden chain, decorated with glittering emeralds and sparkling tiny diamonds, shaped like roses.

“Someone gifted it to me on my graduation day,” I replied.

I still remember that day. Mom and Dad couldn’t attend because their flight got cancelled due to bad weather. No one from my family could attend. With a sunken mood when I returned to my apartment that night after a wild party with my friends, I found a small box laid before my door.

It was from someone anonymous. No note or name. Though I didn’t want to keep it, I just couldn’t resist it. I fell in love with it at first sight.

“Who?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know. There wasn’t any name on the gift box.”

“Princess, you shouldn’t accept anonymous gifts. It can be risky. And who would give you such an expensive bracelet and not reveal their name?” Dad’s forehead creased.

“It might be Tom. And I’m sure he is the one who sends you roses on your every birthday,” Warner said, his tone was filled with annoyance.

“Who is Tom?” Mom looked at me.

I sighed. “No one, Mom. A guy from my college who once asked me out.”

“No one? He literally stalked you everywhere until something happened,

and he disappeared in the air. He must've taken my threat seriously about handing him over to police," Warner exclaimed, his features were grim.

"Stalker?" Mom and Dad shrieked at the same time.

"All this happened, and you didn't even consider informing us?" Dad gave me a look of displeasure and disappointment.

Warner shifted uncomfortably in his chair at my glare. He had to open his big mouth right now, didn't he?

"Calm down, Dad. He was gone before I could even take any action."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. One day he just... disappeared." I shrugged. "Maybe he got the idea of my disinterest and gave up."

"He even disappeared from college," Warner muttered, receiving another look from me.

Honestly, I didn't care where he vanished. But I didn't think it was him who gave me this bracelet. Such a beautiful idea couldn't come to a psycho's head.

"Still, you should've told us, princess." Dad shook his head.

"It's all right, Mr. Hutton. I was there with her," Warner chimed.

Dad eyed his lack of muscles and went back to his food. Tobias's lips twitched at the side in amusement. He knew about Tom, but didn't inform my parents because he knew how restless they could get about every little thing.

Mom's gaze darted to the door. My sister was still missing.

Just as I picked an apple-pie and brought it to my lips, the sound of heels clicking against the tiled floor reached my ears.

With a big smile on her face, she sauntered closer. "Hey everyone! Sorry,

got stuck with something.”

Yellow sundress, high stilettos, shoulder length straight blonde hair, blue eyes, and perfect makeup. As stunning and sophisticated as ever.

“Hey, little sis!” Lightly kissing my cheeks, she sat next to me. “Look at you, you’ve grown more beautiful than the last time I remember.”

My lips turned up in a tight smile. “Thanks. How are you?”

“Oh, I’ve been good! More than just good, actually,” she chirped, her skin glowing under the light.

When her gaze landed on Warner, she recognized him immediately. Though I wasn’t in touch with her much, Tobias kept updating her about me on a regular basis. Even though she wasn’t interested.

After we were finished with our dinner, dessert was served.

“So, Em? You heard about the party tomorrow night?” Tess asked.

Mom tensed at the mention of the party. I raised my brows.

“What party?”

“They didn’t tell you? The party at Valencian house.” Now it was my turn to tense, where her eyes shone with excitement. “A party will be thrown at the celebration of Valencian Corp’s coming on Forbes business magazine. They’re ruling the country’s business world now. Isn’t it cool?”

Tobias cast a concerned glance. So did Mom. At Tess’s question, I just nodded.

“Yeah, that boy has worked hard for it. After his father, he handled their whole business single-handedly,” Dad said, his eyes held proud.

“Why not? After all, he is my best friend,” Tess said.

Flashes of that night floated in my mind. My hand curled around the

glass.

“And, another thing! At this party, I’m going to announce something really important before the whole world. So, you all must attend.”

As I was about to open my mouth to say no, Mom gasped. “Is that a ring on your finger, Tess?”

Another smile stretched across her lips as she shyly raised her hand for everyone to see. A golden ring with tiny diamonds on it glittered under the light. “H-he proposed to me last night. And tomorrow, we’re going to announce our official engagement date.”

Everyone was stunned. Something churned in my stomach.

“When did this happen? I thought you guys weren’t serious,” Mom queried.

“I know. We were on and off. There were some issues between us. Especially with him, you know, after what happened to his family? But he finally got the balls and proposed to me last night! I can’t explain how happy I am.” Her eyes shone with happy tears.

And then my gaze fell on the letter that was engraved on her ring.

“What’s the ‘V’ stand for, Tess?” The grip of my hand tightened around the glass.

She followed my stare. “Oh, it’s for ‘Valencian.’ Isn’t it beautiful?”

TWO: STORMY GRAY EYES



A knock landed on the door. “You ready, honey? Your dad is waiting downstairs.”

“Yeah, Mom. Just give a minute,” I replied, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

“All right, come soon.”

I ran my palm over the red material clung against my skin. It felt smooth. Everything was perfect. The nude makeup, the simple side-parted long hair, the off-shoulder gown with a sweetheart neckline and a semi-high slit at the side, everything was in place.

“I’m ready,” I whispered.

Grabbing my black clutch, I smoothed my hair once again and sauntered downstairs.

Warner met me at the door. His lips parted, brown eyes looking up and down my body. “Holy shit! You look...” He shook his head. “I have no words.”

I smiled. “Thanks. You don’t look bad yourself.”

He did look good in his three-piece suit and tie. With his brown locks combed neatly, his jaw was clean shaved tonight.

“Shall we?” I asked.

“Sure. God knows, no one can take their eyes off you tonight.” Grinning, he gave me an arm, and I took it.

Once outside, we found Mom adjusting Dad’s tie as he grunted something under his breath. His face turned grim, spotting us together. After Mom gushed about my looks, we all piled in the car.

Though her subtle attempt of asking me if I was feeling good didn’t go unnoticed by me after I left in the middle of dinner last night. Jet lag was my excuse. I knew she wanted to ensure if I was okay, not physically, but emotionally.

Everyone avoided talking about the engagement as much as possible before me. They all had an idea of my heartbreak seven years ago. Not all of it, though. They weren’t aware of what happened that night.

But I wasn’t the fifteen-year-old Emerald anymore.

I was going to face the man who broke my heart years ago and see him announce his engagement with my sister before the world. But I was all right. It’s been years since then. I had a boyfriend. I’d moved on.

After last night, I hadn’t seen her. And honestly, I didn’t want to. Even if I didn’t care anymore, I still felt the anger and betrayal I felt that night. After knowing everything, how could she come and announce her engagement to me as if nothing happened?

How could she...

I shook myself, not wanting to remember the past.

I am stronger now.

The past should remain in the past. And I should be happy for her.

It's been years, after all. And I had overcome the past.

It doesn't affect me now. Not at all.

The car screeched to a halt, along with my heart. Mom and Dad got out, and Warner followed behind.

We were here.

"Em?" Warner called out, waiting for me outside.

Deep breaths came out of me, my hands fisted. Heart palpitating down the chest, my mouth turned dry. A drop of sweat trickled down my nape.

It was slipping. The calm façade, it was slipping from my control.

"Honey? Come on, Tessa is waiting for us inside," Mom probed.

I can do it. Nothing happened. I've moved on.

Giving her a tight nod, I gritted my teeth and scrambled out with shaky knees. I caught Warner's arm in a vice grip as my attention fell on the huge mansion I didn't remember when I last visited.

"You all right? You look a little pale," Warner asked as we crossed the threshold.

The line I shouldn't cross.

"I'm fine." My nails dug into my palm.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, clutching him harder. He winced but didn't ask any further. And I was grateful for that.

I let him drag me across the mass of people dressed in sophisticated and branded clothes. The vast hall was sufficient to gulp the massive crowd alone. Everything was decorated the way a party of one of the most

influential families should be. Elegant, yet dazzling.

As we passed the chatting and drinking crowd, we spotted Tess, standing beside some of her friends. Seeing us, she excused herself and rushed to us, the tail of her silvery sparkling gown dragged behind her. Tobias also followed.

If all their friends were here, that meant...

Tugging my hand out of Warner's arm, I took a step back. Glanced around, my legs urged me to run. Go back to the safety of my room where someone couldn't reach me. Someone who I buried in the pit of my memories.

"Oh my God. Look at my baby, you're looking so beautiful!" Mom's voice croaked as she glanced at Dad. "When did our daughter grew up so much, Wilson? Look at her wearing an engagement ring today." She sniffled.

I averted my gaze from her ring and took a glass of wine from a passing waiter. My hand shook around it.

Dad rubbed Mom's back while Tess rolled her eyes. "Mom, we're just announcing our official engagement date. I'm not getting married tonight."

"Don't worry about her, she just got a little emotional. Anyway, where is your fiancé?" Dad asked, looking around.

"Oh, he is over there." She pointed near the bar. And I froze.

Slowly and steadily, I followed everyone's gaze. Four men stood together, one of them stood with his back to us.

Is it... him?

Seven years. After seven years, I will come face to face to him. I will have to look into those stormy gray pools...

I let out a shaky breath. I needed air, I needed out.

Just as I was about to slip away, Tess called out for him.

“Caleb?”

My steps halted. Caleb?

I glanced at the direction as that man turned around and a broad grin lightened his face. Striding closer, he kissed Tess’s cheek and greeted Mom and Dad.

They linked arms, gazing at each other’s eyes with full of affection... I blinked. A silent gasp slipped through my lips.

Caleb was the one Tess got engaged to? Achilles’s cousin?

Now that ‘V’ in her ring made sense. ‘V’ for Valencian. Caleb Valencian.

A pressure in my chest suddenly disappeared, filling it with air. They weren’t together.

“Em? Emerald? Is that you?” Caleb asked, recognition flickered in his caramel eyes. “Oh my God. It is the infamous Emerald Hutton who didn’t even give a call to this poor abandoned man all these years?”

I managed a smile. “Hey, Caleb.”

He engulfed me in a bear hug. And I couldn’t help but return his endearment. He was like a big brother to me. But in the process of distancing myself from a certain person, I cut ties with everyone involved with the Valencians.

He pulled away and put his hands on my shoulders. “Did anyone tell you what a beautiful woman you’ve grown up into?”

Chuckling, I shook my head. The grip around my glass remained firm. Any moment now.

“If you’ve stopped flirting with my sister, can I hug her now?” Tess raised her brow at Caleb.

Grinning, he placed a kiss on her temple. “You know I only have eyes for you, right?”

Rolling her eyes, she pushed him away and threw her arms around me. “You’re looking lovely!”

“So are you,” I said. Her gaze locked with mine. Something close to regret flashed in her eyes, and then something else which I couldn’t decipher.

“Emerald, I—”

“It’s time to dance,” Caleb interrupted. He gave Tess a look that didn’t go unnoticed.

What’s going on?

“Shall we?”

Blinking, Tess cleared her throat. She smiled and placed her hand on Caleb’s and together they skipped off to the dance floor. Mom and Dad got busy in conversation with some other couple.

Warner’s phone rang, interrupting him as he went to say something. Excusing himself, he walked away to attend the call.

Tobias noticed my wary glances. My uneasiness.

“Relax, everything will be fine.”

“What? Why did you say that?” I feigned confusion.

He sighed, shaking his head. “Nothing. You need another drink?” He jutted his chin at my empty glass.

I wanted to tell him to stay with me, but decided against it. “Sure.”

Nodding, he went to the bar to get us drinks.

I didn't need anyone for support. I could deal with it alone. I wasn't that naïve teenager anymore who would fall at his feet with just his one glance.

The hair at the back of my neck stood up. Goosebumps pricked on my skin.

Turning around, I observed my surroundings. Nothing seemed unusual. Then why did I feel like someone was watching me?

As the colorful lights moved around the mass of chattering people, my gaze went to the first floor and stuck there. At the furthest corner, a figure stood there; his face in the shadow. With his hands in his pockets, he stood unmoving, his body facing mine. Even if I couldn't see his face, I could tell he was looking at me. And for some reason, it unnerved me. Even then, I couldn't tear my eyes.

Who is he?

“Em?”

Jumping in fright, I whirled around.

“Whoa! Relax, it's just me,” Warner said, putting his hands up.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I turned back again. He was gone.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. You just startled me,” I replied, wetting my lips.

“All right. Dance?” he asked, giving me his hand.

I looked for Tobias, who was laughing with some girls with two glasses still in his hands. I shook my head at my brother.

Giving Warner a small smile, I took his hand.

I didn't want to be alone right now.

Once on the dance floor, we started to sway under the dim lights and slow music. And then I felt it again. That stare, the burning gaze watching me from afar, following my every move.

Warner tucked a strand behind my ear, but my ardent gaze was searching for something in the crowd.

"Em? You sure you're all right? You look a little disturbed since last night." He frowned.

"Yeah. Don't worry. Just the jet lag," I lied. I didn't want to. But I couldn't tell him why my nerves had gone haywire since I heard of this party.

"If you say so. But you know you can tell me anything and everything, I will listen, right?"

This time, my smile was genuine. I nodded. "I know."

His lips turned up as he took one of my hands and placed a kiss on the back of it.

A throat cleared behind me. "May I have the chance to dance with this beautiful lady?" A deep hard voice asked. Distant Greek accent.

I stiffened.

Warner looked up over my head, and his eyes widened slightly. Recognition flashed into his eyes as a polite smile tugged at his lips. "Sure." Stepping away, he glanced at me. "I will wait for you at the bar." Then he disappeared from the dance floor.

I wanted to tell him not to leave, but I couldn't move or say anything.

I didn't even turn around. Didn't dare to. My heart pounded in my chest as I felt his heat behind me. A pair of big, calloused hands covered mine,

placing them before me together, with his arms engulfing me. A gasp slipped through my lips at the electricity that ran in waves into my veins.

When I didn't move, he took control and swayed us both with his enormous frame around me in slow moves. The heady combination of his exotic cologne tangled with smoke filled my senses.

Still the same.

My brain stopped working.

Hot breath tickled my neck, making my knees weak. An uncouth swarm of emotions crashed over me. Something clenched in my chest as a shaky breath left my lips.

We stayed silent as we swayed under the music. All I could hear was the music, my deep breathing, and the pounding of my heart in my ears. My hands trembled under his.

I couldn't do this. I needed to go away.

Moving his arms, when I tried to pull away, he grasped my hand and swirled me around, pulling me in. My chest collided against him. Gasping, when I looked up at him...

My breath caught in my throat.

Those stormy gray eyes...

After seven years, I was looking into them. And it was what I feared. They held me captive, just as they used to do years ago. Those gray pools peered into my soul, compelling me. His face was inches away from mine.

Breathless, I took in his other features. And I was lost for words.

Strong chiseled jaw, prominent chin, beautiful sharp nose, firm desirable lips, and a wide forehead. Not even a strand of his jet-black hair was out of

place. He wore it long, the ends touching his neck. Just like a Greek god.

Gone was that charming boyish look. Everything about him now screamed man. A powerful, rough man.

I was breathless. My gaze couldn't move from his face. I didn't know age made people that much beautiful. No, beautiful wasn't the word. Words couldn't describe Achilles Valencian.

He was... out of this world.

Raising a hand, he brushed a single strand away from my face, and I didn't feel the shiver when Warner had done it earlier. His eyes roamed every inch of my face, as if memorizing them. They seemed in some kind of trance. As if he couldn't help it, he brushed his knuckles against my cheek. A breathy murmur left his lips, which I couldn't decipher.

Subconsciously, I leaned into his touch, eyes not leaving his face. Skin eager for more, only those strong arms around me didn't suffice. My heart longed for something as it basked under his scorching gaze. The gaze I used to die for wishing it on me even for a second.

My vision burned at the soaring emotions slamming in my chest.

My Ace...

But then his voice broke my trance, bringing me back to the present, the reality.

“Still won't talk to me, Rosebud?” Gray eyes locked with my turquoise ones.

Rosebud? So, he still remembered someone of that name existed in his life?

THREE: HIS ROSEBUD?



The name that used to give me flutters in my tummy now only added fuel to something that smoldered inside me for years.

I didn't want to be called by that name anymore.

"I didn't think my Rosebud could stay mad at me for that long," he drawled as I kept quiet, his eyes searching for something on my face.

My Rosebud?

Whatever you see on my face, Achilles Valencian, you won't find the fifteen-year-old sister of your best friend there. Because she died that night because of you. And the irony was, it wasn't even your fault.

"Don't call me that!" My voice came out much like a snap.

When he raised a brow, I tried to cool my nerves. I couldn't show him my anger. And though how much right it seemed, he wasn't at any fault.

He didn't even know.

"I-I have a name. And I'd prefer to be called by that. I don't like when someone calls me with nicknames," I clarified.

The side of his lips quirked up. "I know your name. But you will always be Rosebud to me." He leaned in, his hot breath fanning my earlobe. "Though this Rosebud of mine now bloomed into a beautiful rose."

My heart stuttered.

Whispers of the past echoed in my mind.

‘Really?’ I brightened up like a Christmas tree. ‘That means you will marry me?’

He bit his lip, his eyes lit up with amusement. ‘I’m sorry, Rosebud. But I can’t.’

‘Why not?’ I pouted.

‘Because it’s not the right time. You’re still so young.’

‘Then when will be the right time?’ I gazed up at him with so much hope.

‘When you turn into a blooming rose from a rosebud.’

A shaky breath left my lips, a squeezing pain shot through my chest. My eyes stung with forbidden memories. He... remembered?

But then flashes of that night floated across my eyes. My throat tightened, causing me to ball my fists.

I gulped, it felt like acid burning inside me. I needed air.

Moving out of his arms, I pushed him away. Surprise flashed across his eyes, and then something close to concern took over his features. Not wanting to stay there any longer, I turned around and walked away. As fast as I could without creating a scene.

“Rosebud!” He called after me. In my peripheral, I saw Tobias going to him, maybe to stop him from following me.

“Em? Where are you going?”

Ignoring Warner’s question, I ran out of there and didn’t stop until I was at the serenity of the huge balcony.

Gripping the railing, I breathed in the cold night air. Up in the sky, hung the half-curved moon, surrounded by gazillions of twinkling stars. They winked at me, as if mocking me for my pathetic feelings.

A lone tear escaped my eye as the cool breeze touched my face. And then I let some more fall free. Tears that I'd been succeeding to hold in for years.

My hand clutched my chest as I felt the same pain it felt that night. As if someone sliced open the old wounds.

Biting my lip hard, I attempted to stop those tears. Seven years. Seven freaking years! And here I was, still mourning over the heartache I got as a punishment for my foolishness. Seven years, and it still pained me physically to remember the loss.

I was still afraid of seeing him. I was still a coward. That's why I tagged Warner along. I needed support. I knew one way or another, in these two weeks, I'd have to face him. I'd been trying to escape him after that night. I'd avoided him like a plague. Even if it was impossible on some occasions to avoid him before I left LA, I didn't look at him. I couldn't look at him because I knew. I knew if I made the mistake to look up, he would see it. He would see it all.

And he'd find out how pathetic I was for believing his words he said to a nine-year-old naïve kid, not to break her fragile heart.

I thought, I'll forget him if I go away. So, I went to live in a different city. I thought, if I dated other men, I'd forget him. So, I dated a lot of men. If I toughen myself up, I'd be able to wipe him from my memories.

But no. Just one glance, and some mere words threw me back to where I'd been years ago. All my attempts failed.

"Why?" I whispered, my voice quivering.

Why can't I just move on? After all these years, why does it still hurt?

Fuck you, Achilles Valencian! Fuck you for fucking up my life!

I wiped my face when I felt a presence behind me. A glass of orange juice was held before me.

"Just give me a moment, Warner. I will be inside in a while."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not your boyfriend. He is enjoying his drink very much with your brother inside."

I snapped my head toward him. He followed me here?

Stormy gray eyes were dark with... anger, shadowed jaw was clenched. His charcoal suit gleamed under the moonlight as he towered over me. Even after these years, I could only reach his broad shoulders with my five feet four inches height.

And the way he pronounced the word 'boyfriend' with malice, didn't go unnoticed by me. I didn't like that tone at all.

"Why are you here?" I took a step back. His proximity suffocated me.

He covered the distance I created between us, handing me the glass. "Came to see if you're okay."

You didn't come to see me all these years.

"You don't need to be concerned about my well-being." I ran my free hand over my arm as chilling air kissed my bare skin.

A muscle of his jaw ticked. Shrugging off his jacket, he placed it over my shoulders. I tried to go away from his overwhelming presence but he held me in place and secured it around me. His intoxicating scent filled my senses.

"I will always be concerned for your well-being, Emerald. I can't stop doing it even if I want to. And I won't."

“Why?” I looked up into his intense gray eyes. His arms were still around me.

Why wasn't I pulling away?

“Because I care for you.”

As a little sister? A sourness rose in my throat.

“And why do you care for me?” I asked. My tone was bitter.

Leaning in, he nuzzled my hair, breathing me in. A shiver ran down my spine. Then he pulled away and peered into my soul, briefly glancing down at my parted lips.

“Let's keep the answer for another day. Let time unfold the inevitable of its own.” Tucking a strand behind my ear, he turned around and strode away, leaving me there. Cold and confused.

What did he mean by inevitable?

Whatever, I didn't care. Looking back up at the sky, I took a deep breath to calm myself down. Composing myself, I sauntered back inside.

I found him at the feet of the huge staircase, talking to a bald middle-aged man. But his gaze was on me.

Averting my stare, I stopped a passerby waiter.

“Yes, ma'am? What'd you like to have?” He pointed to the variety of drinks on his tray.

“Nothing, but I need you to do something.” Shrugging off the jacket, I handed it to him. “Would you please return it to Mr. Valencian? He forgot it with me.”

The waiter followed my gaze, and seeing the tightness of Ace's jaw, the color of his face drained. He fumbled in his place with the tray and jacket in

both of his hands. Before he could object, I thanked him and left.

The more I'd be away from him, and things related to him, the more it'd be good for me.

"Em? Where were you? You okay? I was about to go to you, but Tobias said to give you some time alone. Is everything all right?" Warner fired as soon as he saw me. Standing beside him, my brother eyed me with concern.

I gave him a tight smile. "Everything is fine. Don't worry. I just needed some fresh air."

He didn't look convinced, but nodded, anyway. That's what I liked about him, he never forced me to do anything I didn't want to.

When I asked Tobias for the car keys, excusing of not feeling well, he requested me to stay until the announcement and cake cutting. I agreed to stay until the announcement, only for Mom and Dad. I didn't want them to worry. And the entire time, I ignored a pair of scorching eyes on me.

I needed to get away if I wanted to keep my sanity intact.

* * *

THE BLARING of my phone alarm woke me from my sleep that had come to me with much difficulty last night. The soft beams of morning sun fell into the room, causing me to squint. Letting out a yawn, I sat up.

My head felt heavy. And soon my heart followed as the memories of last night flew in.

Closing my eyes, I pinched the bridge of my nose. Just a few more days, and then I will be gone.

The buzz of my mobile caught my attention.

Must be one of the girls.

Reaching out, I grabbed my phone and saw a message from an unknown number.

Good morning, my Rosebud! Hope you had a good night's sleep.

My heart skipped a beat. Ace?

My hands curled around the phone. What did he want now? Was my behavior last night not enough to clarify that I didn't want to do anything with him? Even though he didn't know the reason, I didn't care.

I thought to reply to him with a 'back off' but didn't. Deleting the message, I threw my phone back on the bed and padded into the washroom.

"So? What're you gonna do now?" Cassie raised her brow when Beth munched on the chocolate chips she brought with her.

They came to hang out at my place and together we had breakfast. Then we sat before the TV, sprawling on the leather couches. Mom and Dad went shopping right after breakfast for Tess's upcoming engagement party. And Warner tagged along happily. Good thing I could share everything with the girls without fearing about anyone overhearing.

"I don't know. And it doesn't matter, you know? He is just being polite to me as a family friend, that's all," I replied.

"And 'ow do you 'ow that?" Beth asked with her mouth filled with chips.

I shrugged. "Why else was he being so nice all of a sudden then? Before I moved to New York, he was never around. And even when he was, he never said a word to me, which I was grateful for. But now, after all these years, he is suddenly so nice to me. Calling me Rosebud like nothing happened."

Both of them listened to my blabbering with utmost attention.

"Hmm, it's confusing," Cassie hummed. "Maybe you're right. But then

you said he remembered what he said on your ninth birthday?”

I nodded. “He did say those words. But I don’t know if it was just a coincidence. Maybe he didn’t even know what he was saying?”

Did he really?

“He even said he cares for you and his behavior was strange,” Beth stated, then her hazel eyes lit up with realization. “Maybe he saw you last night and lost his heart to you? You know, love at first sight?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Shut up, Beth! Achilles Valencian isn’t a man to fall in love with someone at one glance. Of all these years, did you see him with even a single girl around him?” Cassie scoffed. “Some even think he could be a closet gay.”

Not even a single girl? I thought if he wasn’t with Tess, then there must be another girl in his life.

Something burned in my chest at that thought. I ignored the feeling. It wasn’t possible. He must have someone in his life.

“He isn’t and that I can guarantee you,” Beth retorted. “Did you forget the amount of girls he used to tag along at school?”

Cassie flipped her middle finger and slumped back on the couch. “We don’t know everything. Maybe he changed his preference after he’d gone to England for two years, right after Em left for New York?”

I heard about him going to England to pursue some degree. And in those two years, he didn’t return home even once.

“Whatever. And you said you moved on, right? You like Warner. Then why do you care what Achilles Valencian does?” Beth queried.

I was out of answers. “Of course I moved on. And I do like Warner very much.” I raised my chin in confidence. “And I don’t care what he does or doesn’t do. I was just sharing what happened last night.”

They gave me a look, not convinced at all. I shifted my eyes to the television.

The doorbell rang, breaking the awkward situation. I sighed in relief as both of their gazes turned to the door.

Cassie went for it, and a minute later she walked back in.

“Well, I think it’s now a considerable matter for you to care about,” she commented, with a bouquet of white roses in her hand.

“Whose is it for?” Beth raised to her feet.

Cassie’s eyes locked with mine. “Guess who?”

Leaping up, I grabbed the bouquet and took out the note.

A beautiful day should start with those beautiful flowers. Hope you like them.

-A

My heart raced.

“Who sent them? And who is ‘A’?” Beth asked, frowning.

Cassie rolled her eyes. “You should guess it by the letter.”

Beth’s eyes went big as realization set in.

“So, he sent flowers for you.” Her tone was teasing. “I didn’t know people send their family friends good morning messages and flowers without any reason. But why white roses, though?”

I looked up at Cassie as she said, “White roses symbolize peace.” The

corner of her mouth turned up in a smirk. “And a fresh start. So, you better start caring, Emerald Hutton. Because I think Achilles Valencian wants a fresh start with you. And as far as we all know, he always gets what he wants.”

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FOUR: MEETING THE DEVIL AGAIN



I cleared my throat, catching everyone's attention around the square table. The noise of their cutleries and spoons stopped along.

I knew what I was about to say would upset them. But it had to be done. Taking a deep breath, I said, "I'm leaving for New York this Friday."

Silence. The shock on Tobias's face was clear.

"But we thought since your college is finished now, you'd stay with us again from now on." Dad's forehead creased. Mom agreed with him.

"No, Dad. I'm not a kid anymore. I can't crash here just because my college is over. It's time to build my career. So, I have to go back."

"But what's wrong with Los Angeles? You can easily get a job here," Mom argued. "If you want your privacy, honey, then it's all right. We can arrange an apartment for you. At least you will stay close to us." Her voice broke.

"Why don't you help Tobias in our own company?" Dad suggested, and my brother bobbed his head eagerly.

"Yes, in that way you won't have to work under anyone. You'll have free will in your own company. You don't need to leave, Em."

"Dad, Tobias, how many times do I have to tell you that I want to do

something on my own? I want to prove to myself that I can stand on my own feet without anyone's support. I'm extremely grateful to have you guys care for me. But—I can't work in our company. Maybe in the future, but not now."

What I said was true. I wanted to do something on my own ability. But it wasn't the main reason for me to leave right now.

"If you want to work somewhere else, it's fine with us. But you don't have to go that far from us, honey. You could look out for jobs staying here, near us," Mom said again. Guilt washed over me for hurting her like that. But if I stayed here, I wouldn't be able to take care of my heart.

"I'm sorry, Mom. Staying all these years over there, my plans are revolving all around New York. I'd have reconsidered my plans if I already wasn't called for interviews next week."

I had two interviews from two prestigious textile companies, and I couldn't miss them even if I wanted to.

"And the companies who called me for interviews, they've been my dream places to work at. So, I'm to leave this Friday. I'm sorry."

Dad sighed and placed a hand over Mom's, comforting her. "If that's what you want, princess. We won't stop you. But if by any chance you change your plans, let us know."

I nodded, relieved he understood. "Thank you, Dad. Don't worry. I will visit from time to time to see you guys."

"But what about Tess's engagement? You can't miss that," Tobias stated.

"It's next month. Nothing to worry about, I will figure something out when the time comes," I assured him. But he didn't look pleased at all. Honestly, I didn't want to go away from them again. But I didn't have any

choice.

* * *

A KNOCK LANDED on my door, and Warner poked his head in. “You busy?”

“Not really. Just checking some emails,” I answered. Placing the laptop on the bed from my lap, I turned to him. “How did your dinner go with your cousin?”

He shrugged. “Good. Just as usual. You tell me, how did your talk go with your family?”

A sigh left my lips. “They weren’t happy. But they also know I’m not going to budge from my decision.”

I glanced outside the window, gazing at the starry night.

“Hey, what is it?” he asked, turning me to him.

I bit my lip, my throat tightening. “Nothing, it’s just... it’s difficult to go that far from my family. I wish I could stay here with them.” But for one person, it wasn’t possible.

“Hey, look at me.” He grasped my hand. “Everything will be all right. Don’t be upset. It’s just the beginning of your career. Once you get a good grip, maybe in the future you can come back to this city. And it’s not like you won’t visit them from time to time. They can also go and see you there, too. So, don’t worry, okay? Everything will turn out good.”

Nodding, I squeezed his hand. “Thank you for always being there for me.”

He smiled and kissed my lips. “Anything for you.”

* * *

“WHERE ARE THEY?” I asked, adjusting my cap from the scorching sun.

People buzzed with excitement around us as they rushed in and out of the auditorium.

“They will be here in no time, don’t worry. Let’s just go and grab our seats,” Tobias said, ushering me and Warner inside.

We were at Castelo Track. The famous place to enjoy horse racing. I didn’t know we were coming to this game until my brother called this morning announcing his and Tess’s plan. Caleb didn’t get much time to spend with me and Warner, so Tess thought it’d be great to enjoy a horse race together; a way to catch up with us.

I didn’t want to come, but Warner was too excited for me to say no. Even though meeting my sister didn’t appeal to me that much, saying no would’ve been rude to Caleb. So, I agreed.

Once we grabbed pre-booked seats, we waited for the couple to arrive and the race to start. At least thirty or thirty-five horses were lined up at the side, far from the auditorium. Their jockeys were preparing themselves and checking their horses to see if everything was all right. Their neighs were covered by the hubbub of the audience.

A smile stretched at the side of my lips. Those horses were beautiful. I’ve always wanted to ride one, but didn’t get the chance.

When Warner brought popcorn and drinks for us, the announcement blared across. The race was about to start in five minutes. “Where are Tessa and Caleb? They should be here by now.” He moved his brown locks away from his forehead.

“There they are!” Tobias exclaimed.

Following his gaze, I saw my sister and her fiancé climbing down the stairs. In a yellow sundress and a matching hat, she looked as stunning as

ever. Caleb chose to flaunt a white tee and jeans.

And here I was. In a black tank and leather jacket, paired with worn out shorts and sneakers, I didn't even try to doll up a little.

"Sorry, guys! Got stuck with the traffic," Caleb apologized, greeting Tobias with a side hug. And the same with Warner, but when it came to my turn, he engulfed me in a tight bear hug. "I'm glad that you came, Em. Finally, I will get to spend some time with my would-be sister-in-law and long-lost friend."

I smiled. "It's great to see you again. And don't worry, you're not late. The race is about to start."

"I thought you wouldn't come. But I'm happy to see you here," Tess said, giving me a hug. And I didn't reciprocate.

Tobias and Caleb saw the act but didn't comment on it.

Once we were all seated, in no time, the race began. Each horse was extremely good and competitive. Their jockeys were guiding them with brilliance. But the teeth and nail race was between two red and black horses. They both were ahead in the race than the others.

I was cheering for the red one, Jordan. Not because the black one, Cage, was any less good or beautiful. I just happened to love the color red.

"Yes! Go Jordan, go! You can do it!" Tess yelled out beside me. She was also on my team, for the first time in our life. Where Tobias and Warner were encouraging a different one, Caleb just watched all of it silently.

"Which one are you betting for?" I almost screamed over the loud cheers.

"None! Because I know who is gonna win," he shouted back, beside Tess.

"Really? Which one?"

“Jordan. He is a winner,” he replied.

“How do you know? It can be a different one this time.”

His caramel eyes locked with me. “I know because my cousin never loses. And that—” he pointed towards the horse that was now slightly ahead of Cage. Even a white one now was giving them competition, “—is Achilles’s horse. He always bets on Jordan.”

My lips parted in surprise. Ace’s horse? That means he was here?

My nerves pulsed, eyes looking around. He was nowhere in the auditorium. But the owner of the horses, the bettors, never sat in the auditorium with ordinary people. Then my gaze lifted.

And there he was. High in the V.I.P section, shielded by glass, he stood even higher with his proud chest and powerful broad shoulders with hands in pockets. Some other suited people stood behind him, watching the race unfold. I couldn’t see where his eyes were as he wore sunglasses.

His name thoroughly did justice to his personality.

I shook my head and fisted my hands. Get to your senses, Em!

I didn’t know he was going to be here. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have come. Now I didn’t like that red horse at all. I’d rather support the white one as it now passed the black one, Cage.

My sister continued to dance. Now I understood why she was on Jordan’s side.

“For a moment, I thought Cage would surpass Jordan. Damn, he was good,” Warner commented, while Tobias munched on popcorn.

That brat! He definitely knew Ace was going to be present here, but he didn’t even think of informing me. Noticing my glare, he raised a brow. To

avoid Warner's overhearing, I pointed to his phone.

He is here. And you didn't care to inform me!

He looked up at me, frowning, and then went to typing.

Tobias: Who?

Don't be so saint now! I'm talking about Ace.

Tobias: Oh, but I thought you already knew. After all, it's a very common thing to attend the race organized by him in his place.

My eyes widened.

Wait, what? Castelo Track was his? I thought his every company or property's name started with Valencian.

He owns it? And why Castelo? Shouldn't it be Valencian?

Tobias: Yes. And it's his mother's last name.

Oh! I didn't know much about his family other than him and Caleb, who his family adopted at the age of eleven when his parents passed away in a car crash. They were Ace's uncle and aunt. They grew up together since then. I had only visited their home a few times. And most of the time, his parents were missing.

When I looked back up, he wasn't there anymore. Glancing back at the track, I found Cage took the place of Jordan now. Explained why my sister had gone so quiet all of a sudden.

Huh! The great Mr. Valencian couldn't handle his loss and ran away.

Rolling my eyes, I stood from my seat. The race was almost near the end, but my bladder had other plans. Excusing myself, I climbed the stairs and headed towards the washroom.

"Look who is here!" A group of rugged looking guys whistled as I passed

them just outside the washroom area. “Fucking hell, look at those legs, man!”

I gritted my teeth, glaring daggers at them. But I tried to control myself and not give them any attention.

“What’s your name, babydoll? I have two bundles of cash in my pocket right now, interested?” They laughed.

As I turned to them, an arm wrapped around my shoulders and turned me around.

“Em, don’t pay attention to them. They’re dangerous. Just avoid them.”

“Avoid them? Did you hear what nonsense they were spitting out? Let me go so I can teach them a lesson.” I wiggled out of Warner’s hold and tried to go back to them, but he dragged me away.

They whistled and cracked jokes until we were out of the sight.

“Em, please. If you go and say something, it will be worse. They are four and we are just two. So, please, don’t make a scene here,” he talked logic in my head. “So just go inside and come back down, and enjoy yourself, all right?”

I sighed. Maybe he was right. Nodding, I went inside and to take a phone call, he went away. Men weren’t allowed inside ladies washroom, anyway.

Finishing my business, I washed my hands and brushed my waves with my fingers. They went wild with the wind.

Once satisfied with my hair, I grabbed my cap from the counter and exited the washroom. And when I turned...

A yelp left my mouth as a figure towered over me out of nowhere.

FIVE: ALWAYS THE WINNER



“*W*-what’re you doing here?” I couldn’t even ask without stuttering.

Stormy gray eyes roamed my features, briefly glancing at my lips. They watched me as if they had waited too long...

I gave myself an inner shake. I was assuming things that weren’t possible.

“Well?” Voice firm this time. How did he even enter the ladies washroom? Oh yes, I forgot he owned this whole damn thing.

“Came to see if you’re okay,” he said, deep Greek accent was strong. Was he—mad?

“How many times do I have to tell you that you don’t need to be concerned about me? It’s not your job to care for me.”

“Someone has to if that so-called friend of yours can’t even take a stand for you like a loser he is,” he mocked, gaze hard.

Friend?

So, he knew what happened outside?

My eyes narrowed. “Excuse me? Don’t you think you’re crossing your limits here? You don’t have a right to talk about him in that way!”

A muscle of his jaw ticked. “I’m just stating the truth. Only a loser leaves their friend alone after she just got targeted by some drunkards.”

“He didn’t leave me. He-he just went to take a phone call,” I defended.
“And I’m his girlfriend, not just a friend.”

His eyes flashed, nostrils flaring as he cocked his head. “Not for long.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

He stepped closer, making me stumble back. And then another until my back hit the wall, his towering figure blocking my escape.

“W-what are you doing? Step away.” The intense gaze of his had my heart skip. His intoxicating cologne filled my lungs. He needed to create some distance between us. It was too much.

Placing his hands on the wall, on both sides of my head, he leaned in; my heart thudded inside my chest. “I meant, you will *not* be his girlfriend for long.” Determination flashed across his eyes.

“How do you know that?” I whispered. His proximity was doing something to me.

When he brushed my cheek with his knuckles gently, a treacherous shaky breath left my lips. And then the bruise of his knuckles caught my eye. As I was about to ask him of his injury, my breath hitched at my throat when the pad of his thumb traced my bottom lip.

“You won’t be, because—” leaning in, he whispered in my ear, hot breath tickling my skin, “—you already belong to someone else.”

What?

My thoughts were everywhere, I couldn’t think straight.

To be able to comprehend his words, I pushed him away, building some distance.

“D-don’t come that near me ever again! And what do you mean by I

already belong to someone else? Who are you talking about?”

He stayed quiet. The look in his gaze sent a shiver down my spine. I gulped.

No, no! It’s not what I was thinking. I must have misunderstood his eyes. After all, assuming wrong probabilities had ruined my entire childhood once. I wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

“You will know, soon.”

Again, incomplete answer.

I opened my mouth, but the pompous cheers and loud announcement cut me off. The race was finished, and the winner’s name could be heard from the gallery outside.

I looked at him. “Looks like the title ‘loser’ suits you more now.” My lips curved up at the winner’s name while he remained silent. “My condolences on your loss. Poor Jordan and the jockey, they tried hard, you know? Sometimes fate just doesn’t support you everywhere.”

“Em, you’re done?” Warner asked, appearing at the exit. Putting his phone in his pocket, when his eyes landed on Ace, confusion flashed over his face. But then he smiled. “Hello, Mr. Valencian.”

And Mr. Valencian stood still as a stone. His gaze on Warner was unreadable.

Jerk!

“Yeah, let’s go!” I linked my arm with Warner’s. Stormy eyes followed my moves. “Better luck next time.” I turned to go, pulling Warner along.

I didn’t know why I did that, but when I glanced back at him, something flipped in my stomach.

An almost non-visible smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. It whispered a secret I couldn't unfold.

"What was he doing there?" Warner asked once we were outside.

I shrugged. "Nothing. You tell me, how do you know him? Even at that party, it seemed like you knew him even before anyone introduced you two."

He laughed as if it was the silliest question someone has ever asked him. "Who doesn't know Achilles Valencian?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Is there any problem between you guys?"

"Why do you ask?"

A shoulder of his lifted. "I don't know, but... whenever you're with him or hear about him, you always get tense."

I tried my best not to get tense right now. "Nothing. It's just... we never got along," I lied. My tone told him not to query more. And he didn't.

When we passed the place where those drunk guys were, I didn't spot them anymore. But I did spot some drops of blood scattered on the ground. Frowning when I looked up, I found some guards dragging those guys away down the stairs to the exit. One of them was holding his bloody nose. He was the one who asked me if I was interested in his money.

Then the bruise on Achilles's knuckles flashed in my mind. A silent gasp left my lips. Did he... did he do that to them?

But why?

When we got back down to our folks, I was still lost in my thoughts. But my sister's gloomy face caught my attention. Of course. The horse she was cheering on lost. Tobias, on the other side, was grinning ear to ear as he

poked Tess.

“See, I told you Jordan will lose. Now you owe me a thousand dollars!”

“But you weren’t supporting Cage either! So how come I lost the bet?”
Tess glared.

“Doesn’t matter. The bet was about Jordan’s winning or losing. And he lost. So, the money is mine!”

Huffing, Tess slumped beside Caleb, who shook his head in amusement. “It’s all Ace’s fault! Why didn’t he tell me that this time he was betting on Cage instead of Jordan? It’s not fair!”

My eyes widened. He betted on Cage? Not Jordan? But I thought...

My gaze met Caleb. He flashed me a sheepish grin. “Even I didn’t know. But what I said turned out true, right?”

That he never loses.

Now I understood the meaning of his smirk back there. And here I was thinking he lost, calling him a loser to his face. God! He must’ve laughed at me in his head for my lack of knowledge.

I glanced at the VIP section. He was in his previous place, the dark sunglasses were back. People were surrounding him, must be congratulating, but his form was angled to us, telling me his gaze’s direction.

My eyes were set on his as I pulled Warner closer, hugging his arm. The tightness of his sharp shadowed jaw made my doubt clear. He was indeed looking at me.

But my sudden act, and his reaction... I shut down my brain before some realization set in my mind I couldn’t handle.

“The race is over now. So why don’t we go eat somewhere? I’m hungry,”

I said, not wanting to stay there anymore.

Nodding, Caleb stood and pulled a grumbling Tess along with him. “Em is right, even I’m famished. Let’s go, honey, let’s get you a cold drink so you can cool down a little.”

When we exited through the gate, this time I didn’t dare to look back. Though I did feel the burning gaze lingering on me all the way until we were finally out of his sight.

* * *

AFTER A WHOLE DAY of roaming around the city, the day was finally over. Though I did enjoy with Tobias, Caleb, and Warner, the awkwardness of my sister’s presence always hindered my pleasantries.

Because whenever I see her face, I can’t help but remember that night...

I closed my eyes, shutting the door of those memories.

“You okay?” Warner asked. We just stopped outside my house after a long walk. I decided to take a walk instead of Tobias’s lift, thinking it might help me clear my mind. But it didn’t. The heady scent of his still lingered at the back of my mind, that deep yet husky voice still murmured in my ear.

My free hand balled into a fist.

“I’m fine, just a little tired.”

Smiling, he cupped my face. “I can understand, you had a long day today.” Brown orbs shone with adoration and love as they flickered to my lips. “You know, I’m happy I came here with you. I’d miss this amazing day if I hadn’t.”

I stopped breathing when his lips met mine. Closing my eyes, I waited for something, anything. But I felt nothing. Just a mingling of flesh, that’s all. A burn felt behind my closed eyelids.

Even a kiss from a guy who I called my boyfriend couldn't spark even a little of the sensation I feel with just *his* eyes on me.

Something built up in my chest. Frustration, guilt, and an overwhelming emotion I didn't want to give a name to.

As his tongue parted my lips, I pulled away.

Hurt flashed across his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Warner. I'm really tired right now. Can we go inside?"

Even if he was hurt, he covered it with a smile. And I couldn't feel more terrible. "It's all right, Em. I understand. Let's go in and freshen up." With that, he turned around. And I watched him walk away in silence.

* * *

SOFT BREEZE TOUCHED my skin as I watched the dark clouds cover the light of the full moon. The stars weren't awake tonight. The bare night offered nothing but the sounds of crickets.

They used to soothe my mind other times, but not tonight. They couldn't tame the storm raging in my chest.

A stab of guilt hit me as I remembered Warner's face this evening when I rejected him again. This wasn't the first time I turned him down on being intimate with him. Not only him, in those past years, whoever I'd dated, I'd not gone anywhere past the kiss.

I just couldn't.

And no guy would want to do anything with a girl who couldn't even let them kiss her properly, let alone getting physical. But Warner wasn't one of them. He respected my wishes and kept his distance. The most he touched me intimately was kissing me. Other than that, I couldn't give him anything. And

he never complained, even though I felt his desire to take our relationship to a next level.

But tonight, I couldn't even give him a kiss.

A tear slipped down my cheek.

I swear, I tried. I tried my best to get out of my barrier, but I failed. The more I tried, the more I felt disgusted with myself. The more I felt my insides dying. Even if I closed a chapter of my life in my mind, those strings never left me.

The feeling of doing something wrong never left me alone. And I did wrong to myself by forcing myself to feel something for those men I dated. But I couldn't make my heart beat for someone else like it did for him.

So, I stopped trying.

When Warner asked me to be his girlfriend, he knew of my condition. Though he didn't know what happened in my past. But he knew of my broken heart. I told him I might never be able to love him back, but he said he wanted to give it a try. I didn't want to hurt him in the process, but his persistence gave me hope. That maybe, I could feel love again.

But I didn't.

Though he wanted a relationship between us, I agreed for my own selfishness. And I hurt the man who was always there for me when no one was.

And all of this because of my stupid heart. It just doesn't know how to react to anyone other than only one person.

I gritted my teeth at the clench of my heart. Another tear fell free.

I wished I knew how to stop...

I wiped my eyes, sensing a movement behind me on the rooftop. Her sandalwood perfume reached me before she sat beside me.

We stayed silent for some moments before she finally spoke. “You’re still mad at me for that night, aren’t you?” Her gaze remained high in the sky, as the clouds slowly freed the moon.

“I can’t be mad at anyone when I was the foolish one,” I said, still not turning to her.

I saw her looking at me from the corner of my eye. “You weren’t foolish, Em. You were just a young girl in love with someone at a wrong place and time.”

I let out a dry laugh, my nails dug into my palms. “Funny, you were the one who made me realize my foolishness.”

I still remember that day when I confronted her about it, and how she laughed it off in my face, making me remember how naïve I was to even think a boy like Ace would want me instead of someone like her.

A soft sigh left her. “I’m sorry, Em. I know I behaved like a bitch that night, instead of like a sister. But, trust me, I never wished anything bad for you.”

After a moment of silence, she spoke again.

“Because of misunderstandings and childishness, we’ve lost a lot of years, Em. I-I missed my sister in these years. Even if you visited sometimes, you were so distant that I couldn’t reach out to you. And honestly, I never found that much courage.” The tremble of her voice made me glance at her. Blue orbs glistened under the moon. “I want the relationship we’d had before, Em. I want my sister back. Especially when the most important day of my life is approaching. Can’t we just forget the past and start over? A new

beginning?”

“Why did you do it?” I knew it wasn’t the right time to ask her this when she was talking about a fresh start. But I had to know. It might be just a teenage girl’s heartbreak over her crush for her, but it was much, much more than that for me.

Looking away, she heaved another sigh. “I know you hate me for that. But trust me, Em, I never wanted anything bad for you. I’d always wished for your well-being.”

“Can you answer my one question?” I wanted to know why she did it. Why did she break my heart after knowing everything?

She seemed hesitant, but then nodded.

“Did you love him?”

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SIX: JEALOUSY



The amber rays colored the horizon, manifesting a crown of crimson and pink above the setting sun. Lines of birds flew across the sky in the direction of their shelter; melodic twitters of them felt like an announcement for the darkness to befall.

I took in a deep breath, filling my lungs with the cool evening air.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Dad said, sitting on the car hood beside me.

I nodded, a smile curved onto my lips. “Yes, very. Thank you for bringing me here, Dad. It’s been so long since I last visited. I really missed our sunrises and sunsets.”

We used to come to this meadow at least once a week. Well, at least me, Dad, and Tobias. Mom and Tess were too lazy to join every time. It was like a tradition for us. The tradition my grandfather started with Dad. But after my move to New York, I couldn’t join Dad and Tobias anymore.

“Me too, princess. Without you, our visits here didn’t have the same meaning.” His tone filled with nostalgia.

“Yeah, that idiot had all the fun for himself,” I joked, mentioning my brother. He couldn’t join us due to an important meeting this evening. “But I’m happy you came here with me this time. It’s my turn today to have all the

fun.” I grinned.

Chuckling, he shook his head. “Nah, our time here became pretty boring as even Achilles stopped joining us after you left for your high school.”

My smile slipped at the mention of his name.

He used to accompany us regularly to watch the sunrises and sunsets. But after his father’s death, his visits became less, until it stopped totally. I still remember my extra enthusiasm for the ride here, even at four in the morning, to see him. Meeting him was more important to me than watching anything else.

I heard Dad heaving a sigh. “Sometimes we’ve to let go of the past to live our present, Emerald. Because until you live your present, you won’t be able to accept your future.”

I knew what he was trying to say. Though my family didn’t say anything, I knew everyone has sensed my distance with Ace even after so many years. But I couldn’t explain anything to them even if I wanted to. They didn’t know the whole truth, so they couldn’t understand.

“But what if it’s too difficult to let go of the past?”

His gaze locked with mine. “Nothing is impossible, sweetheart. Sometimes we indulge ourselves so deep in our pain that we can’t see anything past that. All you’ve to do is open your heart a little more, and let go of the grudges. Don’t let the past hold you from your happiness in the present.”

I put my head on his shoulder, saying nothing.

Could I do it? Could I be that brave to let go of everything and move on? I haven’t been able to in years.

The buzz of my phone cut off my thoughts.

“Who is it?”

I put my phone back. “Cassie. She and Beth want us to have dinner together at our regular place.”

Nodding, his gaze turned back to the chromatic horizon.

After spending some more time talking and refreshing memories, we headed back to home. Once dropping him off, I turned the car around and drove to Nova’s Diner, where the girls were waiting for me.

But all the way, the only thing that consumed my mind was Dad’s words. I knew he was right. I couldn’t let go of the past because I held grudges. Grudges against my sister, grudges against Ace, grudges against myself.

I could understand the reason I blamed Tess and myself for being so naïve. But Ace, he didn’t deserve my hatred. He’d never promised to take care of my heart that I’d blamed him for breaking. But the heart couldn’t see anything other than its ache. And it knew, it’d to hurt others if it wanted to prevent another ache.

After talking to Tess last night, I decided to give us another chance. Maybe it was time to let go. Even if it was just a tiny step, it was something. I couldn’t just hold over something that happened years ago.

And maybe, it wasn’t all I thought it was. Last night’s conversation flashed in my mind.

“Did you love him?”

Her irises didn’t flicker as she answered, “No.”

“Then why did you do it? Why did you do it even after knowing you’d be hurting me by doing that?” I asked, my voice was desperate.

A look of sorrow had covered her features. “I didn’t want to hurt you, Em. I’d never hurt my little sister like that, no matter how much different we were from each other.”

“Then why?”

She’d cast me a look of apology. “I’m sorry, Em. I can’t tell you why. But you will know soon.”

She didn’t explain anything after that, just told me to think over her request and left, leaving me alone and confused.

What was she hiding? I didn’t know.

* * *

“SO, YOU DECIDED TO FORGIVE HER?” Cassie asked, raising a brow.

I shrugged, twirling the fork into my spaghetti.

“I’m happy that you’re solving your problems with your sister, Em. Life is too short to hold grudges forever. I agree with your dad.” Beth smiled.

Cassie scoffed. “These things only sound good in your stupid books. They’re not that brilliant in real life. Once a bitch, always a bitch.”

“Cassie!” I sent her a look of reprimand, causing her to roll her eyes and take a sip from her smoothie.

“I wouldn’t forgive my sister if she’d done something like that to me. Thank God, I don’t have one!” she remarked.

Beth scowled at her. “Don’t listen to her, Em. You do whatever your heart says.” She wiggled in her seat. “Uh, now that you forgave Tess, will you consider doing the same to Achi—”

“I don’t want to talk about him right now. Let me just enjoy my dinner with you guys, will you?” There was nothing to forgive Ace in the first place,

but trying to get my relationship good with him meant sacrificing my heart again. And I knew better. Just some days more, and then I will be gone. Far away from him.

“Well, I see your wish didn’t get granted at all,” Cassie commented, looking at her right.

“What’re you talking about?” My eyes widened when I followed her gaze to the furthest corner of the diner.

Beth gasped. “What’s he doing here?”

Three suited men and a woman in her late twenties sat around the table. She sat right beside him, too close to just be a business associate. With fiery red hair, porcelain skin and soft features, she was gorgeous.

At something one of those men said, she laughed, delicately placing a hand on his shoulder. And he, too, reciprocated with a soft smile he only displayed on rare occasions.

A pang felt in my chest. Turning around, I gulped the lump down my throat.

“Oohoo, I thought he didn’t have any barbies in his life.” Cassie whistled.

“Cassie!” Beth hissed, throwing me a concerned glance.

Cassie straightened. “I’m sorry, Em. I didn’t mean to... We can leave if you want.”

I waved my hand in dismissal. “No need. I don’t care if he is here or not, or who he brought here. We’re here to enjoy our dinner, and we will just do that.” I cast another glance back at them. She was now whispering something in his ear; the grip on my fork tightened.

“You sure?” Beth whispered.

I nodded, putting a forkful of spaghetti in my mouth, not wanting to give them any attention. But it was difficult when her high-pitched laughter burned my ears.

Beth and Cassie sent daggers at them with their hostile looks.

“Look at him! Getting so comfortable with that leech, and here I thought his sending you messages and flowers meant something.”

“Will you shut up, Cass?” Beth glared and then looked at me. “She could be just a friend. And after what he did and said at the racetrack, it proves that he likes you. I don’t think he is that shallow that he’d try to pursue one and roam around with another.”

“I don’t think so, look at them. They look too cozy to be just friends,” Cassie remarked.

Another pang made me grit my teeth. “I don’t care if they’re friends or not. Why should I anyway? It’s not that I’m his girlfriend or something. And whatever he did yesterday, it didn’t mean anything. So, let’s just forget about it.”

My fork kept playing with the food, I seemed to lose my appetite. Even if I didn’t want to, my gaze went back to them.

Her arm was now linked with him as his hand patting hers. And my treacherous eyes stung, heart squeezed with something.

Thunder cracked outside, announcing the upcoming downfall.

I didn’t look away when his gaze met mine. Surprise flashed into them, and then something else I couldn’t decipher. Seeing his lack of attention, she followed his gaze. Her eyes widened slightly as she untangled herself from him once she noticed the direction of my stare. But he remained as comfortable as he was. As if he didn’t care.

And why would he? It's not that he really cared for you or he'd any soft corner for you, anyway. Everything he said and did was just a pretense.

A sense of suffocation engulfed me.

Turning away, I stood abruptly, grabbing my purse. Cassie and Beth went to follow me, but I stopped them.

“You guys finish your dinner. I’m done.” When they went to protest, I shook my head. “Don’t. I will see you guys later. Bye.”

A storm was building in my chest, wanting to be released. My fingers clutched my purse in a vise grip. My jaw was tight, holding the emotions that threatened to surface.

I needed to go away. I needed air.

Just as I stepped out of the exit, a shoulder bumped into mine.

“Em? What a pleasant—are you all right?” Caleb held my shoulder. His face held concern. The flash of lightning fell on us.

Without giving him an answer, I moved away and walked into the open air.

“Wait, where are you going? It’s raining!” he called out behind me, but I didn’t pay him any heed.

Drops of rain slapped against my face, along with the gust of cold wind. Goosebumps rose across my arms as the water drops pricked my skin. But it didn’t stop me. This storm was nothing before my inner one.

The rage that boiled inside me, it didn’t make any sense. But it did bother me. It did bother me to see him with that girl, even if I didn’t have any right over him.

It hurt. It hurt like a bitch! And that’s what frustrated me. I didn’t want to

feel, but I couldn't help it.

My car wasn't parked where I left it. The valet must've parked it in the parking lot. So, ignoring the rain and howling wind, I strode towards the parking lot.

What would it take for me to get over him? What would it take for my heart to heal the wound I'd given myself?

The tear that slipped from my eye, the pouring rain washed it away. I hope it could take away the ache also.

A flash of blinding light fell into my eyes, causing me to cover them with my hands. A shout of my name came with a screech of tires as a pair of strong arms moved me away from the way.

The driver yelled out some curses, driving away when my gaze remained in no particular direction with my heart pounding in my chest.

"What the hell is wrong with you! Where was your attention? You could've died, God damn it!" He shook my shoulders, getting me out of my shock. Stormy gray eyes blazed with fire under the cold raindrops.

He was done with his lady love and came after me?

"So what?" I snapped, pushing him away. "It's not like you'd care if I died! Go enjoy your dinner with your girlfriend!"

His jaw clenched, grabbing my arm. "She's not my girlfriend. And don't you dare talk about—"

"I don't care! Leave me alone! And do *not* touch me again, I'm warning you!" I jerked my hand from his grasp and turned to my car.

A gasp left my lips as my chest collided against his. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he grabbed my nape with the other hand. "I *won't* leave you

alone. Get that into your beautiful head. And about touching you—” he leaned in, his nose brushing mine, “—no one can stop me from touching you. Not even you, Rosebud. Because you’re mine to touch.”

His forehead pressed against mine. With our noses touching, stormy gray clashed with my turquoise as strong arms clutched me to them in a possessive grip.

My breath hitched at my throat, heart racing. My blood streamed hot in my veins, breathing came out ragged as he pulled me closer, cupping my cheek.

Raindrops rolled down his head to the thick lashes as he gazed at my lips with unmistakable dark desire. My own lips parted at the heat of his body against mine. My insides burned for something.

“Mine. Just mine,” he rasped, placing his hot mouth at the corner of my lips. My eyelids threatened to shut, drunk in his intoxicating warmth.

My heart whispered his name.

Lingering his mouth on there for a moment, when his lips went to meet mine... A honk of a car jolted me out of my trance. As soon as I got back to my senses, I pushed him away.

Surprise and something close to disappointment flashed across his hard features. His hand shot up to reach me again, but he stopped himself from doing so. Closing his eyes for a second, he opened them again. This time, they held calm and composure.

“Emerald, I...”

Shaking my head, I turned around and ran to my car. Fumbling with the keys with trembling hands, I somehow managed to get in and drove away. His silent yet rigid form grew distant in the rearview as I went further and

further away until he vanished out of the sight.

Slamming on the brakes, I stopped at a corner. My grip around the wheels tightened as a sob left my mouth. I let the tears free, placing my head against the seat. The pounding of my heart still didn't die down. How could I let it happen? How could I let him so close to me? Even after everything, how could I let myself sway? How?

"You're mine to touch! Mine. Just mine."

His words rang in my head.

I shook my head. No, no, no. I can't let it happen. I can't let myself get hurt again. I can't let him do this to me again. I won't be able to live through another heartbreak.

My phone blared in my purse.

Wiping my cheeks, I fished my phone out.

Tess.

"Hey, Em! Sorry if I'm disturbing you. Dad told me you're with your friends," she said from the other side.

I have to do something.

"Em? Are you listening?"

I blinked. "Yeah, tell me."

"All right, so I called to tell you that we're having a family dinner at Caleb's place tomorrow night. It'd be a great chance to get our families together again. His uncle is also coming. So, I'd be really happy if you join," she explained. "You will come, right?" Her voice was full of hope.

Silence.

"Em? You will join us, won't you?"

“I’m sorry, Tess. I can’t.”

“But—”

I cut the call and dialed Warner’s number. After two rings, he picked up.

“Hello?”

“Book two tickets and pack your bags.”

“What? Now? But why?”

“We’re leaving. Tonight.”

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SEVEN: MINE



A pair of stormy grays gazed down at me. My heart skipped at the intensity in them. I tried to move, but it felt like I didn't have any control over my body. I couldn't do anything but watch those gray pools coming closer.

Then I felt hot breath fanning my neck, sending goosebumps across my skin. My insides squirmed with anticipation.

“Mine...”

Jolting awake, I searched around for him. But there was no one. But, I felt as if someone just called me his...

Running my palms over my face, I sat up. It was just a dream.

He wouldn't leave me alone, even in my dreams, would he? Three days had passed since that night and my returning to New York, and his words still haunted my sleep.

Shaking my head, I glanced at the time. Shit! It's already eight!

Scrambling out of the bed, I grabbed my clothes for the interview and ran inside the bathroom. I had two interviews today, and the first one was at nine. If I didn't get there in time, I'd lose the chance to work at one of my dream work places.

Actually, both of them were important to me. If I got a job at one of them,

it'd be a golden ticket for my career as a designer.

And my first destination was Summer Clothing House. One of the most famous fashion houses across the city.

* * *

“WHAT? But how's that possible? I was informed I'd have an interview today at nine.”

The receptionist sent me a professional look of apology. “I'm sorry for the hassle. But we've found the perfect candidate for the post, so we had to cancel the interview. Didn't you receive the email, Miss?”

I frowned. “What email?”

“We'd sent all our expected candidates an email regarding the rescission as an apology,” she informed.

Oh! I'd kept my phone off since I left home that night to avoid my family's questions and a particular person's calls and messages. I haven't even checked my email for some days now.

How could I be so careless?

“Uh, maybe I missed it.” I bit my lip. “All right, my bad luck, I guess.”

“We're sorry again, miss. Have a good day!”

Nodding, I sent her a tight smile and got out of there. Time to go to my next destination.

I just hoped everything would turn out good this time.

* * *

CHECKING myself one last time in the rearview, I let out a breath, wiping my clammy palms on my skirt.

Come on, Em! You've got this!

Chanting the mantra in my head, I got out of the car and looked up at the huge forty-something floor building. A big Coopers Fabrics sign was hung at the top.

I blew out a breath. I really didn't want this chance to get out of my hands. These two were my dream workplaces, and now one was gone, leaving the latter.

Ignoring the nervous wreck in my tummy, I padded inside. Shoulders squared and chin high in confidence.

But as soon as the crowd in the waiting area came into my view, my confidence melted into a puddle. All of them were sophisticatedly dressed, with CV's in their hands. Definitely for the interview.

Of course, this was one of the most renowned textile companies in the country. What did I expect?

The receptionist guided me to wait with the others as there was still quite time for my turn to come. And standing among these sharp and talented looking people, my nervousness rose to a new height.

Choosing a vacant seat, I settled in the furthest corner of the waiting area and waited for my turn to arrive.

My phone vibrated in my purse.

Pulling it out, I checked the name.

Warner.

"Hello," I whispered.

"Em, thank God you finally switched on your phone. Your parents were killing me asking about you. They're mad that you left all of a sudden and then kept your phone off."

I glanced down at my nails. The sense of guilt was picking up on me. I hadn't given them much of an explanation of my sudden leave, and then blocked any way they could connect to me. Just to avoid one person, I hurt so many loved ones.

Since I switched on my phone this morning, I didn't even check the calls or messages. I'm sure my message box has been flooded.

"Yeah, I'm sorry that you'd to handle my family's bombarding. I will talk to you later about it. I'm now at Coopers Fabrics for the interview. Do you have anything else to say?"

"It's nothing, Em. It's just that I'm worried about your sudden change of heart. Anyway, I called you to give you some good news. I will meet you tonight at your place." His voice dripped with excitement.

"What good news? And sure, I'm free tonight." I ignored his first statement.

"That's a surprise for later tonight. Now I gotta go. All the best for your interview!"

I smiled. "Thanks. See you later."

Sighing, I put the phone down. What good news he was talking about?

"Emerald Hutton?" A lady in her mid-thirties with a high tight bun and suit looked around for the beholder of the name.

"It's me!" Raising my hand, I got up.

"You're next. Mr. Cooper is waiting for you inside," she said. Tone professional with no hint of a smile.

Nodding, I grabbed my purse, CV, and followed behind her.

Once we stopped before a pair of white doors, she knocked and waited.

“Come in!” barked a voice from inside. I cringed. God knew who was going to take my interview. I already had a feeling of doom.

Tilting her chin, she gestured to me to go on and left. Taking deep breaths, I entered. Restless butterflies stormed in my stomach.

A small round man in his late fifties sat opposite of the huge desk.

Mr. Cooper. The CEO.

With a big scowl, he continued to sign some papers, muttering something incoherent under his breath. A loud noise echoed in the room as he slightly leaned to his right and then sat straight.

I stopped in my tracks.

“Would you stand there forever? Sit!” he grumbled, without looking at me. He didn’t seem to notice that he just farted before someone.

Trying not to crinkle my nose at the foul odor in the air, I took the chair opposite of his and placed the file of my CV on the desk.

“Hello, Mr. Cooper. I’m Emerald Hutton.” I kept my tone as professional as I could while holding my breath.

“Give me your CV already, will you?” Brushing the arched moustache on his upper lip, he reached out for my file, and I handed it to him.

With narrowed eyes, he scrutinized my CV. Though I’d topped in most of my exams and my other qualifications were also good, I was still at the edge of his judgement. Because the way he was looking at those papers, I got a feeling he was a judge in some time of his life.

“You’re fluent in Spanish and Italian? Or you just added it out of excitement?” His tone was already calling me a fraud.

But I remained calm. “No, Mr. Cooper. I’ve taken courses on Italian and

my second language was Spanish at high school. If you want, I could converse with you in one of them.”

“No need.” He waved his hand, grunting. “It’s not that I’d understand anything, anyway. You could blabber to make a fool of me.”

I gritted my teeth, but kept my composure. This grumbling potato was now getting on my nerves.

Who takes interviews like that? I wonder who even made him the CEO of this company.

“You eat well?” For the first time, he looked up.

My brows creased. How did that relate to anything with the job? “I do when I’m hungry. Why?”

He snorted. “Girls of your generation are fond of keeping themselves empty stomached to stay lanky. And if your stomach is empty, so will be your head. How would you create designs if you’re empty in the head?”

Do I still want to work in his company? Sadly, yes.

“No, Mr. Cooper. I prefer to be healthy than be... lanky,” I replied.

He cast a look, observing me. I fidgeted in my seat. Then, he closed my file and slid it to me. “Get out now. And tell Lucinda to send the next headache.”

I raised my brow. Did he just reject me? Then I understood it was his way to say: you may leave now. And I assumed Lucinda was that woman who sent me in, and headache was the next candidate.

Pressing my lips tight, I flashed him an even tighter smile and stood up. The nervousness now turned into fear as I informed Lucinda and then walked away. She said I’d receive an email later to know if I was selected or not.

Until then, I would have to wait.

As I got out of the elevator, my shoulder bumped into someone.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Looking up, I found a man near Mr. Cooper’s age standing before me. But he was far from small and round, the opposite, in fact. Tall and fit. Some gray hairs were peeking out of his dark strands.

When he glanced at me, something flashed across his dark, hollow eyes. Tilting his head, he gave me a look over. I didn’t know why, but he looked familiar. And from just looking at him, uneasiness filled me.

“It’s all right, my dear. People often stumble into their way when they don’t see where they’re going. Or... crossing whose path.” The edge of his voice evolved some secrets. Then the ominous look suddenly vanished and replaced a bright smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I hope your interview went well, dear.”

I looked down at my CV. But still, they were in a file. How did he know I came here for an interview?

“Uh, it was good. But how do you know that I came here for an interview?”

He had that look again. “I know a lot of things, young lady.” His orbs flickered over my shoulder. “If you will excuse me, I’m in a hurry right now. I will see you later.” Nodding, he walked into the elevator.

“But...” I turned around, but the doors were already closed. And he was gone.

I frowned. Who was he? He talked as if... he knew me somehow. But how?

Whatever, I didn’t want to see him around again. That man radiated some

kind of negative energy.

Heaving a sigh, I looked up at the sky once outside. First interview got canceled, and this one was terrible. Though he didn't give me an answer, his expression didn't seem to be impressed. Still, I had my fingers crossed. I didn't want this chance to slip away from my hand.

It wasn't even noon. And I was already feeling tired.

My phone vibrated again. And this time it was my best friend.

"I've found out. She isn't his girlfriend or anything like that. They're just friends! And if it still bothers you, then you should know that she's happily married," Cassie finished in one breath.

"Cassie, what are you talking about..." Then it hit me. That girl with him at the diner. That redhead. Irritation irked my skin.

Wait... what did she say? They're just... friends? Not anything else?

Why did I feel so light?

I shook my head.

"Em, you there?"

"Yeah, I'm listening." I cleared my throat.

"Oh, thank God! I thought you died out of relief." She teased.

I straightened. "It's nothing like that. I don't care if she's his girlfriend or just a friend. And you called me to inform this?"

I could imagine her rolling her amber eyes.

"Yeah, right! That's why you vanished after that night. Don't lie to me, bitch! I know how much you care. So as a best friend, I just did my duty by applying balm on your burn."

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. “Shut up! I’m not lying. And right now, when I don’t know if I got rejected or selected for the job, I don’t want to talk about that man.”

Now that caught her attention and then I gave her a brief of everything that happened since this morning and all she did was laugh at my misery, wishing me luck with Mr. Fart Cooper.

* * *

“So? What good news are you going to give me?” I asked Warner, taking a bite on the pizza he’d brought for us for dinner.

“You tell me first. How did your interview go?” He chewed on his piece.

My shoulders lifted. “Peachy. The first one got canceled and the second one was horrible.”

“Why? What happened? Your CV is excellent. Everyone would want to give you a chance,” he stated.

“Thanks. But Mr. Cooper wasn’t everyone.” Shaking my head, I explained everything. Except that creepy man I bumped into.

He laughed so hard he choked on his food.

“That’s not funny! I’m concerned about my whole career here.” Giving him a glass of water, I glared at him.

“Sorry! It’s just I still can’t believe he farted in front of you.” He chuckled, wiping the tears he got from laughing his ass off. Seeing my serious expression, he sobered up and smiled. “Don’t worry, Em. They will definitely get back to you soon. And trust me, the job will be yours. I know it.”

“I hope so. Anyway, will you tell me your good news now?”

Setting the glass aside, he sat straight. Though his eyes sparkled with exhilaration, he seemed hesitant. “You remember I applied for a job last month?”

I nodded.

“Well, I got accepted to work directly under the general manager there.”

“What? That’s amazing, Warner! Congratulations!” Leaping up from my place, I gave him a tight hug.

“Thank you. But there is another thing...”

Pulling away, I studied him. “What’s it?”

He scratched his head. “This company is in Seattle. So, uh, I’ve to go there and join next week.”

“Of course you should go! Why are you so hesitant about it?” I queried.

He huffed. “That means I’ve to go far away from you, Em. And I can’t do that.”

I grabbed his hand. “I know how you’re feeling. I will miss you too. But just because you will have to shift to another city, you can’t miss this opportunity. It’s always been your dream to work at that company. And now that you finally got the chance, you should definitely take it.”

“But I can’t leave you here alone...”

“I’m not a kid, Warner. I can take care of myself. And we will talk every day, don’t worry. Just pack your bags already!” I punched on his shoulder, making him laugh and engulf me into another hug.

My phone buzzed on the couch, making me pull away.

My heart skipped. Was it an email from them?

Warner eyed me. Giving me an encouraging nod, he pushed me to check

it.

With both excitement and nervousness, I picked up my phone, expecting an email of good news. As I saw the screen, my heart stopped in my chest. And then it started racing. It wasn't anything I expected it would be.

I gave you time. And now your time is over. You can't escape me anymore. -A

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EIGHT: A SHADOW



“Come on, Em! You can’t sit here with that gloomy face. Don’t worry about the job, just enjoy, girl! Everything will be fine,” Molly slurred, leaning against the bar counter. “Here, take this drink. You’ll feel good.”

I shook my head. “I’m not in a mood.”

She pouted. When I didn’t drink the shot she offered to me, she shrugged, gulping it herself.

Kate and John shook their heads at her and went back to their cuddling.

We were at a local pub with our college friends. After they found out about Warner getting the job, they wanted to celebrate it. So here we were, enjoying the night. Except me. Too many thoughts were playing in my head to get wasted with alcohol.

“Here, at least drink this orange juice. It’s really good, I tell you.” Warner handed me a glass, sipping on his own.

“Thanks.” I scanned the dancing crowd and the moving lights. Even the booming music didn’t make my mood better.

He turned me to him. A small smile tugged on his lips. “Don’t worry. I’m sure the job will be yours.”

I smiled before he got busy with the others, laughing and joking. And I

just concentrated on my juice in silence.

“You can’t escape me anymore.”

What did he mean by that? Whatever he said that night, at the parking lot, and then that message, what should I think out of it? Why was he behaving like he... like he had some right over me? All these years, he didn’t even ask about me to anyone.

And now...

A sigh left my lips. He confused me. I confused myself, or should I say, my feelings did. Even knowing he could give me another heartache, why did I still feel so connected to him?

“Em? You’re here with us, right? You seem lost,” Kate asked.

“My love, you know why she isn’t in a good mood tonight. We’ve been pestering her from the moment she arrived. Leave her alone,” John said, kissing her temple, and then pulled her for a kiss. The others gagged at their PDA.

Something soared in my chest and subconsciously, my hand touched the corner of my lips. The place where his scorching mouth was just nights ago.

Warner’s poking me pulled me out of my reverie. Looking at his eyes, guilt washed over me like a cold bouquet of ice. My hand balled into a fist.

How could I think of someone’s kiss when I was sitting right beside my boyfriend? But I couldn’t control my feelings even if I wanted to.

The beeping of my phone distracted my sense of shame. My eyes widened when I checked it.

An email from Coopers Fabrics!

I squealed as soon as I read it, making Warner and others watch me with

confusion. Grinning ear to ear, I leaped up from my seat. “I did it! I got the job!”

Whistles and cheers resonated around the group as they congratulated me one by one. Warner seemed as happy as I was as he engulfed me in a bear hug.

Finally, after so many days, something good happened in my life.

“Now that our dear Emerald got the job, it’s time for a double celebration!” John yelled out. “And you miss—” he pointed at me, “—no more gloomy face, enjoy now!”

Kate and Molly bobbed their heads as Molly passed me a glass of vodka. And this time, I didn’t hold myself back.

After hours of drinking and spending time with everyone, I was swaying on my feet. I couldn’t even walk properly without stumbling. Once everyone called it a night, John and Kate offered to drop me and Warner off. The couple was much sober than us.

“Careful, Em!” Warner cautioned when I got out of the car with wobbly legs.

“Bye, guys! We’ll see you soon!” Kate shouted. I cringed at her high-pitched voice.

Waving at them, I hobbled towards my house. My eyes were about to shut down.

“You sure you don’t want me to drop you off at your home?” I heard John ask Warner.

“Nah, my place is just two blocks away. Thanks, man! You guys can go now. It’s late,” Warner replied.

Again, saying goodbyes, they drove off. The sound of the car engine reverberated across the empty street. Only one or two dogs barking in the distance could be heard, other than our footsteps.

“Hey, hey! Careful there!” He held my shoulders before I could fall on my face in front of my main door.

“I’m fine, Warner.” I giggled without any reason. “You don’t worry about me. You go home, I will just fly into my room from here in no time.”

“I don’t think so. You can barely walk straight, Em. Let me help you to your room,” he offered.

“I can walk just fine. And I’m already at home. So, I will be fine. You go.” I insisted, fumbling with the keys.

“But... you sure?” He seemed hesitant.

I bobbed my head without looking at him. Sighing, he gripped my chin and pressed his lips against mine.

I stood there still, not returning the affection. Something told me to pull away, but I didn’t.

Suddenly at the corner of my eye, I caught a movement. Pulling away, I squinted. There, at the furthest corner of the street, stood a shadow under the damaged streetlight. Its body was angled towards us.

Goosebumps crawled up my skin as I felt his or her gaze on me. Though I couldn’t see the person’s face due to the darkness, I could feel it. Their stare.

“What happened? What are you looking at?” Just as Warner turned around, it vanished into the shadows. “Is something wrong there?”

“I think I just saw someone there.”

“But there is no one, Em.” Warner frowned. “But if you’re not feeling

good, I can stay the night if you want.”

My head snapped back to him, blinking. “Uh, no, it’s fine. It could be my imagination. I think I drank too much tonight. You go home, I will be fine.”

“All right, if you insist.” Yawning, he gave me a hug. “I will go now. See you later. And call me if you need anything.”

As he walked away, my eyes flickered to that spot where I saw the shadow. There was no one. Shaking my head, I opened my door, walked inside, and closed it behind me.

* * *

“EM, you should sleep well, especially if it’s the night before your first day at job,” Mom chastised over the phone for me not sleeping enough last night.

Well, after returning home at midnight, I only had two hours of sleep until I woke up with another dream of a particular person. And then the hangover came along. Even though I got some relief after taking a pain killer, I couldn’t fall asleep after that. Excitement and nervousness kept me wide awake.

It was six in the morning, and here I was, pacing the living room out of anticipation.

“Anyway, when do you start?”

“At nine.” Three hours more to go. And I already could feel my hands and feet turning cold.

“There is still so much time. You could still take a nap for an hour, honey. I don’t want you to look like a zombie on your first day.” When I’d informed her about the job, she was over the moon. She was way more excited about my job than I was. And I was happy about that. At least she wasn’t upset with me for leaving the way I did anymore.

“It’s all right, Mom. I’m fine. I can’t fall asleep even if I want to. So, I will just make some breakfast for myself now and then get ready.”

“Oh, okay then. Don’t forget to call me later. And eat something healthy,” she said.

I smiled. “All right, Mom. I will. Now can I go? I haven’t even taken a shower.”

“Okay, okay. Go. Your father is waiting for me outside to go jogging, anyway. I will talk to you later. Love you!”

“Love you too!”

* * *

BLOWING OUT A BREATH, I checked myself in the rearview one last time before getting out of the car. The huge building stood tall over me. It felt like a déjà vu. But I just hoped today wouldn’t turn out like last time.

Forcing my legs, I raised my chin high and walked ahead. But as soon as I crossed the entrance, my steps halted.

People were on a marathon around the lobby, coming in and out with boxes, racing around with loads of folders. No one cast another a single glance as they ran like headless chickens. Even the receptionist was having difficulties attending so many phone calls at a time.

A frown set on my forehead. What was happening here?

“Hi! Good morning. It’s my first day here, so can you tell me where Lucinda is—”

The receptionist cut me off with her hand and picked up another call.

“Excuse me? Can you please tell me—”

She ignored me again, too busy on the phone. And then my gaze fell on

the packed box on her left. Was she—leaving?

Some other staff were also carrying those same boxes with crestfallen faces. What was happening?

Then Lucinda came into my view.

“Oh, Ms. Hutton. You’re already here, I see. Good that I found you now, otherwise I don’t think I’d have any time later to discuss anything with you. Now, follow me.”

She didn’t even let me speak as she turned around and stormed away, leaving me with no choice but to follow her.

“You see, there is a lot of work today. So, I won’t take much of your time. Sadly, Mr. Cooper is not here right now, otherwise he’d inform you all newcomers himself,” she informed, not slowing down a bit.

It was good he wasn’t here. I preferred my environment to be pure and breathable.

“Uh, what is going on here?” I queried. But the woman ignored me, walking inside a spacious office.

“Here!”

“What is it?” I eyed the white envelope she handed me. Something churned in my stomach.

Oh no! Was I already fired for some reason?

“Your transfer letter,” she replied, with no emotions on her face. “You’ve been transferred to another city in one of this company’s branches.”

“What?” I gaped. “What do you mean by a transfer letter? I-I don’t understand. What’s happening here? I just joined today.”

She sighed. “We apologize for the sudden decision, Ms. Hutton. But

Coopers Fabrics was sold to a multinational company last night. A lot of employees have lost their jobs, some even got appointed. You're lucky that the new owner didn't terminate the newcomers and decided to give them a chance."

My mouth was on the floor. Someone bought it overnight? But how was it possible? And about my transfer, I didn't have any idea of which corner of the country they've shifted me.

"Is there no other way to change the decision? I mean, I can't just leave everything and move to a whole new city." My voice was desperate.

"Sadly, no. We're doing what we'd been ordered to do. We're just doing our job, Ms. Hutton," she said, glancing at her watch. "Now, I've something else to attend to. If you will excuse me. All the best for your future."

"But, I..." And she was already gone.

I just stood there, flabbergasted. What the hell just happened?

I glanced down at the letter. Only God knew.

With shaky hands, I pulled the paper out and unfolded it. My heart stopped beating in my chest.

God. It's not happening! It can't be.

Now the crestfallen expression was slapped on my face as I walked out of the ominous building. Pulling my phone out, I dialed the number. After some rings, Dad picked up.

"Hello?"

"I'm coming back."

NINE: MEETING THE REDHEAD



“So, that means you will stay now that you’ve been transferred here?”

Mom eyed me, stirring the soup on the stove. Her voice radiated felicity.

Peeling another pea, I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m thinking of applying for another transfer. Maybe they will consider it?”

Staying here wasn’t an option for me, but leaving this job, well, I couldn’t take the risk. I’d dreamed of working at companies like this, and now that I finally got the chance, I couldn’t just throw it away. The one thing that didn’t make any sense was Coopers Fabrics was one of the most successful textile companies. What happened that they had to sell it overnight?

“I didn’t know you hate this city that much,” she said, her tone was fragile.

I sighed. “I don’t hate it here, Mom. It’s just, I told you, all my plans are made around New York. And I can’t just ignore them just like that.”

“Do you think I’m a fool?” Her brows rose. “Do you think I don’t know why you’re so keen to stay away from LA?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it.

She shook her head. “Just because of one person, you can’t punish your

whole family, Em. You have to accept it sooner or later. You can't keep running forever."

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my neck. I didn't deny anything she enunciated. We both knew the truth.

"Anyway, what's the name of your new employer? I want to thank him personally for transferring you here. I already like this person." Sensing my unease, she changed the topic.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't know. And honestly, I don't have any wish to know." Because of that person, I was here again, back to the city where the devil of my dreams resided.

Mumbling something incoherent under her breath, she took the peas from me and added them into the boiling soup.

"Smelling good. What's for lunch today?" Tess strolled into the kitchen. Throwing her purse on the table, she took a seat beside me at the bar. "Glad that you're back! I was really disappointed when I heard of your departure. I couldn't even spend much time with you."

I cast her an apologetic smile. "Something important came up. So, I had to go. And sorry about the dinner. I hope it went well."

"Do you really think we'd have a family dinner without you?" At her question, my brows creased in confusion. "I canceled the dinner as soon as I heard you left. I want both my and Caleb's family to be together at this dinner. And without you, my family remains incomplete."

I stared at her. Her words touched something inside me. Where was that harsh and spoiled Tess I knew seven years ago? It was as if I was getting to know my sister in a whole new way.

"You could reschedule it again now that she's here," Mom suggested.

“No, Mom. Caleb’s uncle isn’t in the town right now. You know what Uncle Arthur means to Caleb and Achilles. After Achilles’s father’s death, he is the one who took care of them. So, with his absence, arranging a family dinner isn’t a good idea.”

“Arthur Valencian? He lived in England, right?” He was the only relative Ace and Caleb had left after their family crisis. But due to a conflict he had with Ace’s father, he didn’t live in the states. That’s all I knew about him. I didn’t know he returned to his homeland.

Tess bobbed her head. “Yes, but he returned after some years of his brother’s death. To look after his nephews. He is an amazing person.”

But what about his mom? Where was she when they needed someone to take care of them?

“Anyway, I have to do some shopping today. You know, for the engagement party. And I need my sister to help me with it. So go get ready, we’re leaving in ten minutes.”

Before I could object, Mom chimed in, “Excellent idea! She needs some shopping to get her mind off things. Take her along. She needs it.”

“But...”

“Em, won’t you help your sister with her engagement’s shopping? I need you there,” Tess said, blinking her blue eyes.

Shaking my head, I got up and went upstairs to get ready. Her squeal followed behind. Maybe Mom was right. Going out could help my mind off the transfer. And this way, my relationship with Tess could progress more. At least I had to try.

Gliding down the stairs, I found Tess closing the door, holding a huge teddy bear with an adorable bow around its neck. An involuntary grin

stretched on my face. It was so beautiful and big that she was having difficulties holding it.

“Who brought it? Is it yours?” I asked, admiring the teddy.

“Well, my fiancé is too boring to send gifts like this! It’s for you,” she joked, rolling her eyes.

I frowned. “For me? But who’d send it for me?”

She shrugged. “There’s a note in there, check it out.”

Though I was confused, the excitement surpassed the confusion and curiosity as I grabbed the teddy from her. I took my time petting it, feeling its softness against my palm, and then I took out the note. Tess watched me with amusement.

I’ve always loved those fluffies. My room used to be filled with huge teddies. I couldn’t even sleep without some beside me. I was definitely going to keep it on my bed.

But when I opened the note, I was doubting it.

Welcome home, Rosebud. -A

Three words, and my excitement drained, and annoyance took place instead. How did he know I was back? Then my gaze landed on my sister, who was patiently waiting to know who sent this enormous gift.

Either her or my stupid brother.

“So?” she queried.

“There’s no name on it.” I swiftly put the note in my pocket. An A wasn’t a name. “If you want, you can have it.”

“Why? You don’t like it?”

I shrugged. My arms had a firm grip around it. And when she came

forward to take it from me, my treacherous body stepped back, holding the teddy tight against my chest.

Her brows quirked, lips twitched at the side as she put her hands on her hips. “Well, it seems like your heart had a sudden change of mind.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.” My ears turned hot. Not knowing the reason behind my own reaction, vexed, I turned around and ran upstairs to put it in my room. But I was sane enough not to place it on my bed.

* * *

“WHAT DO you think about this one?” Tess asked, twirling in front of the mirror in the eleventh dress she’d tried this afternoon. And only two of them turned out lucky and got selected. Apparently, she was shopping for every function of her wedding except her wedding gown. That was for another day.

We even missed our lunch due to her infinite dress hunting.

“It’s beautiful! I think you should take this one for your rehearsal,” I replied from the couch, stretching my legs before me. My legs were killing me from standing on my feet for hours.

Only if I knew.

I just hoped she’d be satisfied with her shopping soon, or else I’d just leave her here and go home.

“You’re right! It fits in all the right places,” she gushed.

Thank God!

Once she got out of the changing room, she instructed the sales girl to add the dress to her list and dragged me along to another store.

And when I caught the direction of her gaze, my eyes widened. Victoria’s Secret. Though it wasn’t a big thing, I was always shy about buying my

underwear. Most of the time, I ordered them online.

“Uh, Tess, why don’t you just go in and see what you want for yourself? I’ll just find some shoes for me.”

She gave me a look. “I know you’re just using excuses to not go in there. Jeez, Em! It’s not like you’re going to buy underwear and lingerie with a man in there. It’s just me. So, drop your shyness and come with me.”

I groaned as she dragged me into that store. God! I was now seriously repenting coming with her.

“So, Em? You didn’t tell me why you got transferred on the first day of your job?” she asked, running her hand on a silk lingerie. When a man in the same row glanced at me, I turned crimson with a small piece in my hands.

“The company got sold. And the new employer wished to transfer some newcomers to another city, and here I am.” Irritation filled my insides again. Curse whoever that person was.

“Oh? That’s really unusual, but I don’t complain. At least you came back to us.” She smiled. “What’s this company’s new name now?”

“OC Textiles,” I replied, remembering the name on the letter.

She stopped whatever she was doing, and her gaze snapped to me. Something flashed across her face.

“You see if you like anything. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Where are you going?”

She didn’t wait to answer and rushed out of the store. What’s wrong with her?

As I was searching for matching bras with the panties I took for myself, someone called out my name behind me.

“Emerald? Is that you?”

Turning around, I froze in my place.

The redhead. Matching her hair, she looked stunning in her body-hugging red dress and heels, her green irises twinkling.

Wait, how did she know my name?

Before I could pronounce my thoughts out loud, she pulled me into a tight hug.

“Damn! I finally got to meet you.” Pulling away, she shook her head. “I’ve heard so much about you. It became my prime wish to meet you personally. And I think my wish just got accepted. Thank God! He won’t let me see you.”

I frowned. “Uh, nice to meet you too?”

“Oh, so rude of me! I’m Leyla, Leyla Collins. Achilles’s friend.” She shook my hand.

“T-that’s great. But may I ask, how do you know me? I mean, I haven’t met you before, at least not personally.” My gaze fell on her ring finger. And indeed, there was a diamond ring that screamed married.

“Yeah, we haven’t. But I know everything about you. Achilles and Caleb talk so much about you that I almost feel like I’ve known you for years!” She snorted, rolling her eyes.

My heart skipped. He-he talks about me to her?

“Leyla? Hi!” Tess had a surprised look. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey!” She kissed her cheeks. “Well, why do people come here?”

Tess rolled her eyes, smiling. “I see that you already met Emerald? Em, she is—”

“Oh, she knows. I just introduced myself to her,” Leyla said, cutting Tess off. Then she looked at me from head to toe. “I must admit, she’s way more beautiful than A—”

A nudge at her ribs from Tess halted her mid-sentence. She looked at my sister with confusion, and then her green eyes widened.

“Uh, I meant you’re more beautiful in person than I heard about you from all of them.” Casting a look at Tess, she cleared her throat. “I gotta go now. I’m getting late for a meeting. It was so nice meeting you, Em! I will see you soon.”

“Likewise,” I said, politely.

Once she was out of sight, only then Tess relaxed a bit. When I asked her why Leyla looked so out of place before her exit, she just shrugged and told me she had an urgent meeting to catch.

“Where did you go, anyway?”

She averted her gaze. “To make a phone call. Now, if your interrogation is over, can we continue our shopping? I’ve still got a lot of things to buy.”

Letting out another groan, I strolled behind her as we left the shop and went to look for some jewelry. Though their odd interaction still bothered me. What was Leyla going to say before Tess stopped her?

TEN: PLAYING WITH ME?



I had to crane my neck to look up at the huge skyscraper standing proudly before me. Molded with sleek glass, it reflected the whole city against it. And a huge OC Textiles sign was hung at the top of the building. My new office.

I wasn't hoping for anything to turn out well, because from experience, I knew my wish wouldn't get sanctioned anyway. But that didn't tame the nervous flutters in my tummy. I wasn't even sure if I'd have to work here, or they'd consider my request and transfer me elsewhere.

Let's see what happens.

Having my fingers crossed, I blew out a breath and walked inside. And I was left in awe.

From the dark marble floor and classy contemporary interior to the polished dark wood ceiling, everything was stunning and spotless. I didn't know an office could be this beautiful.

When I approached the receptionist, she was up to her feet with a bright smile plastered on her face, even before I could reach her. As if she was just waiting for my arrival.

"Welcome to OC Textiles, ma'am. How may I help you?" she greeted

with a polite nod.

“Hi, I’m Emerald Hutton. Today’s my first day. Could you please tell me where I should go first?”

Her nod was eager. “Yes, yes, of course. Can I see your joining letter, please?”

“Yeah, sure. Here.” I handed her the letter.

She didn’t even read it properly, just swiped her eyes over it and gave it back to me. “All right, kindly please follow me, miss. Let me show you to the boss’s office.”

Nodding, I did what she said. But before we could even cross the lobby, we halted in our tracks.

A frown set on my forehead as I stared at the tall caramel eyed man walking towards us with a happy face. When he nodded at the receptionist, she flashed me another smile and walked away.

“Caleb? What are you doing here?” I glanced around. “Are you here for a meeting or something?”

He chuckled. “First of all, welcome to the office. And as for your question, no, I’m not here for any meetings or anything else. This is my office.”

I opened my mouth, processing his words. And then it hit me. “Your office? That means you’re my boss now?”

He shrugged. “In a way, yes. I’m the CEO of this company. But you don’t have to worry about that. Think of it as your own.”

“Wait a minute, I’m not catching up here. What’s going on? I mean, you weren’t even shocked seeing me here.” With narrowed eyes, I tilted my head.

“Because he already knew of your arrival,” a voice said behind me. A deep voice with a hint of a Greek accent I wanted to hate.

Not losing my composure, I turned around. And there he was. Towering over me in his three-piece charcoal suit, he looked as heart-stopping as ever. I didn’t dare show the effect on my face as the memories of that night hit me.

Stay cool, Em. Focus on the current situation.

But how could I when those stormy grays stared at me like I was the only person around him in the entire office he could see?

“Hello, Emerald,” he said, a formal smile on his lips.

Emerald? No Rosebud now?

Ignoring him, I turned to Caleb. Seeing my questioning stare, he nodded, confirming his cousin’s statement. Of course he’d know. He was the CEO after all.

Then something hit me. “You’re the CEO of this company, that means—you transferred me here on purpose, didn’t you? And how did you even know I was one of the newcomers?” Everything turned more vogue for me. What was happening here?

He shifted, glancing over my shoulder. “The decision to transfer some staff was totally for official reasons. You were about to be transferred to another city. But when your papers caught my attention, I thought, why not bring you back to the city? As we have one branch over here. And you’ll also be comfortable staying close to your family.”

His reasons didn’t convince me. And the burning stare at the back of my head didn’t let me concentrate either.

“Such a coincidence, isn’t it?” Was he telling the truth? But why would

he lie to me?

He coughed. “Yeah, it is. But I’m happy you’re here. Tess was missing you.”

“I hope you got your answers, Ms. Hutton?”

I turned around. The side of his lips twitched, gray irises twinkling with something. Ms. Hutton? Was he playing with me right now? Because I could see it in his gaze. They were weaving some web, but what? I couldn’t figure it out.

He took a step closer and tucked a strand behind my ear. “Did you like the office, Rosebud?” his rough voice whispered, stormy grays roaming my face.

My breath caught in my throat.

First Emerald, then Ms. Hutton, and now back to Rosebud. What was he doing?

I slapped his hand away and stepped back before I lost my sanity. “It doesn’t matter if I liked it or not. It’s not that I’m working here, anyway.”

I ran away from my home to New York just to stay away from him. I hurt my family and friends just to be away from him. And now my fate has brought me here, in the company his cousin owned. I couldn’t let this happen. Though it wasn’t his company, it was one of his family member’s. Avoiding him wouldn’t be an easy thing for me if I stayed. And considering his weird behavior towards me recently, I didn’t believe he’d keep his distance.

He tilted his head, giving me a challenging look. “And who told you so?”

I raised my chin, even though that didn’t help with his over six feet height. “I did. I won’t work in this company. I’m going back to New York.”

At the mention of New York, he tensed. But only for a second. The next moment he was in utmost ease as he shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry to inform you, Ms. Hutton. You can’t.”

“What do you mean? You can’t force me to work here.”

“Did you read the rules and conditions before you applied and accepted the job?”

I frowned. “Yes?”

A tiny smirk tugged at the edge of his mouth. Something dropped in the pit of my stomach. “Then you must’ve read about the three months contract. In which, you agreed to the condition that you can’t leave this job at least for ninety days after accepting the offer. So that means, Emerald Hutton—” he closed the gap again, holding my gaze, “—you can’t leave this company and this city at least for three months.”

I gaped at him. Speechless. How could I forget about the clause? Because at that moment, it wasn’t a big deal for me. I wouldn’t have left the job even if it was for some years instead of just some months. But now...

“I don’t care about the contract. I’m resigning and no one can stop me. And how do you know about this contract, anyway?”

“I know a lot of things. And you will have to care, Ms. Hutton, if you don’t want a big red mark on your career.”

“I-I...” I didn’t know what to say. He had a point. Breaching this contract could be a big thumbs down for my career.

The look of triumph in his orbs vexed me.

And then I remembered his words.

“You can’t escape me anymore.”

No. I can't let that happen. But what can I do?

I turned to Caleb, and before I could ask for help, he put his hands up. "I'm sorry, Em. I can't help you with this. The contract states that, just like the employee can't resign before the estimated time, the employer can't fire them until it's for something major."

But it is a major issue for me! I wanted to scream.

"Please, is there nothing you can do? You could transfer me somewhere else," I requested.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Em. And why transfer, though?"

"Uh, nothing. It's just..." My voice trailed off.

"Are you scared of something, Ms. Hutton?" Ace appeared before me. "Is there anything that you think you can't handle?" He cocked his head.

My jaw clenched. What was he trying to do? Was he challenging me?

"I'm not scared of anything or anyone!"

"You sure about that? Because it seems like you're desperate to escape the city. What are you afraid of?" he fired back.

Something squeezed in my chest. His questions pricked me. Did he really not know why I wanted to escape this city so desperately?

"I'm not escaping anything. I'm not a coward!" My eyes burned as I defended myself.

"No? But you're behaving like one." As soon as he said that, regret flashed over his features. "Emerald, I didn't mean..."

"You know what, Achilles Valencian? Go to hell!" Sending him a glare of wrath, I turned around and stormed away.

* * *

WATCHING the whole city from the balcony helped me cool my nerves. When I found this balcony empty, I decided to take a breath in the fresh air. But his words kept echoing in my head.

Though Ace's words stung, he was telling the truth. I was running from someone, him. I was a coward. I just didn't have the courage to be around him more than I could handle. More than my heart could handle.

But now that a challenge was thrown in my path by him and my fate, was I ready to accept it?

My phone beeped.

Ace: I'm sorry.

I glared at my phone as if I glared at him instead.

Sorry my foot! He did it on purpose. To hurt me. He knew it was a sore subject for me. Though he never mentioned it, I knew, somehow deep down, he knew of my feelings for him.

That was years ago! Yes, years ago. I reminded myself.

I didn't know what changed, and why he was after me. But whatever he wanted, he wouldn't get it.

Gripping the phone tight into my fist, I typed.

Whatever you're trying to do, you won't succeed in it. I won't let it happen. Just three months, and I will be free of this contract soon. You can't make me stay here forever.

Yes, I decided to face it. It was high time to face my fears. I didn't even have any choice. Maybe, just maybe, I could finally move on facing my fears? Who knew? And in these three months, I could stay with my family. Plus, Tess's wedding was approaching. So, in a way, there were a lot of

positive sides if I stayed back and worked here.

It was just a matter of three months, anyway. I could do it.

After spending some time on the couch, I went back inside and found Caleb's assistant, Liza.

Once she gave me a tour and explained my job here, we stopped at the management department. With dozens of cubicles, dozens of people were working tirelessly on their given tasks.

"So, Liza? Where will I work from?" I turned to the tall blonde.

"Your office is on the forty-eighth floor."

My eyes narrowed. "Office? Shouldn't I get a cubicle like the others? I mean, I'm just a new employee, assisting the head designers."

"You're right. But the boss has given you an office so you don't have any kind of discomfort. And trust me, you will love it." She smiled.

Caleb? But wouldn't that be partiality? I shrugged. A personal office didn't sound so bad.

I wonder if Tess knew about my job in Caleb's company.

When Liza took me to my office, she was right. I fell in love with it at the first sight. It was decorated in a combination of white and blue. The plush couch, the shelf, and even the beautiful paintings on the walls. It also had a floor to ceiling window from where I could see the world beneath me.

I breathed in awe as I took in the beautiful view of the busy city from the window. It was like a customized personal office. As if someone decorated every single thing with utmost care and affection.

I must thank Caleb for this. Getting my own personal office kind of reduced the bitterness of the argument I had with his frustrating cousin.

Once Liza left me on my own, I put my head into the work. It was a little difficult at first, but it all turned manageable with time. But it needed hard work. Piles of files were stacked on my white desk. I didn't even realize when the sun set in the jam of the work. And as a newbie at this, I was lacking speed.

A knock on the door made me look up. A blond head peeked through the door before he strolled in with a small box in his hand. Blue eyes twinkled with felicity.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Came to see how my little sister is doing on the first day of her office. Why? Is there a problem?”

I rolled my eyes and jutted my chin to the box. “What's in it?”

“Cupcakes. I thought you'd like some after a day full of work,” he said, opening the box. The mouthwatering sweet aroma of them had me salivating. Only then I realized how hungry I was.

“Thanks.” Grabbing one, I took a bite.

“So? How was your day? Did you like the office?” Tobias asked.

“Other than the shock I got after knowing that I was brought here on purpose and who the owner is, everything else was pretty good. The people over here are very nice and humble.”

He nodded. “I heard what happened. But I don't have any complaints about their decision. We can have you closer to us, after all.”

I shook my head. I knew none of my family members would see any problem in it. For them, whatever Caleb did was right. I couldn't even stay upset with him for it. He didn't know my reasons. If I were in his place,

maybe I would do the same.

“Hey, I know what you’re thinking. But don’t worry. I’m sure Achilles won’t do anything that will make you uncomfortable. I can talk to him if you want?” he offered, concern laced his face.

“No need. It’s not like I’ll have to face him everyday. Not that I care, but it’s good that Caleb is the owner of this company and not him. So, there is nothing much to worry about. I won’t see him often.”

“Who told you Caleb is the owner of this company?” He raised his brow.

I frowned. “What do you mean? He’s the CEO, right?”

Tobias nodded. “Yes, as a CEO, he manages everything. But he’s not the owner. Achilles owns this company. He bought it.”

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ELEVEN: AS THE KING ORDERS



A knock on the door put a brake on my non-stop rejecting and selecting the designs from the heap of catalogues. I needed to deliver the final samples to the head designers for the new collection of OC Textiles.

Liza's blonde head appeared through the door.

"Sorry to disturb you, but the meeting is just about to begin. And your presence is required there."

My brows furrowed. "But I'm just an employee. What would I do in a board meeting?"

His shoulders lifted. "No idea. The boss's orders."

Why did Caleb need me in a board meeting?

Sighing, I nodded. "All right. I'll be there in a few."

"Great. See you there." With that, she closed the door behind her and left.

I didn't even have any idea what the meeting was about. Nor did I know what to say or do. Whatever happens, I just hoped he wouldn't be there. After yesterday's confrontation, I tried my best to avoid him. But his being the freaking owner of this company didn't make it easy.

Since Tobias's revelation about it, I still couldn't get over the shock. The irony! I had to work in his company under his orders. And here I was trying

to escape him at any cost. Now I had a doubt that whatever happened to my job and transfer, he had something to do with it.

I let out a huff.

I just couldn't make out what was brewing in his head. It was all so inarticulate.

When I entered the conference room, all entities in three-piece suits' eyes trained on me. The head chair was still vacant and there was no trace of Caleb yet. Flashing a professional smile towards those mostly unfamiliar faces, I found an empty chair right next to the head of the table.

All the other seats were occupied other than the one I took and the one at the other end of the table. And the big bald man seated beside it with a creepy face didn't encourage me to go there.

Once I took my place, my gaze kept flickering to the door, waiting for the boss to arrive. The curious glances I received from around the long table made me fidget and uncomfortable.

Though their reactions were legit as it wasn't a regular thing for someone who was not a board member to join board meetings.

When the door opened, only then everyone took their interest off me and stood as—

Achilles Valencian walked in, followed by Caleb and Liza.

I sucked in my breath when his gaze landed on me. Those powerful, dominating stormy irises. The whole room went silent: an effect of the commanding aura he carried with him.

Averting my eyes, just as I expected Caleb to come and sit at the head of the table, he changed direction and went to the chair beside that creepy big

man. And thus, the head of the table was occupied by the devil himself.

Of course. He was the king of this kingdom. What was I thinking? Now I was regretting not sitting beside that bald man.

Caleb sent his regular sunny smile from across the table, which I couldn't return. I'd just ask him later why he called me here.

At the king's curt nod, everyone took their seats.

"Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to someone who will be joining in every board meeting from now on," spoke his deep voice, when I played with the emeralds of my bracelet. A way to ignore him and the irrational fast beats of my heart due to his presence. "Meet Ms. Emerald Hutton, a very special friend of mine."

My gaze snapped up to him. What the hell? I'd be joining board meetings with them? I was just a newcomer employee!

"Welcome aboard, Ms. Hutton! It'll be a pleasure to work with you." I turned to the woman next to me, who greeted me with a kind smile.

I could barely show her my enthusiasm in return. I was too perplexed for that. What the hell was really going into his head?

While some of the members welcomed me with professionalism, most of them remained quiet. They seemed to share the exact bewilderment as me.

When they didn't respond well and expressions of displeasure etched onto their faces, great Achilles Valencian barked out, "Any objections?"

The shake of everyone's heads was immediate.

"N-no objections, Mr. Valencian. I'm sure there must be some reason behind the decision you took, and we respect it. We're just... a little surprised, that's it," the bald man beside Caleb said.

Ace nodded. “Good. The sooner you get over your surprise, the better. Now, you all may proceed with the meeting.”

I kept shooting daggers at him with my glare as he leaned back in his chair, listening to whatever the members were saying one by one. And when his hand slowly slid to where mine was placed on the table, I jerked my hands down.

The slight crease between his brows told me about his dissatisfaction.

He was trying to touch my hand in front of everyone? The nerve of him.

My features formed into a scowl of disbelief.

Sensing my glare, his fleeting pools met me for a second. And the twitch at the corner of his lips made my fists into balls.

My attention wasn't on the meeting, as I was too busy showing my displeasure. But a certain topic caught my ears.

“This is a matter of concern about how they seemed to have better plans than us in every presentation we're making in our recent deals. It seems like they know exactly what will be our deficiency and they will work right on there,” the bald man beside Caleb stated, a frown set between his joined brows.

They were talking about a rival company of Valencian Corp. Some AR industries that competed in every deal this company approached.

Ace cocked his head. “What do you have in your mind about this?”

That man shifted in his chair, clearing his throat. “Umm, I think—”

“That we have someone among us leaking information.” Ace finished for him. It was more like a statement than a question. His jaw ticked as the bald man nodded. “Have you tried to find out who it is yet?”

The man visibly gulped. “We thought to discuss it with you first. And we were not sure how to find out the culprit.”

His lips curled in distaste. “You weren’t sure? Is that how you all are planning to run this company?”

The board members avoided his furious eyes, keeping mum.

I cleared my throat. “If you all don’t mind, I’d like to suggest something.”

Nervous flutters erupted in my stomach when everyone’s gaze fell on me once again. I had given interviews and presented presentations before the teachers and students back in the college, but talking here before these experienced businessmen professionally, was another thing.

His sharp glare softened as he gave me his sole attention.

“You don’t need to ask permission to speak up, Em. Say whatever you want to say,” Caleb encouraged me from the other side of the table.

Wetting my lower lip, I started. “To find out who’s behind this, can we do a discreet research on the backgrounds and recent activities of the people who are working directly with these projects? Because irrelevant staff won’t know much about the presentations to disclose.” When no one interrupted, I continued. “That way, if we find someone suspicious, we could easily replace them with someone more reliable and take legal actions against them once we get solid proof regarding their offense.”

An older man laughed out loud. “Good idea there, Ms. Hutton. But we can’t just go and start looking at everyone’s full history and recent activities. It’ll be too time-consuming. And whoever is doing it isn’t a fool. Once they find out about the investigation, they’ll get more careful with their moves.”

“That’s why I said the word ‘discreet.’ Yes, it might be time-consuming, but it’ll be for the well-being of the company. Otherwise, I don’t think there’s

any other way to find the culprit.”

“Of course there’s a way,” he argued. “We could just change the whole team instead and appoint only the trustable ones.”

I shook my head. “Finding them out is an utmost need for us right now. Because if we let it go and don’t do anything about it, it won’t be difficult for the rival company to buy someone else again. An example of what happens to a traitor needs to be set before the others.”

The man snorted. “We know how to deal with this situation. You don’t need to point out anything. You’re just a newcomer here—”

“Didn’t you hear what she said, Mr. Brooks?” Ace snapped. “I’d like you to start working on this as soon as possible without wasting any more time!”

“But Mr. Valencian—”

“Enough! No more discussions. You’ll do what my—Ms. Hutton says!” he barked, cutting Mr. Brooks off with his icy gaze. “And next time, keep your attitude in check while talking to her.”

Swallowing, Mr. Brooks nodded, shifting in his seat.

Though it felt good that he supported me, what’s with the rage?

As the meeting went on, I again went back to silence, twirling my bracelet, only speaking when needed. Even that was difficult with his intense gaze on me most of the time. As if he didn’t come here to join the meeting, but to stare at me.

I sighed in relief when a clerk interrupted the long ass meeting for a coffee break.

With a large tray of mugs, he started distributing them around the table. When my turn came, I shook my head at him with a polite smile.

“No, thanks. I don’t drink coffee.”

“No worries, miss. I got some tea for you,” he replied, handing me the cup of steaming tea.

I sent him a surprised look. How did he know I preferred tea over coffee?

“How do you know I like tea?” I queried.

The smile on his face threatened to fall as he glanced around. He opened his mouth, but Ace cut him off.

“You may go now, Gabe. Thank you for the drinks.” His eyes remained on me. Gabe didn’t waste a second before hurrying out of the room, away from my question.

Casting another glare at him, I sipped on my tea. And again, I was surprised. It was made the same way I liked it. Less milk with no sugar.

I looked at Caleb. Did he tell that clerk my preference? Maybe he found out from Tess? But I didn’t think she knew I didn’t like coffee in the first place.

Weird.

* * *

“GOD! I’m so tired! Liza, why don’t you ask someone to help me with these report sheets? I need some help with it,” Sierra said, a girl from the finance department.

After the meeting, Liza took me on another tour around the office. This time, to introduce me personally to everyone. And when we met Sierra, a good friend of Liza’s, she started complaining.

“Everyone is busy, Sierra. I can’t just tell anyone to push their work aside and help you out. I’m sorry,” Liza apologized.

Sierra's shoulders slumped.

"I can help you with that if you want. I have some experience of working on them with my brother," I offered.

Her eyes widened as she straightened. "No, no. It's all right, Emerald. Thank you so much for your offer, but I think I'll manage."

"No worries, I'm free right now, anyway. I'd be happy to help."

I have been free since the meeting. Because no one was giving me any work to do. Even choosing those designs in the morning, I had to request Liza to let me do that. Well, I told her to give me something, and she handed me those catalogues. It didn't seem like work for me, but I took it anyway. At least I'd something to do.

I figured the stuff they gave me to do yesterday wasn't very important. I understood I was new, but that didn't mean they wouldn't give me any serious job.

Even the other employees seemed to be too careful and polite around me. I couldn't make sense out of their treating me like a VIP and not one of them.

"But I can't just trouble you with my work—"

"Please, I insist," I pleaded. My hands were itching to do some real work.

She glanced at Liza behind me with uncertainty, and then slowly nodded. A hesitant smile slowly spread across her face.

"Oh, thank you! Tell me, where do you exactly need my help?"

* * *

ONCE IT WAS LUNCH TIME, only then we were finished with the work. Sierra was a fun person, so working with her was easy and comfortable. I was glad that apart from Liza. I found another easy to get along person in this office.

“You ready?” Sierra asked, getting up from her desk.

Looking up from Beth’s messages, I nodded. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Just when we were about to get into the elevator, a voice stopped us.

It was Carter, Ace’s assistant. A redhead with a short height. The dark patches under his eyes were proof of his tiredness. Though I just met him yesterday, I pitied him. Due to some unknown reasons, his boss remained in this office all the time. And he, being his assistant, had to run back and forth between Valencian Corp and OC Textiles for him.

“Yes?”

“Miss Hutton, I’m sorry to stop you. But Mr. Valencian requires your presence in his office.”

I frowned. “Why? What does he need now?”

He shifted on his legs, pushing the specs up his nose. “Uh, he wants you to have lunch with him.”

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TWELVE: CREEP



I set aside my designs and picked up my phone after it blared for the second time. A smile etched on my face, seeing the caller ID.

“It took you a whole week to call me?”

“And it took you so long to pick up the phone?”

I chuckled. “I was working on some designs. Anyway, what’s up with you? How’s the job going?”

Since Warner had left for Seattle for his new job and I returned to Los Angeles, it was our first conversation in a week.

“You’re working on weekends? And yes, everything is going smoothly. Life has never been this good. ”

“Glad to hear that.” If only my life was a little better. “And yes, but it’s not official work. Just some of my ideas I needed to polish.”

“About the office, how’s it going? I hope you still don’t have any problems staying in LA, do you?” he asked. He didn’t know where I was working.

And what do I tell him? All of this was still so confusing to me.

“Office is good. I have to work here for at least three months until I decide to think of something else,” I replied absentmindedly. Office was

good because I hadn't seen Ace in three whole days. He didn't visit after the day he ordered me to have lunch with him. Of course, I denied. And the nerve of him. He sent Carter again to the canteen to deliver me the food he got for lunch!

You should eat homemade food. The canteen's stuff isn't good for health. It was the message I got with the food.

And the embarrassment I felt with every pair of eyes on me out there was a whole different thing!

Though he didn't come to the office for three days now, the food was always on time. At first, I gave them away to Liza and others, but then, well, I thought I shouldn't push away food like that.

The dishes were heavenly. From the pieces of information I picked up from Liza and Caleb's conversation, he was busy hunting for a new house and renovating it. Why did Achilles Valencian need a house all of a sudden?

"I don't understand what problem you have staying in that city," Warner mumbled. "Anyway, I will call you tonight. There's a day out with my office colleagues today, so gotta go now. I miss you, Em. I wish you were here."

I smiled. "I miss you too. Don't worry. We'll meet soon at Tess's wedding. You're coming, right? It's at the end of this month."

"Of course. How can I miss it? I'll definitely be there."

"Great. All right, you go now. Talk to you later."

"Love you."

* * *

THE CAR SCREECHED TO A HALT, and I got out. The huge iron gate decorated with red and white flowers welcomed everyone who entered through. A big bold 'Felicity Charity Event' hung at the top of the gate. An event for some

people to genuinely donate for the poor, and for others, a way to show off.

Dad and Tobias also piled out and walked to me. Our family has been donating to this foundation every year for the orphan kids for the last ten years. I used to attend this function every year in my childhood. When I heard of it organizing another event today, I tagged along with Dad and Tobias.

“Let’s go,” Dad said, leading us inside through the red carpet, avoiding the crowd of people and the paparazzi.

Once inside, the first thing that came into my view was a swarm of elegantly dressed people roaming around and admiring the fine pieces of art that’s been exhibited around the hall. While some were busy in light conversations with glasses of drinks in their hands. A slow, classic music hummed in the background.

“This time they’re holding it differently. They put these canvases and pictures on auction, and whoever wishes to donate will buy them. Their money will directly go to the charity fund,” Tobias explained.

I nodded. “It’s a wise way, I must say. This way, more people who love art will donate. It will be good for those orphan kids.”

“Yeah, and I think I’m going to jam my walls with some today. Look at those beauties.” He pointed to the beautiful canvases around. “Who can say no to them?”

I giggled. “I agree.”

As Dad went busy conversing with an older man, I let myself explore in the sea of people and arts. Arts that demanded attention. I wasn’t a big fan of them, but they were impossible not to stare at. The beauty of nature, unknown people, mythological creatures, everything looked so real between

the brushes of vibrant colors.

The colors blended so well, it felt they'd come alive at any moment.

A small boy, standing beside his mother, was gaping in wonder at a picture where a crimson skinned dragon fumed amber flames through its mouth. Its eyes sparkled with rage and menace. On the other hand, a middle-aged man stared at the highlighted cleavage of a woman with half of her face covered with her raven hair in a canvas.

Shaking my head, I passed him and turned to another row. Then a certain painting caught my eye. A painting of a single rose, bloomed with its velvety petals spread around, with a couple of rosebuds facing in directions adorned it. And those tiny drops of water sparkling on the petals reminded me of diamonds.

It was gorgeous.

“Em! See this?” Tobias called out, beckoning me to him. He stood before a painting of a mermaid with her upper half floating on the water. “What do you think of this? I think she will glorify my bedroom wall with her beauty.”

I sighed at my brother. The mermaid's chest was barely covered with her hair. There were children roaming around, for God's sake!

“Yeah, it's beautiful,” I agreed anyway.

A friend of his called him from among a group of men.

“I'll be back!”

As he strode to the group, I stayed back and appreciated the rose painting.

Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me. The wisp of the familiar cologne that tingled my nostrils had me frozen in my place. My heart stuttered as I felt his body heat behind me.

“You like it?” a deep voice rasped into my ear. An involuntary shiver ran down my spine.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, not turning to him. His house hunting was finally over?

Wait, why did I care if he was busy the whole week?

Right, I didn't.

A deep chuckle. “I see my Rosebud isn't happy to see me here.”

I frowned. “You didn't answer my question.”

He stepped closer. “Why do people come to events like these?”

I shrugged, feigning not to be affected by his proximity. “Well, most of them come to show off.”

A sharp intake of breath. Then I felt his hot breath on my neck. The temperature suddenly rose higher in the room.

Wait, did he just smell me?

Creep!

“Trust me, sweetheart. I didn't come here to show off. I have much more important things to do than waste my time on that.” He brushed his fingers on my hip, making me jolt.

Not being able to bear the tension, I stepped away from his overwhelming presence and touch. Sending him a glare, I walked away with flushed cheeks. But his persistent gaze didn't.

When the bell of the auction rang, we all gathered in the backyard of the building, under the open blue sky. Rows of chairs were lined up before the huge stage for people to sit. We took our seats in the second row. And a particular person was missing.

Was he already gone?

Good for me.

A man cleared his throat in the mike, snatching everyone's attention to the stage. "Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the 'Felicity Charity Event' one more time. We all know the holy purpose we're gathered here for. So, without any adieu, let's begin the auction right away."

A painting of a phoenix was first put for sale on the stage as the auctioneer began calling for bids. As the auction went on, things got heated between the bidders to win over a piece of art.

Tobias was extremely disappointed when someone else brought his mermaid painting at a much higher price than him, where Dad was satisfied with a picture of Mother Teresa.

And when the canvas of that blood rose got on the stage, I really wanted to bid for it. But well, my pockets weren't full enough to do that. I could easily ask from Dad, but if I wanted to help someone, I wanted to do it with something that I owned. So, I decided to just pay them a little amount that I could afford in check later.

"And who wants to hold onto this gorgeous velvety rose over here?" the auctioneer asked. "The bid starts with five thousand dollars!"

"Ten thousand dollars!" a man yelled out from the crowd.

"Ten thousand dollars! Anyone else wants to take it home with a higher price?" queried the bid caller.

"Fifteen thousand dollars!" a woman shouted.

"Fifteen thousand! Anyone else? Fifteen thousand dollars! Going once! Going—"

“Seventeen thousand dollars!” the previous man cried out.

“Excellent! Seventeen thousand!” Everyone started murmuring about the outrageous price for only a mere picture of a rose. Even I was surprised. That man must’ve liked it a lot. Though it was a masterpiece. “Going once, going twice, and so—”

“One million!” a voice spoke over the babbles of the crowd from somewhere behind us. Everyone went quiet, gasps of shock echoed around as everyone glanced back to see the insane person wasting a million dollars on a simple painting.

I turned around, and there he was. At the last row, sitting with an utmost ease, not caring that he just spent a load of money after a mere canvas.

Was he crazy?

Even the auctioneer watched him with bafflement. “A-are you sure, Mr. Valencian?”

He stood and glanced down at his watch. “Get it ready.” Sending one last look my way, he went to sign the check his secretary handed him as every pair of eyes ogled him with awe and disbelief.

Once the auction was over, we met him outside. Dad was proud he donated so much for those kids, while Tobias also appreciated him with a still sullen mood. When they left, Ace and I were alone again.

He watched me as I eyed the beautiful canvas lying on the backseat of his car.

“I didn’t know you were interested in art that much,” I said. “Why this one, though? There were a lot of paintings out there from famous artists who’d have been worth the money.” I didn’t know he’d do it just out of kindness.

“But those weren’t what I wanted. I wanted it—” he pointed to the painting, “—so I got it.”

“Why? Anything special you saw in it?” Shouldn’t I just walk away? But here I was, asking questions to him out of my stupid curiosity. As far as I knew, he had never been to any charity functions, let alone donating a million in a day.

He stepped close, his stormy gray irises peered into mine. “What do you see in them?”

I tilted my head, my brows creasing.

“I—a rose?” I uttered, glancing back at the painting.

“And?” he probed.

“And...” My gaze flickered in the backseat again. “And some rosebuds...” My eyes widened as realization set in.

“Exactly. Rosebuds and a beautiful blooming rose,” he whispered, easing closer. “Ring a bell, Rosebud? Or, should I say, my Rose?”

My breath hitched at my throat at his words. He-he remembered. He remembered what he said to me on my ninth birthday.

A shaky breath escaped my lips. If he remembered, then he also knew of the feelings I’d harbored for him for all these years. I was right, he knew. He knew everything.

“You...” I gulped the lump down my throat, my heart pounding.

“Yes, I remember everything. You know why I bought it?”

I shook my head, still reeling from his revelation.

“Because the moment my eyes fell onto this rose, it became mine. And I don’t let go of anything that belongs to me.”

A gasp slipped through my mouth. Even though someone else would think that he was talking about the painting, I knew he wasn't. Those intense gray orbs of his were on me as declared his claim.

And I don't let go of anything that belongs to me.

Something ticked in my head as I remembered my message to him last week. It was his reply to me.

Just three months, and I will be free of this contract soon. You can't keep me here forever.

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THIRTEEN: THE VIP ELEVATOR



“So, you mean he declared that he wants you? That you’re his?” Cassie asked, with her jaw on the floor.

“He didn’t exactly say that.”

“But this is what he meant with whatever he said. Even a kid can see through it!” she argued.

I threw the cards we were playing on the table and leaned back against the black leather couch, huffing. After the auction, I got a call from her to meet at her place. Suffering from a feeble flu and bored at home, she wanted my company.

“God, I’ve seen people being crazy in love before. But this? This is insane!” She shook her head in disbelief. “Buying an entire company just to bring you closer to him, forcing you to join the board meetings so he could see you more and wasting a million on a painting?”

At the mention of the ‘L’ word, I straightened. “There’s no love! It’s—it just could be a want of possession or obsession of his. I don’t know. But there is nothing like that you’re implying.”

She sniffled. Her sharp little nose was red from her continuous sneezing. Her honey blonde hair was tied in a messy bun. “Even Jeff Bezos wouldn’t

do something as crazy as buying an entire company that would cost him a fortune just to bring a girl close to him he wanted.”

I rolled my eyes, but my treacherous heart skipped at her words. After I found out from Tobias that OC Textiles’ owner was Ace, and not Caleb, I was shocked. I even had doubt that he had something to do with my transfer. It wasn’t just Caleb. Though, I wasn’t sure. When I accidentally told Cassie about this, she got this illusion he bought that company from Mr. Cooper for me. Even though I didn’t want to believe her, it did make some sense.

“He must’ve had some other agenda behind it. And it could be a pure coincidence he found out I’d be working in that company, and so he told Caleb to transfer me here. That’s it.” I still denied.

“Really? And what about the message he sent you just the night before that day? That you can’t escape him anymore? Your time was over and blah, blah? Can you explain that?”

I opened my mouth and then shut it. Crossing my hands over my chest, I shrugged.

She gave me a look, but to my utter surprise, she changed the subject. “How’s Warner?”

I cocked my head. “Uh, he’s good?”

What was she trying to do now?

She nodded. “You guys talk every day?”

“No. Both of us were really busy the entire week. But he did call this morning.” I checked my phone, but there were no calls or messages from him. “He was supposed to call me again tonight.”

“So long-distance is already at its work,” she hummed.

My brows creased. “What do you mean?”

Her shoulders lifted as she grabbed her coffee mug and took a sip, sniffing. “Isn’t it simple? Even strong relationships don’t work with long-distance most of the time, and here we’re talking about your one-sided relationship.”

“It isn’t one-sided.”

“Oh?” She raised her brow. “So, you love him?”

Silence.

“Knew it. Look, Em—” placing the mug back on the table, she leaned in, “—you and I both know that what you and Warner have isn’t going to last long. And now that you two are worlds away from each other, and with your new, slash old lover back in the picture, you should take a decision on your relationship with Warner now. You and he both are aware that you were never into this. You never had any feelings for him other than seeing him just as a friend. Yes, maybe he likes you, but trust me, deep down, he also knows you won’t be able to love him, no matter how much he tries.”

I looked down at my lap. “It’s not my fault I can’t do it. I tried. I tried my best to love him. But...”

“But your heart still belongs to someone else?”

My gaze snapped to her. “No! I don’t have any feelings for him anymore. Yes, he still affects me, but... it’s just the awkwardness. Nothing else.” I averted my eyes from her piercing amber ones. “Warner and I are doing well. You don’t worry about that.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know you more than you know yourself, Em. You still want him as much as you did back at your siblings’ birthday party that night. You’re just scared to get hurt again. That’s why you’re denying your feelings,

aren't you?" she asked. When I didn't answer, she sighed. "Don't you think you're doing wrong to Warner? Even if he was the one who insisted on trying, you know you won't be able to love him no matter if it's because of Ace or not."

Closing my eyes, I put my head in my hands. I knew I wasn't doing fair with Warner. It's been eating me out for a long time now. But I was too selfish to let him go. Though I didn't love him, his friendship gave me huge support. Truth to be told, him being my boyfriend helped my mind a little bit to assure myself that I'd moved on. I could show it to the world, to *him*. But deep down, I knew the truth. I knew I was using Warner for my own selfishness.

My eyes pricked as guilt cut through me. Though I was thinking about talking to him about it for the last few months, I couldn't do it. My selfishness, fear... fear of facing *him* alone stopped me from doing it.

Cassie placed a hand over mine. "It's okay. I know what you're feeling. But don't. It's not your fault. Though Warner doesn't know about Ace, he does know why you agreed to be his girlfriend. Talk to him. I'm sure he will understand. He deserves to know the truth, Em. Tell him everything."

I nodded. "I will talk to him. But not now. I need to do this when we're face to face. He's coming to Tess's wedding."

"Will you tell him about Ace?"

"No. There's nothing to tell him about Ace." I cast a glance. "I will talk to him about us. I just hope he will still be my friend after everything is over."

She squeezed my hand. "He will, I'm sure."

After a silence, she shifted and cleared her throat.

"So?"

I turned to her. “So what?”

“Now that the issue of Warner is sorted, will you give Ace a chance?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “You talked me into breaking up with Warner so that you can pair me up with Ace? I can’t believe you!”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. It’s not that you weren’t going to do that in the near future, anyway. Especially now that Ace is here.”

I scowled at her.

“What? I’m just helping my best friend with her love life dilemma. You and I both know what your heart desires. And I know, deep down, beside the fear of another heartbreak, you were stopping yourself from leaning towards Ace because of Warner. You didn’t want to cheat on him. But that’s sorted now, right?”

“Are you for real? I’m not going to do anything with Ace. And about Warner, I still haven’t broken up with him. He’s still my boyfriend.” Anger boiled in my chest. I didn’t know why I was angry for. For the fact that she supported Ace way too much or because her words screamed truth.

She waved her hand. “He will be out of the picture soon. It will be better for his own good, anyway. Because assessing your Valencian’s obsession with you, I don’t think he would take this nicely if he has any competitor in the way of getting you.”

“You know what? I’m leaving. I’m not talking to you anymore about this.” Red in the face, I got up and collected my purse and phone.

“Do whatever you want, girl. We both know that Achilles Valencian has played his card. And now, you’re stuck in his trap. No matter what you want, you can’t escape him. And you know why?”

I stared at her, waiting for her to finish.

“Because you don’t want to escape. Your heart won’t let you.”

* * *

THE ELEVATOR PINGED, opening for another person to reach their destined floor, leaving only me and Liza inside. I held a bunch of files with one hand while my other hand was occupied with a cup of tea. After the small talk with Cassie, her words didn’t let me sleep last night. Some of my own realizations haunted me.

I was beginning to accept my fate, the change, and him around me again. It didn’t scare me as it did the first couple of days. And it scared me the most. It’s just been no more than twenty days since I met him again, and I was already thinking about him more and more. I was turning weak again. Just like years ago...

No, Em. Don’t go there. You can’t fall weak this time. Be strong, use your head. Don’t let yourself fall into his trap. You don’t know what happened seven years ago. Even if he knew about your feelings, you don’t know if he really had anything for you in his heart. But that wasn’t possible. If he felt something, then he wouldn’t do that with your sister.

But Tess said she didn’t love him...

Then why did they do it? If there was nothing between them, then why? Or there was? Or it could be a moment of heat between them? But do best friends do that?

I blew out a sigh. It was all so confusing. I didn’t know what to think anymore. All my life I thought my sister betrayed me, but the truth was she didn’t. Or she said she would never hurt me.

I wanted to ask Tobias about it. The truth of what actually happened

seven years ago. But I didn't know how to start this conversation with him. Did he even know what happened that night?

“God, it's not even noon and I'm already so tired! The preparation for the meeting with Arabs is taking a toll on me,” Liza complained.

“What's so important about this meeting, though? I mean, the way everyone is taking it so seriously, it's not usual.”

“It's a very big deal the boss wants to crack with them. He doesn't want it to go to our rival company. These chipmunks now started a new clothing line when they found out about our new business in this field.” She shook her head. “I tell you, these people can't take any success from this company.”

Oh! So that's all the fuss about.

Then something caught my eye as we reached the last stop, forty-ninth floor. It was a fifty-story building. Then why were there only forty-nine buttons on the elevator panel?

“We're here,” she announced once the doors opened.

“Wait, why are there only forty-nine buttons? It's a fiftieth-floor building, right?” I asked, strolling out behind her.

She bobbed her head. “Yes. The boss's penthouse is on the fiftieth floor, and no one can go there other than his closed ones. So, the common elevator doesn't have access there. They go there by the VIP one.” Her chit jutted towards the other elevator beside the ordinary one.

The golden one.

I knew it was for VIPs, but I didn't know only this one had access to the fiftieth floor.

Once we were with the team that was working on the presentation for the

meeting, we drowned our heads in the work to finish the final touches. As Liza said, the boss, Caleb, didn't want any deficiency with anything. I didn't know these people were that terrified of Caleb. Even the words 'the boss' was enough to drain color from their faces.

"Phew, finally done. How much time is left for the meeting?" Matt, a guy from the management department, asked. He was always paranoid about every little thing.

"Don't worry, Matt. There's still one hour left," Sierra said, checking her watch.

He huffed. "The boss can arrive at any moment and demand a recheck himself."

"Anyway, let me print those papers in the meantime," I said, gathering the sheets.

"All right but be quick. You know you and Matt are joining us in the meeting, right?" Liza asked.

"Yeah, don't worry. It will only take five minutes," I told her, getting up from my chair. But my hand accidentally bumped with the tea mug I had put on the table and the cold content spilled on the surface, splashing half of it on my clothes. "Shit!"

"Here!"

Liza passed me some tissue papers, but it was already ruined. The stain marked my white blouse dark. Damn! Did I have to wear white today?

Cursing under my breath, I threw the tissues in the bin.

"Oh God, Boss will be here any moment now and then we will leave for the meeting. You need to clean this up fast!" Sierra was up to her feet.

“There’s no time to clean it. Even your jeans have some stains. You have to change your clothes.” Liza eyed my appearance.

“But where would I find clothes at this moment? I don’t have that much time to go home now.” I bit my lip.

Her face lit up as she spoke. “Why don’t you go up to the penthouse? Your sister had stayed there a couple of times. I’m sure there are some clothes of hers in one of the rooms.”

“Penthouse? But what if Cale—”

“The boss wouldn’t mind at all! At least not for you. Just go change your clothes. We don’t have much time.” Cutting me off, she pushed me out of the door. “I’ll print those papers. You go on.”

Heaving a sigh, I went to the golden elevator and hopped in.

There must be some guards up there to control the unwanted accesses. They know Tess, but not me. Would they even let me pass? Should I call Caleb for permission first?

Too late, I was already there.

As the doors opened, my suspicion was right. There were indeed two huge built guards hovering outside. But much to my surprise, when they saw me, something flashed across their faces as they stood straight and greeted me with polite nods.

Guess I was allowed.

Flashing a smile at them, I walked through the spacious corridor. But there was a second barrier. A fingerprint scanner beside the door. Damn it! Now how would I go inside?

I should just go back and try to get these stains off somehow without

wasting my time here.

Just as I turned to go, one of the guards appeared before me, his eyes on the floor. “My apologies for blocking your way, miss. But if you don’t know, you have access to the penthouse. You just have to press your thumb on the scanner.”

I frowned. I had access? But how? When did Caleb collect my fingerprint for it?

Confused, I turned around and placed my thumb on the scanner. And it did recognize my identity and unlocked the door. Whoa!

Strange.

Still surprised, I thanked the guard and walked inside before closing the door. And I just stood there for a moment. The entire penthouse did justice to Valencian’s name. Stunning would be an understatement. The white marble and dark paneling, and the combination of classy white and grey furniture, just enhanced its beauty.

Remembering the shortage of time, I went upstairs, not knowing where to go. And then I entered the master bedroom. Not even a single thing was out of place. It felt like no one really lived here. It definitely wasn’t the room Tess visited. Because she wasn’t the one to keep a place tidy like this.

Not wanting to waste anymore time, I padded inside the walk-in closet. Seeing the tons of ironed suits, jackets and other clothes lined up in the racks, I assumed it was Caleb’s room. The closet was filled with the smell of laundry. Even the clothes seemed untouched.

I couldn’t wear his suits, so I searched for some T-shirts or something I could fit into. And I did find one in the back. Though it seemed too big for me, I could somehow adjust myself into it.

Going back into the bedroom, I placed the black T-shirt on the bed and collected some more tissues to pat on the stains my jeans had. They weren't that noticeable, so I just rubbed on the wet patch a few times and let it be. The T-shirt was big enough to cover them, anyway.

Throwing the tissues into the silver bin, I went back to the bed and removed my sticky blouse. Once I was done wiping the dampness on my chest with it, I flung it on the mattress. As I grabbed the T-shirt, the door of the bedroom flung open, and soon followed a curse under someone's breath, making me freeze in my place.

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FOURTEEN: HIS SCORCHING TOUCH



Clutching the T-shirt tight against my chest, I whirled around. My breath caught in my throat. There, he stood rigid beside the door, hand clenched around the knob as his darker than ever stormy gray gaze preyed on my almost half naked body. Even with the T-shirt before my chest, I felt naked under his scorching stare.

Curse the moment I decided to go braless due to the thick cotton blouse!

“What are you doing here? Get out!” I screeched as he stood there immobile, staring at me shamelessly.

My outburst seemed to pull him out of his trance. Closing his eyes for a moment, he took a deep breath. Once those gray pools opened again, instead of leaving, he closed the door behind him and stalked towards me.

Eyes like saucers, I stepped back. “W-what are you doing? Get out of the room! Right now!”

Only when he was inches away from me, then did he stop. With his jaw clenched, his gaze went back to roam my bare shoulders to my bare waist, leaving a tingling sensation behind in their wake.

I was frozen in my place, my head screamed to run to the washroom, but my legs weren't moving. I didn't flinch when he raised his hand and tucked a

strand behind my ear. Even though I was alone with him in this whole penthouse, there wasn't any fear in me.

“You're telling me to get out of my own room, Rosebud?” he rasped in his deep Greek accent. Flaming stare set onto my parted lips. Only then I noticed how his shirt was half done, displaying the fine ripped muscles of his chest.

I bit my lip.

“Don't do that if you want my hands to stay away from you.” A groan reverberated through his chest as he pulled my lower lip out with his thumb, giving it a slow and feathery brush. A jolt shot through me, making me stumble away.

With my heart in my throat, I managed to say, “D-do not touch me. Get out or else...”

He stepped closer. “Or else?”

My eyes flickered around as I kept backing away. “I-I will...”

What could I do?

Moving away from him, I ran for the washroom and closed the door behind me. A booming laughter followed behind.

I cursed under my breath. In the mirror, I found myself all hot and crimson, out of anger, embarrassment and... something else. Something I felt when he watched me with those eyes and touched my lip. Something I didn't want to address.

What was he doing here, anyway?

He said it was his room. That meant this was his penthouse, and not Caleb's? But then why did Liza say it was Caleb's—oh! So ‘the boss’ meant

Ace? I thought she was Caleb's assistant, so she might refer to him as the boss.

God, I'm such an idiot!

Then something clicked. If Ace was 'the boss,' that meant he organized that office for me? That beautiful office I was so comfortable working in? And here I thought it was Caleb.

I didn't know if I was flattered or irritated. That man vexed and confused me, and at the same time amazed me.

What does he actually want from me? The roses and gifts every morning. Why's he doing all this?

Still weak in the knees, I put on the T-shirt and looked at myself in the mirror. It engulfed me whole.

It was his...

Without realizing, I took the fabric and sniffed. A disappointment filled me as only laundry powder's smell was what I got.

I shook my head.

What was I doing? I had to be strong. I couldn't let him affect me in that way.

With a new determination set, I took a deep breath and walked out. He wasn't in the room anymore, neither was my stained blouse.

Where did it go?

Once I was in the hall, he was still nowhere to be seen. Good for me. I just wanted to disappear from here without facing him again. I could come later sometime to grab my blouse.

I almost let out a sigh of relief when I reached the door without any

interruption.

“Going somewhere, Rosebud?”

I stilled.

Turning around, I sent him a glare. He was now changed into a white shirt and dark suit jacket.

“Yes, any problem?”

My eyes widened as the door didn't open when I pulled it. I tried again, but no avail. What was wrong with it now?

I remembered about the fingerprint scanner, but there wasn't anything like that beside the door either.

“Why isn't it opening?”

A smirk tugged at his lips. “Because I locked it.”

“What? But why?” I scowled. “Open it, I'm going to be late for the meeting.”

He shrugged. “I'm sure your boss wouldn't mind if you get late.”

The nerve of this man! He talked about my boss as if he was referring to someone else and not himself.

“Open this door right now, Ace.”

Something flashed over his orbs. Closing the distance, he stood before me. The heady combination of his exotic cologne tangled with a distant hint of smoke filled my senses. “I missed hearing my name from your lips all this time.” His tone was soft with emotion as he watched my face with such tenderness.

Something squeezed my chest as the memories we spent together seven years ago, when he used to visit our home regularly, flooded my mind.

A composure suddenly took over his features, turning him unreadable. Clearing his throat, he cocked his head. “I will let you go only if you accept a condition of mine.”

“Everyone is waiting for me. I don’t have time for this.” I didn’t want to accept any of his conditions. I knew it would be something wicked, just like his intentions.

“That’s why I’m suggesting you to accept my condition and I’ll let you go.”

He wouldn’t budge, would he? Pressing my lips tight, I glared at him. “Fine. What is it?”

A triumphant look took over his irises, though he didn’t let it show on his face. “You’ll come with me, in my car, to the meeting.”

“What? No, I won’t go with you!” No way I was staying alone with him in his car. The embarrassment I felt in his room was more than enough to give me sleepless nights. I didn’t want more.

“Then you aren’t leaving,” his tone held finality.

I gaped. “But... you can’t do that. If you don’t open this door, you can’t leave either. You know that, right?”

His mouth twitched. “Nice try, Rosebud. But trust me, I don’t have any problem spending some more time with you here, alone.” He stepped closer.

I raised my hands before me, stopping him. “All right, I—I’ll go with you. Just open this damn door.” It was better to be in a car with him than stay locked in this penthouse.

God, I hated him!

But when a breathtaking smile appeared on his lips, brightening

everything around me, I doubted myself. It felt like I was seeing the same old Ace again. Soft and carefree. Not rough and cold.

I went speechless when he closed the gap, pressed a kiss on my forehead and whispered a 'let's go' in my ear. He opened the door for us by tapping on something on his phone. I didn't know how to react as he held my hand and led me out of the penthouse. And I let him until we stepped out of the elevator and met my other colleagues down in the lobby.

* * *

THE CAR RIDE was quiet all the way to the meeting. I barely looked at him as I stared at the road most of the time, ignoring the brooding man. Though his overwhelming presence wasn't easy to ignore.

The whole time he was tense, his knuckles were tight on the steering, glancing at me from time to time. As if he wanted to say something to me but held himself back.

The only thing he asked was if I wanted to listen to some music. But I said no. I wanted to ask him how he got my fingerprint for the scanner, but I chose to stay silent. I didn't trust myself. Once I started asking, I feared I'd ask something I shouldn't.

Once we were at our destination, together we walked inside the sea-faced restaurant where the Arabs would meet us. The terrace was booked for the meeting. The first thing that greeted us as we entered the meeting area was the fresh ocean air, blowing my long brown locks along. It was decorated with small flowerpots with colorful flowers blooming under the sun. The sweet fragrance around the ambience and the view of the blue ocean instantly brightened my mood.

The Arabs were already there, discussing something in their own

language around the big round table, four men and two women. The ladies weren't Arabs for sure, seeing their knee-length sleeveless dresses. One was blonde while the other was a brunette. Liza and Matt were seated at a smaller table beside them.

Smiling, when I tried to approach them, a big hand held my elbow.

"You'll stay with me. Come," he ordered, though his tone was soft.

"And why would I listen to you?" I had to crane my neck to look up at him.

His shoulder lifted an inch. "Because I'm your boss." The teasing in his fleeting glance didn't go missed by me.

I huffed silently as the Arabs approached us, all smiling broad.

"As-salamu alaykum, Mr. Valencian. Pleasure meeting you," the older one of them said, shaking his hand with Ace. Just like the other three men, he also flaunted their traditional long white tunic and a red and white checkered headdress on his head.

"Likewise, Mr. Hakimi. I'm glad you all specially came here for this meeting," Ace replied.

Though a smile stretched across his lips, his eyes were blank. A hollowness that resided in those gray pools even when he was with his loved ones. Another thing that changed in all these years. I wonder what caused him to turn like this.

Well, except me. With me, he was someone else. He had emotions in his eyes. Emotions that scared me.

After Mr. Hakimi introduced his partners, he then introduced his assistant, who lived here in this country, Cindy. The girl in a red dress and

eight-inch stilettos. Eyeing Ace up and down, she flashed him a red lipped smile, batting her fake eyelashes.

“I’ve heard so much about you, and finally I’m here, standing right in front of you, the infamous Mr. Valencian. It’s such a pleasure!” she cooed, shaking hands with him. I didn’t miss how her hand lingered in his. My stare hardened.

But it seemed he didn’t care at all. Retracting his hand, he dismissed her with a curt nod. Her smile threatened to fall.

“And who is this gorgeous young lady we have here?” Mr. Hakimi asked.

Turning to me, Ace pulled me close by my waist, surprising me. “Meet Emerald Hutton. A very close friend of mine.”

Close friend? I didn’t think we were friends, let alone close. Giving him a look, I smiled at the Arabs. “I’m a designer at OC Textiles. And *just* a family friend of his.”

All of them greeted me with smiles while he just watched me, which made me uneasy. His closeness and touch were already too much for me.

“Shall we proceed now, Mr. Hakimi?” he asked the old man.

But his assistant was too excited to proceed then her boss, as she said, “Of course, Mr. Valencian! Please take a seat.”

Annoyance pricked my skin as she unnecessarily crouched down to pull a chair beside her for Ace to sit there, displaying her cleavage in the process.

Nodding, as he went to accept her offered chair, I went ahead and sat there instead. Surprise flashed across her face, but she covered it with a fake smile. I smiled back with equal enthusiasm.

“Easy, Rosebud. I have my eyes only for you,” his sudden whisper in my

ear had me flush. His talking to me in that manner still managed to shock me. Even though he cleared his intentions from day one.

Taking the vacant chair beside me, he threw me an amused glance.

He must be thinking I was jealous. Which I wasn't. I just didn't like that girl. And like that, I sent her a subtle glare.

As the meeting went on, that red witch continued to laugh and flirt with him. She would even ask irrelevant questions throughout the conversation, leaning forward over the table to see him properly, as I was in the way.

Even his stoic face didn't discourage her. My hands curled into fists when her eyes shamelessly devoured him in front of everyone. I didn't know how I resisted myself from clawing them out of her sockets.

When a hand landed on my thigh, I looked up at him, surprised, even confused. But when he squeezed gently, I turned red again, realizing he noticed my reactions, all of them. Even that old man sent me a mischievous smile. His aged eyes flickered from me to Ace.

Embarrassed with my reactions and disturbed by my own feelings, I excused myself and went downstairs to the washroom.

The cool water on my hot face was soothing. But the ugly green monster still raged inside me. I didn't know I'd react like that, seeing some other girl eyeing him with interest. And it wasn't the first time. I felt the same when I saw that redhead friend of his with him that night.

I was getting tired of fighting off my own feelings. But I didn't have the strength to accept them. I just couldn't.

Tapping my face with a tissue, I rechecked my appearance in the mirror, blew out a breath, and walked out. The washroom on the terrace had some work going on, so I had to come downstairs.

As I walked through the busy restaurant, a fuss behind me made me halt and turn around.

A tray filled with food was spilled on the tiled floor as the waiter gaped at the scene with horror. The man standing beside him apologized. Getting out some cash, he handed it to the baffled waiter and hurried out of the door. His movement was tensed as he kept looking over his shoulder.

Wait, I knew him. I saw him before somewhere. But where?

Scrutinizing, my gaze followed him outside as he walked to the parking lot. The walls were made of glass, so I could see him properly.

Tall frame, gray hair peeking out of dark locks. Yes, it was the man I bumped into back in New York, at Mr. Cooper's office. How could I forget that strange man?

What was he doing here?

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FIFTEEN: YOU'RE MINE



I shook my head. Why did I care about what he was doing here?

I should just go back to the terrace.

Once back upstairs, I found the meeting was over and everyone was now enjoying their drinks, except Ace. He simply drank a glass of plain water.

And... that witch was now in my seat!

But his attention wasn't on her. Instead, those stormy orbs were searching around for something. Until they landed on me. Was that relief that flashed over them?

He beckoned me to him with his head, but I turned around and went to Liza, who was talking to two of the Arabs beside the railings. Matt wasn't here.

"Hey, where did you go?" Liza asked.

"Washroom," I replied, standing next to her. Nodding, she returned to the conversation.

One of the Arabs' gaze locked with mine as he flashed me a smile. I remember his name was Fazza. At twenty-something, with dark hair and tanned skin, he didn't look bad. But the interest in his brown eyes didn't match mine.

But out of politeness, I smiled back.

“How long are you working for Mr. Valencian?” he asked.

“It’s been just a week.” I averted my eyes from his awkward stare.

“Oh, so you’re new in this field too,” he stated. “I just joined some months ago.”

“You’re a designer?”

He nodded. “Yep, loved doing these drawings with paper and pencils from my childhood.”

This time, my chuckle was genuine. “Well, I still draw the designs with them. Doing it on the computer doesn’t feel connected.”

A grin spread across his face. “Looks like we’re on the same page then.” He glanced at my hand. “You’re not having anything. You need a drink?”

When I was about to answer, an arm around my waist cut me off. A gasp slipped through my lips as I was pulled against a hard frame. His familiar heady cologne tingled my nostrils.

“Sweetheart, what took you so long? I was waiting for you,” Ace said with his jaw tight as stone, casting a look of frost at Fazza. I just stood there, dumbfounded.

“You—you guys are together?” Fazza’s gaze fell on my waist, where Ace’s arm was wrapped around me possessively.

“Yes, she’s taken,” Ace replied, but it came out much like a hiss. Though his expression was cool, his orbs were hard, as if warning him off, staking his claim on me.

Fazza put his hands up. “No bad intentions here, Mr. Valencian. I was just talking. Anyway, I’ll just take your leave now.”

Once he was gone and so did the others, I tried to wriggle out of his hold, but he only tightened it. Huffing, I glared up at him.

“What are you doing? And what did you mean by I was taken?”

He cocked his head. “Because you are. You’re mine.”

My heart stopped. The intensity of his gaze held me speechless. And then my heart started racing, blood ran hot in my veins as something soared in my chest.

I gulped. “I-I’m not yours.”

“You aren’t?” He leaned closer, stormy grays held me prisoner.

The shake of my head was vague.

“You sure, Rosebud? Because your eyes are saying otherwise.” His hot breath fell on my lips as his fingers dug into my flesh, sending shivers down my spine.

* * *

“WHY DID WE STOP HERE? We were supposed to go directly to the office, right?” I asked, glancing at the mall standing tall outside of the car window.

“At least you said something,” he remarked, eyes amused.

Pressing my lips, I scowled. After he declared his claim on me back on the terrace, all I could do was get out of his arms and run away from him. My plan to return with Liza and Matt failed as they already left me, assuming I already had a ride. And I’d no way but to get into his car with him again.

Throughout the whole ride, I hadn’t spoken to him. Even when he tried to grab my hand—the nerve of him!

“Well?” I crossed my arms over my chest, snatching his smoldering gaze there. Blood rushed to my ears.

Inhaling a deep breath, he brought his eyes back to mine. “Caleb and Tess’s engagement is this Sunday. And I need your help to choose gifts for them.”

I raised my brow. “It’s your cousin and best friend you’re talking about. You don’t know what to get for them?”

A sour feeling appeared in my mouth as the picture of him and Tess from that night flashed through my mind. Did they really have anything at all between them? If they did, then he should’ve at least felt some discomfort that the girl he used to date was going to marry his cousin, who was more like a brother to him. But it seemed like it didn’t affect him at all.

If there wasn’t anything like that, then what was it that I saw? The intensity between them, the passion...

My hands balled into fists, my chest constricted. But I managed a calm façade before him. Years of practice, how could I not manage?

“I’ve got something in my mind for Caleb, but I don’t know what to get Tess. Yes, she’s my best friend, but as her sister, and a girl, you’d know better.” He assessed my face, as if searching for something in there. Did he know of my inner turmoil? The turmoil that was getting more difficult day by day to cage in.

I stayed silent, lost in my own thoughts.

“You’re mine.”

What did he mean? After all these years, the years he maybe didn’t even care where his best friend’s little sister was. And now out of nowhere he called me his? He wanted me? When did this happen? I didn’t believe he just fell for me after just seeing me at that party.

* * *

“HERE, I’m sure you’ll love this one, ma’am. This is one of the best pieces of necklace in our store,” the manager of this renowned jewelry outlet said. He was there to greet us himself. And why not? The great Achilles Valencian was in his store.

I mentally rolled my eyes.

I didn’t want to help him find a gift, but I couldn’t just say no to those stormy grays. I knew I was being stupid and weak. But... I couldn’t help it.

And we were here because Tess was obsessed with diamonds and clothes.

Shaking my head, I passed another piece of necklace. They were too heavy. “Show me something light and contemporary.”

At Achilles’s nod, the manager took off to show me some more of their collections that I finally might like. I didn’t know much of Tess’s choice, but I knew she was fond of trying the brand-new designs in the market.

Twirling the bracket on my wrist, I scanned the jewelries on display. Then something caught my eye. A simple pendant with a diamond cut emerald in the middle. The tiny rubies that surrounded the emerald made it more gorgeous than it already was.

I wasn’t fond of emeralds before, but the tiny ones in my bracelet had won my heart.

I wonder who left this beautiful bracelet before my door that day...

“You like something for yourself?” His deep voice came close to my ear. I instantly stepped away from him. This man just didn’t know personal space.

“No. We’re here for Tess, not me, remember?”

He watched me for a moment before nodding.

“Mr. Valencian, please take a seat. Let us show the latest collections of

our store,” the manager urged, with two assistants behind him carrying dozens of boxes in their hands.

With a curt nod, he wrapped his arm around my waist and led me to the sitting area. I tried to wiggle out of his arm, glaring at him. But he kept a firm hold, pulling me more into his warmth.

I huffed, giving up, not wanting to create a scene. And the thing that I felt in his arms, his scent, could be another reason I didn’t pull away.

He was tampering with my head, as well as my heart.

After I was done choosing something for Tess finally, he maneuvered me to another store. This time, I was thrown to hunt for a dress for her.

I told him our dressing style was a lot different, I couldn’t help him with that. But his opinion was different.

“I trust your decisions, Rosebud. I’m sure whatever you choose will be the best. Don’t worry. I’ll help you make the decision.”

I frowned in confusion. Whatever he said went over my head. What did he know of my decisions and choices, anyway?

Though I wouldn’t admit it, I was thankful the woman who was helping us find a dress wasn’t staring at him like a puppy craving a bone, like the women in the other shops we visited. She was polite and professional, no hint of lust on her features. When I told her what type of dress I wanted, she handed me two dozen expensive gowns. For wedding functions, they’d be best—suggested the woman.

I ran my hand over a pink satin, checking its florid designs.

Suddenly, it was snatched from me. Looking up, I found a displeased Ace glaring holes into the dress. “We’re not taking it.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it? I think it’d be perfect for Tess. And pink is her favorite color.”

He raised his brow. “What’s wrong? It’s too short.”

“So? She has no problem with short dresses.”

“But I do!” His lips tightened.

Something nagged inside me. Why did he care if Tess wore short dresses or not? My temper flared as I grabbed the dress back from his grasp.

“I liked this dress for her, so we’ll be taking this. You told me to help you and I’m just doing that. If you don’t like my choice, then be my guest and do it yourself!”

My sudden outburst didn’t seem to bother him, as he was too busy eyeing me up and down.

“What’re you doing?” I frowned.

“How do you know Tess would look good in it? You didn’t see it on her, did you?”

“I don’t need to see it on her. I can tell, this will be perfect for her.”

“But I’m not certain,” he said, tilting his head. “Why don’t you try it on yourself, and see if it really looks good?”

My eyes widened. “What? Why would I do that? And how can you decide if she’ll look good or not seeing it on me? I’m not her!”

He shrugged. “Your height and weight are almost the same as Tess. So, I don’t think there’d be a problem.”

“But—”

“No buts. You’re only wasting our time arguing over this. Just try this out, let me see you, and get done with it.” He cut me off. When he mentioned

of seeing me, goosebumps crawled up my arms. And it didn't help as his stormy grays grew stormier.

“Fine!” Glaring, I walked to the changing room. There were people around the shop, more men than women in our section.

I'd have to walk out in this thigh length sleeveless dress.

Slamming the door shut, I cursed under my breath for agreeing to help him and started undressing. I didn't even know if it would fit.

It did fit. But it was tight as hell. I could barely breathe in it. He was wrong. We didn't have the same weight. She was thinner than me, where I was the curvier one. Well, it was obvious as she was the girl who spent hours at the gym.

Once I was ready to go out, I tugged at the ends to somehow drag them a little lower and opened the door. I didn't find him outside the door as I expected. In fact, I found him sitting comfortably on a bloodred leather couch, with his elbows on his knees.

And the most surprising thing was the whole shop was empty except for the sales girls of the shop.

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SIXTEEN: TURN AROUND



Where did everyone disappear to?

I was looking around in confusion until I felt a pair of scorching eyes on me. Turning to him, I found his gaze following every curve of mine and cuts of the dress that exposed my sudden ultra-sensitive skin to him.

I bit my lip, not wanting to fidget under his stare. “Is it okay?”

With a tight nod, he beckoned me to him. Confused, I glided near. His eyes were still on my body as he handed me a black dress.

“Try this.”

When I unfolded it, my eyes widened. It was even shorter than the one I was flaunting right now. And as a cherry on the top, it was off shoulder and backless. What the hell? He could just pick a bikini for her instead!

“I’m not wearing it!”

One of his eyebrows arched. “Why not? It’s a classy, branded gown. I think Tess will definitely love it.”

“But it’s too short!” I argued.

I wanted to slap the tilting of his head. Whenever he did it, I sensed a challenge was thrown in my way. “Why? Now you’re having problems with short dresses?”

“I don’t. I just... I can’t wear it before you,” I stuttered.

“Are you being shy before me right now, Rosebud?”

The warmth of my cheeks was embarrassing. Yet, I raised my chin high. “I’m not being shy or anything. You know what, let’s just get over with it.” I knew I was going to regret it, but I clutched the dress and turned around.

And I was indeed regretting once I looked at myself in the mirror. It fit perfectly, not too tight, not even loose. The end of the dress reached just an inch above my mid-thigh. The low-cut neckline displayed my cleavage, where the back cut just stopped three inches above my butt!

Though it was out of my comfort zone, it did look good on me. I looked... sexy. The smooth fabric clung to me like a second skin, manifesting every curve and dip of mine. Even at the thought of going before him with this on, flutters erupted in my stomach.

I didn’t know why I was even doing it.

A knock landed on the door. The sales lady’s voice floated in, asking if the dress fit or if I needed a hand.

“No, everything is good. Just a second,” I replied, tugging the neckline a little higher.

Come on, Em! You can do it.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and walked out. I found him assessing a beautiful red gown displayed on a dummy. But I couldn’t decipher the look he’d on as he brushed a finger over the fabric, gaze intense.

Then he tore himself away from the gown and turned to me.

His shoulders tensed as the muscle of his sharp jaw clenched. His hands fisted in balls. The storm in his irises turned wild, with his smoldering gaze

touching every inch of my body, lingering on the deep neckline.

Blood rushed to my cheeks and ran hot through my veins under his flaming stare. It had me squirming in my place.

“Turn around,” he said. The dominance and huskiness of his rich, deep Greek accent made me obey.

As soon as I turned, a curse reached my ears and followed a sharp intake of breath.

When he didn’t speak for a moment, I fidgeted with my fingers. “A-Ace?” Even the saleswoman was nowhere to be seen. We were alone.

I felt him behind me. His hot breath fanned my bare shoulder, making my breath hitch. A brush of warm fingers glided down my bare back, erupting goosebumps across my skin. My heart pounded as his hand slipped to the curve of my waist, to the front of my stomach, to my bare shoulders.

A slow rumble reverberated through his chest.

Struggling not to feel his touch, I let out a shaky breath.

“W-what are you doing?” I whispered, as big hands fell on my hips. I should’ve asked the question to myself. Why was I not pulling away?

I heard a murmur under his breath. Though I couldn’t pick out most of the words, I caught something like driving him crazy.

When I was on the verge of leaning into him, the woman strolled in, making me jump away from his heat.

Her eyes widened, flickering back and forth to me and Ace. “Uh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean any interruption.”

My cheeks turned crimson, when all he looked was extremely disturbed. The woman turned pale under his hard glare. What’s wrong with him?

“I-I’ll be back in a minute—”

“No! It’s all right. You didn’t interrupt us at all. We were just about to call you anyway,” I cut her off.

When he didn’t speak and kept scaring that poor woman, I gave him a look.

He gave a curt nod, still glaring. “Yeah, we’re done here. Pack that pink dress, and...” Turning to me, he raked his eyes on me one more time. I shivered. “This one as well.”

He’d give it to Tess?

Again, the same nagging feeling rose in my chest. Though I knew it was ridiculous. She was getting married to his cousin. But still...

Once I was back in my comfortable jeans and his T-shirt, I padded out and waited for the woman to hand us the bags. My gaze fell on the dummy where the red gown was on. It was now gone. No one was there in the shop, so who took it?

When he told me to wait for him in the car while he did the payments, I didn’t wait a second longer. I was dying to get some fresh air. His consistent presence around me was overwhelming me. I needed some space to keep myself in check.

Once he was back, we got in the car and drove away. The sun was down on the horizon by then, coloring the sky with its crimson glow. But when he didn’t turn to the road that would lead us to the office, my brows creased in confusion.

“Where are we going? We were supposed to turn right.”

“We’re on the right path. Don’t worry,” he replied, staring at the road.

Can he ever give a straight answer?

“We’re supposed to go to the office. No, home, because it’s evening.”

“I know. But I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“You’ll get to see it yourself soon.”

What was running in his head?

“But where are we going?” Dread washed over me for the more time I’ll be spending with him. It wasn’t good for my heart.

He only smirked. “Patience, Rosebud. We will be there soon.”

Groaning, I sat against my seat and looked outside.

* * *

“WE’RE HERE,” he announced, making me open my eyes. I was almost on the verge of sleeping after half an hour’s drive. It’d been a long day.

Getting out of the car, he opened the door for me while I stretched my legs and let out a yawn. But the sleepiness cleared the moment my gaze fell on the structure that stood across the vast lawn.

A beautiful two-story modern villa. One whole side of it was covered with glass, while the other side was a combination of dark wood and white marble. The lawn was surrounded by a colorful rose garden, a small cozy sitting area was situated in the middle.

It was gorgeous.

“You liked it?” his low voice asked close to my ear.

I nodded, still not looking away from the beauty. “Whose house is it?”

He stayed silent. I could feel his gaze on me. Once I looked up at him, he

said, "I bought it last week."

"It's yours?" I turned to the villa again. So, this was the house he was busy buying and renovating. "It's beautiful. But why did you need to buy a house when you already had so many?"

He watched me, intense gaze locked with mine. "They were just houses. I wanted a home for myself. So I bought one for the near future."

I blinked. For his future?

"Come, let me show you inside." Securing my hand in his, he took me inside the building he wanted to make a home out of. And I let him, still admiring the structure.

And again, I was left speechless. The interior was more stunning than the exterior. From the high ceiling, that was decorated with small lights and a huge crystal chandelier in the center to the gray and white walls, everything demanded attention. The floor to ceiling glass windows were adorned with red lacy silk curtains. Though not much furniture was spotted there. Only some stuff sat on the dark hardwood floor, yet to unpack.

As he led me upstairs, still holding my hand, I asked, "How many rooms exactly are there?"

"Five bedrooms, two guestrooms, two extra for library and office, and another for gym. In total, ten. Six downstairs and four upstairs. And yes, three more in the basement."

Thirteen rooms!

"What in God's name will you do with so many rooms?" I gaped.

Letting out a husky chuckle, he opened the doors of a room. A master bedroom. Only a king-sized bed sat in the vast room. Other furniture was yet

to be brought there. The walls were painted in light blue and white.

“I want a big family, Rosebud. And children need a big home to play and grow up.”

At the image of him with little Aces running around the house, my heart bloomed with an unknown emotion. But it withered away as soon as I thought of some girl who’d be the mother of his children.

“This is where my beautiful future wife will be living with me. Our very own personal bedroom,” he said.

My chest squeezed as my eyes roamed the bedroom. She’d be living here with him, sleeping with him on this bed...

But he said he wanted me...

Just because he was interested in me didn’t mean he’d see his future in me.

The nails digging into my palms brought me back from my disturbing thoughts. The possessiveness and hurt I found in my inner thoughts unnerved me.

Why did he even bring me here to see his future home? One moment he declared I was his, and the next moment he showed me his and his future wife’s bedroom?

“Is there anything else you want me to show? Because I want to go home now. I’m hungry and tired.” My tone was clipped.

A small crease formed on his forehead, sensing my sudden change of mood. Something flashed over his eyes, the corner of his mouth twitched.

“Yes, there is. Come with me.”

Even after my protest, he dragged me to the adjoined balcony. And when

I saw the view, my complaints died down.

The balcony was right above the rose garden. Soft night breeze blowing across the open meadow ahead of us touched my face. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the sweet mild fragrance of roses. The full moon hung high right up in the sky.

“It’s more beautiful during the day. Even the meadow is filled with flowers,” he spoke, standing close behind me.

Suddenly I wanted to come here during the daylight. But with what right? As a family friend he might be interested in and going to forget very soon?

A pressure built in my throat, choking me. My eyes burnt with emotions crashing on my chest.

I shouldn’t have come here.

“I arranged dinner for us. Let’s go downstairs.”

When he aimed for my hand, I stepped back, crossing my arms over my chest, suddenly feeling cold. A frown etched between his brows.

“I want to go home now. Can we just do that?”

“Emerald, you—”

“Please, Ace. I’m tired.” I was tired of my emotions, my lack of control. I was tired of my constant fighting.

With jaw tight, he nodded and led me outside, again, holding my hand in his. It seemed to become his habit. I tried to get away, but again, he didn’t have any of my protests.

On our way back outside, I saw a huge portrait leaning against a wall in the open room he said would be his office. The portrait was covered with a white sheet, but I could see the end. Only a pair of feminine hands could be

seen, a blue diamond ring adorned her ring finger.

Whose picture is that?

I wanted to ask him, but remained quiet. I just wanted to get away from here right now.

* * *

A GASP SLIPPED through my lips as I was pulled against a hard frame. Strong arms wrapped around my waist, crushing me against his solid chest. Soft, warm lips touched the curve of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. Rough stubble poked my skin, making me giggle.

“Ace! Don’t!” I complained, but my eyelids closed as his warm mouth sucked on my skin, big hands roamed my body. A whimper left my lips as hot sensations ran through my veins.

“You like it, Rosebud?” his husky voice murmured in my ear. My arching body towards his touch was my only reply. A low chuckle vibrated on my back.

I took a deep breath as another kiss landed just behind my ear. “Ace...”

Then I was cold. Alone, standing in the middle of his master bedroom. I looked around in confusion.

Where did he go?

A moan snatched my eyes to the bed, which wasn’t there a moment ago. Two figures were wrapped in a white sheet, tangled with each other in a passionate kiss. More groans followed. When his face peeked out of her shoulder, my breath hitched.

Her hands were roaming his chest, while he had his one hand wrapped around her in a possessive hold, and the other gripped the blonde locks of hers as he pulled her for another kiss. Her moans filled the room.

I choked out a gasp as I felt someone gripped my heart and squeezed it hard. The same pain I felt years ago. My heart shattered in a million pieces, and at the same time, I wanted to destroy something. Destroy her. The scene before me.

But I couldn't move. As if I was paralyzed. I tried to close my eyes, but I couldn't move a muscle. Panic started to rise in my chest. I wanted to scream, but to no avail. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

And then his stormy grays met my gaze, and all of a sudden, he was right in front of me. That girl was nowhere to be seen.

He gave me his hand to take, but I couldn't move my hand. I didn't want to let him go. Go to that woman again. I wanted him to stay with me.

Tears ran down my face as I struggled with the force that held my body. I wanted to ask him for help, but I couldn't. I wanted to call out to him, but I failed. When I didn't take his hand, he gave me a sad smile and stepped backwards, slowly vanishing into the air.

My eyes widened. No! Don't go! Don't leave me alone! Not again!

More tears ran as I tried to reach out to him, but I was still in my place. Then he vanished. I couldn't see him anymore.

He was gone.

"Ace!" I jerked awake, frantically looking around. A tear had slipped down my face.

"Emerald? Jeez, are you all right?" I found him right beside me, looking back and forth between me and the road. Concern latched onto his face. "What happened, baby? Are you okay?"

I let out a shaky breath, my heart thudded in my chest. Closing my eyes, I

ran my palms over my face.

I was dreaming. What kind of dream was that?

“Rosebud?”

I looked at him. He threw me worried glances, forehead creased.

He was right here.

“I’m fine. Just a bad dream.”

His frown deepened. “What was it?”

I turned away. “Nothing.” I didn’t want to replay it in my head.

“You called out my name.”

“So? I could call out anyone’s name. Not everything is about you! It’s none of your business!” My temper flared. I didn’t have any control over it.

His jaw clenched. “You’re pretty shaken up. What did you see?”

“I said it’s none of your business!”

“Damn it, Emerald! Can’t you just answer my question? I want to know what scared you that much!” he snapped, gazing at the road.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I looked out the window.

“Emerald!”

Silence.

With a curse, he cupped my chin and made me turn to him. His touch was soft as he brushed his thumb on my cheek.

“What happened, Rosebud? Please, tell me. What did you see?” His gentle tone soothed something in me as his patient eyes watched me.

Those gray pools compelled me to admit.

Gulping, I opened my mouth. He nodded in encouragement.

“I-I saw you with...”

A light fell on my eyes, blinding my vision, followed by some blare of horns. Cursing under his breath, he turned the wheel to the right. The tires screeched as the car lost its balance before crashing against something hard.

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SEVENTEEN: ANONYMOUS GIFT?



A knock descended on my door.

“Coming!”

Putting the lipstick down on the dressing table, I opened the door. Judy, our house help, stood there with a white box in her hand.

“Sorry to disturb you, dear. But this has come for you,” she said, handing me the parcel.

For me?

“What’s in it? And who sent it?” I glanced down at the box.

Her shoulders lifted. “I have no idea, dear. A courier boy just gave me the parcel and left. Anyway, I’ll leave you to this. A lot of chores are on hand.”

Nodding, I flashed her a smile along with a thank you and closed the door.

I searched for a name on the box, but there wasn’t one. Who could’ve sent it?

Biting my lip, I unpacked it.

A gasp slipped through my lips as my gaze landed on the red gown lying in it. Taking it out, I unfolded it. It was the same gown I saw him checking out that day.

A note that was placed beneath the gown caught my eye. With a skip of my heart, I picked it up.

This one was left out from trying. I want to see it on you tonight. -A

So, he... bought it for me?

A warmth surged through my chest as I ran my hand on the beautiful cold shoulder gown. The fabric felt smooth under my palm.

Holding it against me, I stood before the mirror. It looked... beautiful.

But why did he get it for me?

Flashes of that night on the road floated in my mind. That horrible night we almost faced death...

My hands clutched the gown tight.

A car had lost balance and came our way. To save us, he had to avoid a collision and our car ended up hitting a street lamp.

I closed my eyes as the fear of that moment hit me back.

He'd put his arm over me to save me from getting hurt, not caring for himself. Even after the seatbelts, I was about to hit my head on the window, if not for him. The hit was that severe. Good thing neither of us had any major injuries. I got a small scratch on my leg. But his shoulder was hurt. The jerk of the crash and the way he stretched to protect me gave his shoulder a muscle injury.

I was so rattled after the incident that he clutched me to his chest for almost half an hour until I gained some composure. I hated the feeling. The fear I felt at that moment. The fear of death, the fear of losing him...

I shook my head, shaking off the inauspicious thoughts.

I shouldn't be thinking of that. Everything is all right now. Today is

Tess's engagement night, so I should just concentrate on that.

I looked back at my reflection.

This gown.

Shouldn't I be mad he sent another gift for me? But I wasn't. The red tint on my cheeks proved that.

A sigh left me.

What was I doing? I was wandering away from my goal: avoid him until three months passed so I could finally go back to New York, away from him.

But... it's just a gown...

I bit my lip.

"Em? You ready?" Mom called out from downstairs.

"Just give me five minutes!" I yelled back, my gaze returning to the gown, admiring it.

* * *

SECURING my hand on Dad's arm, I took a deep breath and walked down the red carpet that led us inside the Valencian Mansion. It should've been called a castle instead because that was the vibe I got every time I visited here.

The party was in full swing. A typical rich, classy, sophisticated, and dazzling atmosphere. And why not? After all, it was Tessa Hutton's engagement.

In the swarm of all the dolled up people and rushing waiters, we found her at the tail of the grand staircase in the middle of the vast hall, surrounded by a group of her friends. Flaunting a sea green mermaid gown, she looked gorgeous. The groom stood alongside her with a three-piece posh suit. He didn't look any less.

As soon as her gaze caught us approaching her, she rushed to us, followed by Caleb, and threw herself on Mom and Dad. Both of my parents had moisture in their eyes as they hugged their elder daughter with love and affection.

I smiled, standing beside. And then came my turn.

“Em!” Instead of her regular sandalwood, the fragrance of Jasmine filled my nostrils as she engulfed me in a hug. Pulling away, she eyed me up and down. “This isn’t fair! Only the bride should look that gorgeous in her engagement, not her little sister!” she complained, frowning. Then an involuntary grin stretched across her lips. Mom, Dad, and Caleb laughed along.

I couldn’t help but smile back, shaking my head. “Yes, and that’s why you’re the one who’s radiating the evening with your beauty. You look stunning!” Then my eyes fell on her neck. She wore the necklace we chose for her. It went well with her attire. “Especially this.” I pointed towards the piece of jewelry. “It’s beautiful on you.”

Glancing down, she grazed the oval-shaped diamond dangling down the slender platinum necklace.

“All thanks to you! I’m sure if only Achilles had chosen it, it wouldn’t be this beautiful. He wouldn’t even go to the mall. He would just order an expensive one randomly online!” She rolled her blue orbs.

He told her?

Seeing my surprise, she nodded. “He told me how you chose it for me. Thank you, Em! Otherwise, I don’t think I would be wearing my best friend’s gift tonight.”

I chuckled, my eyes seeking to get a glimpse of someone. The flutters that

have been dancing in my tummy since we left home still stormed around.

Where is he?

“How did you like the dresses? I hope they weren’t that bad,” I asked, remembering those outfits.

Confusion fell over her face. “What dresses? What’re you talking about?”

I frowned. “The dresses he got for you, along with your necklace. He made me try them to see if they’d look good on you.”

She shook her head. “No, he didn’t give me any dresses.”

If he didn’t give them to her, then what did he do with them? Did he... buy them for someone else?

I bit my lip, clutching the purse tight in my hand.

“Oh, maybe he had some other plans with them,” I said, forcing a smile.

Something flashed over her eyes as they widened a bit. Mumbling something under her breath, she put a hand on my shoulder. “Maybe he wanted to give them to me on other occasions. You know, he bought all the gifts together so he could give them to me one by one at my other wedding ceremonies?”

That made sense.

The heaviness in me disappeared as I nodded.

Why could I just not care? She must have noticed the sudden change in my mood.

Someone’s clearing their throat behind Tess pulled everyone’s attention. When Tess moved, and that person appeared in sight, my lips parted in surprise.

The man I bumped into at Coopers Fabrics, back in New York, and saw

at the restaurant that day.

What was he doing here at this engagement party?

Dark orbs stared right back at me with a smile on his face as Tess and Caleb welcomed him with side hugs.

“Hello, Mr. Hutton. It’s been a long time,” he said, shaking his hand with Dad.

Dad smiled. “Yeah, it’s been months. You finally got free of your busy schedule, huh?”

He shrugged. “Work is work. You can’t avoid that.”

“True,” Dad said, as that man greeted Mom.

“Em, meet Arthur. Achilles and Caleb’s uncle.” Tess introduced him to me. “And Arthur, this is Emerald, my sister.”

“Ah, the infamous Emerald Hutton. I finally got lucky to have the pleasure of meeting you.” He grinned. Taking my hand, he placed a kiss on the back of it.

Ace’s uncle?

What a coincidence I had already met him twice before our official meeting.

I gave him a hesitant smile. “Nice to meet you, too. By the way, we’ve already met if you forgot.”

Tess and Dad raised their brows at that.

“You guys already met? Where?” Caleb queried.

“Oh? We did?” He tilted his head, dark eyes puzzled. Why did it look so fake?

“Yeah, at Coopers Fabrics, New York?”

Thinking for a moment, he then shook his head. “Sorry, dear. I’m a little lost here. Maybe I forgot. It’s proof I’m getting old now.”

Everyone cackled with laughter, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know why, but something was off about him. When he looked at me again, something flashed over his eyes, but it was gone as soon as it came. Averting his gaze, he went back to the conversation.

* * *

“WHERE’S your prince charming tonight? I don’t see him anywhere,” Cassie asked, sipping on her drink. She arrived just minutes after we did, and without Beth. Again, she had her boyfriend problems.

I gave her a look. “He’s not my prince charming,” I replied, holding back the urge to glance around for the umpteenth time. It’s been almost an hour, and he wasn’t still here.

I didn’t like the frustration building inside me at all. I should be happy that he wasn’t here. But... he wouldn’t miss his cousin and best friend’s engagement, would he? Where the hell was he?

Is he all right?

“Yeah, right! Do me a favor and go look in the mirror. The dullness in your eyes due to your missing lover is unmistakable.” She snorted.

Pressing my lips together, I glared. “They’re not dull at all!”

When she noticed someone familiar in the crowd, raising her hand, she waved. “I think I got my prince charming for the night. Why don’t you just call him and ask where he is instead of playing ‘I don’t care’?”

My brows creased as she bounced off to a pretty guy and disappeared

through the mass of people.

I wasn't playing any games. He was. I was just trying to protect my heart from being broken again.

Scanning the crowd one more time, I walked towards the bar and grabbed a cocktail. The night did feel dull tonight, even after the chatter, laughter, and music around me.

While sipping on my drink, I caught Arthur, Ace's uncle, on the other side of the hall, talking and laughing with some suited men.

Then his gaze locked with mine. A smile stretched across his face. Even from afar, I could see his façade. His smile didn't reach the eyes. But I smiled back anyway and turned around.

From what I knew, Ace's uncle handled a lot of important loads of the company. He was one of the liable persons at Valencian Corp and in Ace's life. But I wasn't comfortable around him like I should have been.

That day at the meeting with Arabs, we were all on the terrace. What was he doing downstairs? Did he have a meeting at the same place?

Maybe. It could be just a coincidence. I was thinking too much.

Then, I felt it. Goosebumps crawled up my skin as I felt his gaze on me. He was here.

The abrupt silence around the hall and whispers of girls, the annoying sound of their giggling proved my suspicion right. The party was back to life after some moments while I stood there, fidgeting in my place, forcing myself not to look behind.

I don't care! I don't care! I won't look. Chanting the mantra in my head, I managed to glue my attention on my drink. I was stronger than this.

“If I knew you’d look that beautiful in white, I’d have chosen this color instead of red for my Rosebud,” a deep voice rasped in my ear.

I stilled, my heart stopped in my chest.

Deep breath, Em! Deep breaths!

Inhaling deep, I searched for my voice. “You were mistaken if you thought I’d wear the gown you sent me.” I decided to wear another dress I’d bought with Tess the other day, instead of the one he bought for me. Even though I loved that gown.

Wait, did he just call me his Rosebud again?

“And I’m not yours.” Tilting my head, I looked up at him over my shoulder. It was a mistake. My breath hitched as soon as my gaze met his.

He wore his hair and beard longer tonight. I hadn’t seen him in two days, and his thick stubble was so grown today, giving him an extra look of edge and roughness. His dark hair touched the collar of his shirt. My hands itched to run over his covered jaw and smooth hair. While his stormy irises remained the same, intense on me, dark and dominant.

His heady cologne with his signature smell of a hint of smoke tingled my nostrils. Something tugged in my lower region as I filled my lungs with him.

Suddenly I felt him against me, his arms caging me around the bar. When did he come so close?

A groan reverberated through his chest as he brushed a strand away from my face. His intense gaze fell on my parted lips. “And again, I’m going to repeat that, Rosebud.” Leaning in, he brushed his lips on my earlobe. “You’re mine.”

A shiver ran down my spine. Another tug in the forbidden area had me

mortified. Averting my eyes, I tried to break his cage and fly away, but he only pulled me close, binding me in his arms again.

The music began in the background, indicating the dance had started, while I continued to scowl and wiggle in his arms. He watched me in amusement.

The look in his orbs did something to me. He watched me as if he was looking at the most precious and beautiful thing in the world. His usual hollow eyes had light and... happiness. A serene, tiny smile tugged on his lips.

When my struggle finally died down, he took my hand in his. “Dance with me?”

“No,” I said, but not moving away from him. I was turning weak again, I knew. I couldn’t help it. He made me like this, he made me weak for him.

Ignoring my answer, he gently kissed my hand and pulled me into the dance floor among the other couples, who were already swaying under the slow music.

And all the time, I felt a pair of eyes on me. It wasn’t a warm feeling, though. The shiver that ran down my spine was chilling.

EIGHTEEN: HURTING



“This is not a way to dance. No one dances like this,” I huffed.

“I’m not anyone, Rosebud. I’m Achilles Valencian. I don’t follow rules, I make them.” He pulled me deeper into his arms.

Sighing, I gave up.

While the others moved around the dance floor, he didn’t let even an inch of distance between us. When his one hand should be in one of mine and the other on my waist, both of his strong arms were firmly wrapped around me, keeping me against his chest. And mine were locked around his neck. He wouldn’t even move freely, just slow sways. As if no one in the world was watching us. But the glares of both single and taken women were unignorable.

When my neck started to hurt, craning to look at him all the time, I rested my cheek on his chest. Closing my eyes, I let him move us around in slow waves. His scent with every intake of breath lulled me to peace.

I remained silent as he played with my hair. “Don’t cut your hair ever again.”

My eyes opened, but I didn’t move my head from his warmth. He was talking about that time when I’d cut it short, assuming he liked it that way.

“Why?” I whispered. I didn’t have any plans to do something I’d done years ago out of my naivety. I was my own person now.

“Because it looks beautiful on you. And this is the real you. I don’t want you to change for someone else.”

I froze. He noticed my change for him? He noticed how I turned into someone else just to catch his eye? His words touched something deep inside me. He didn’t want me to change for anyone, even for him?

Not that I was going to do anything for him.

His fingers brushed against the fabric of my dress after he was done playing with my hair. Even if he minded I didn’t wear the red gown, he didn’t show it. Though the appreciation in his eyes for my appearance was clear.

I hated to admit it, but I liked it. I liked the way he looked at me every time we met. I hated to love it all. His gaze on me, his touch, his warmth, his scent, his dominance, everything single thing. And I had no idea how to stop myself from adoring these feelings.

My hand snaked to his left shoulder. “Does it hurt?”

“No. Just a little sore, that’s it.”

I nodded, still roaming my hand from his shoulder to his chest. The sharp inhale of his pulled me out of my trance. Pulling away from his chest, I once again tried to maintain some distance. And this time, he let me. But only a few inches.

It was better than nothing. I could at least breathe.

Glancing over his shoulder, I caught Caleb and Tess moving with the rhythm of the music. Love and adoration shone in their eyes as they whispered and laughed, lost in their own world.

Some unsought memories again crawled back into my mind.

I moved away from his grasp, making him narrow his eyes.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I need to use the washroom,” I mumbled, already walking away, not waiting for his response. He didn’t follow, but his gaze did until I was out of sight.

Dodging the strolling people and rushing kids, I kept moving. I didn’t know where I was going. But I didn’t want to be near him anymore.

Why do I always forget what pain he can cause me again? His unintentional act occurred irreparable damage to my heart.

No, I can’t live through another heartbreak.

Gulping the pressure in my throat as I turned the corner, a hand grabbed my elbow, turning me around.

“Stop running away from him, Em. You’re hurting yourself by doing so.”

I shook my head. “I’m protecting myself, Cassie. If I don’t run away, I will definitely get hurt. And this time, I don’t know if I can handle it.”

When I turned to leave, she stopped me again. “You can’t know what’ll happen until you give it a chance. And for that, you’ll have to stay. Stay and see where your heart takes you this time,” she said, her amber eyes were serious.

“I can’t!” I snapped. Why didn’t she understand my point? Didn’t she know how much I suffered?

“Yes, you can. Just because something bad happened in the past doesn’t mean it will happen again. You don’t even know the whole truth of what exactly happened that night and why. You’re having this doubt that

something is missing here, don't you? Then why all of this?" She exhaled a long breath, her features softening. "Look, Em. You know very well what your heart desires. Even after all these years, you couldn't move on from him. And now that your life is giving you another chance, don't let it go."

I clutched the bracelet and blinked away the tears that threatened to well up.

She placed a hand on my shoulder. "He already took his steps towards you. It's your turn now. Don't let your fears steal the one thing that will be worth it in the future."

I looked at her. "When did you become so sensible?"

The side of the lips twitched as she lifted her shoulders, her honey blonde locks bouncing along. "I was born sensible. Now don't change the subject. You're getting what I'm trying to say?"

I sighed. "I don't know what to do, Cassie. I'm confused."

"Then clear your every confusion. Go talk to him. And if you can't, then talk to Tess. I think other than Achilles, only she can answer your questions."

* * *

AFTER I WAS DONE in the washroom, I rechecked my appearance and decided to join the party again.

I'd taken extra moments than I needed, considering the advice Cassie provided. I didn't know what fate would bring out of Ace and my relationship, if there was something, but I wanted to know everything that happened in the past. Because hearing Tess's confession that night on the terrace, observing Ace's behavior, and his hints of knowing about my feelings years ago, forced me to think beyond. There was definitely something I didn't know.

Even if whatever I saw was true, maybe they... had something between them. Or maybe it was just a heat of a moment. Whatever it was, I wanted to know everything. Because until I knew the truth, I would continue to suffer thinking of the possibilities.

Maybe I should talk to Tess.

Walking down the hallway, I stopped in my tracks.

While everyone was enjoying the night, he stood there before the floor to ceiling window, alone. With his hands in his pockets, he stared out at the dark sky. His expression was unreadable, eyes held an emptiness... loneliness.

My heart tugged. I wanted to reach out and wash away the emptiness in him, bring back the light in those gray pools.

A long sigh caught my attention. Caleb and Tess stood beside the pillar near the staircase. Tess put a hand on Caleb's shoulder as a sadness washed over his face, his gaze fixed on his cousin.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have been forcing him again and again to come here. Even after knowing how much this place gives him pain, how much he hates this mansion."

She rubbed his back. "Don't blame yourself, Cal. You just wanted your brother to stand beside you in your happiness, that's all. And see, even after everything, he came. Maybe he's finally ready to move on from his past? He can't always live in that darkness, can he?"

A light chuckle left him. "We both know why he came here, both at the celebration night and this evening."

Her lips turned up into a smile. "Yeah. For his Rosebud."

My heart stopped in my chest. F-for me? And they knew about it?

When I glanced back at him, he was gone. Where did he go?

My eyes roamed the vast mansion he grew up in. How could the place he spent most of his life give him pain? And what past they were talking about?

Then I remembered.

His father's suicide. His father killed himself when he was just eighteen. Though he was never that close to his dad, I remembered how he looked up to him as his hero, an inspiration. And after his sudden demise, his life changed. He changed. I still remembered how he grew distant with everyone, even with Tobias and Tess, after the incident.

Maybe that's why he chose to leave this mansion when Caleb decided to stay back. He didn't want the memories of his father to haunt him.

Something squeezed in my chest again. I couldn't even understand how much he must have gotten hurt coming back here. But he did. For me.

My legs moved even before I knew, searching for a glimpse of him. I wouldn't give any explanation why, but I wanted to be there for him right now. Maybe I could give him some comfort?

But where was he? He wasn't anywhere at the party.

Looking up, I caught a fleeting shadow of his disappearing into the first floor. Not wasting any more time, I followed. Climbing up the stairs, I strode to the way he went. But all I found was an empty hallway.

I just saw him come here. Where did he go now?

My eyes searched for him, but there was no trace of him. Then the east wing came into my view.

Maybe he went that way?

I entered the east wing, even the shadowed corridors didn't stop me.

Though it did look eerie. I didn't know how Tess and Caleb stayed here alone in this huge palace.

From what I remembered from my last visit years ago, everything has changed. From the antique furniture to the colors of the walls, everything was replaced with a modern contemporary interior. Gone was the old house they got from their ancestors.

I halted in my steps as something caught my peripheral vision. Stepping back, I stood at the head of the hallway. And there he was.

What was he doing in front of that door?

His hands remained in his pockets as he stood there, immobile. But this time, his frame was rigid, eyes darker than I ever encountered. The hatred his gaze held as he stared at the door sent shivers down my spine.

But other than hatred, there was... pain and something else that I couldn't decipher.

Another tug in my chest urged me to go near him. But I stayed still. Something about his tense demeanor warned me to stay away. But I couldn't just stay back and watch him like that. So I moved. But as soon as I started to approach, he turned around and stormed away.

"Ace!" I called out for him, running ahead. But he was already gone.

I glanced at the door he was staring at with such hatred. While all the other doors were replaced and new, this one remained the same, old crafted dark wood door. And... it was locked.

Whose room it was? And why was it locked, unlike every other room around here? This couldn't be a storeroom because those were in the basement.

Touching the lock, I tried to budge it, knowing it was useless.

“I’m afraid Achilles wouldn’t like it very much if he finds out you’re snooping around in a place where you shouldn’t.”

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NINETEEN: HE'S GONE?



Jumping in fright, I whirled around with my heart in my throat.

Dark eyes met mine as he stood right in front of me.

I sighed in relief. “Oh, Arthur. It’s you.” My gaze flickered around. No one was nearby. The hallway was eerie.

What was he doing up here?

A small smile tugged at his lips. His expression tight. “You shouldn’t be wandering here alone, dear. Especially in this wing. Achilles isn’t very fond of it if someone enters here.”

My head tilted. And why was that? “It’s been years since I last visited here. So, I thought to take a look around.” I shrugged. “Whose room is that, anyway?”

Glancing at the door, something washed over his face. But he masked it soon enough, not letting me understand anything. But whatever it was, it was... dark.

“It was his mother’s room.” He turned his attention back to me.

“You mean, Ophelia?”

He nodded.

I remembered that woman. Though she was sweet, I never saw her

spending much time with Ace and Caleb. Both of his parents would be away from home most of the time. I wondered where she was now.

“Where is she?”

With an empty look, he replied, “Away.”

Just as I opened my mouth again to ask for an explanation, a voice interrupted me.

“Here you are, Arthur. I was looking for you everywhere. Thank God a waiter saw you coming this way,” Caleb said, sending me a brief glance. “The Simpsons are asking for Achilles. Handle them, will you? Because I’m so done giving excuses to everyone about his disappearance.”

“Of course.” Turning to me, Arthur nodded. “I’ll see you later, Emerald. And remember what I told you.”

This place was not for wandering.

Caleb’s attention piqued at that as his brows furrowed.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said in a polite tone. What was in this room that they marked this wing as restricted? And if everyone was prohibited from coming here, what was he doing here in the first place?

Flashing me another of his vague smiles, he walked away.

“What was that?” Caleb asked, watching his uncle’s retreating form. “What did he say to you?” The subtle look of his at the locked door didn’t go missed.

“That Ace won’t like it if he finds out about me being here, in the east wing.”

Rubbing his neck, he looked at me. “It’s not like that, Em. It’s just that a lot of his memories are connected to this place. Good and... bad. And he

doesn't want anyone to peek into them."

He meant peek in this room?

"Anyway, the ceremony is about to begin. Let's go."

The sudden change of topic hinted he wasn't comfortable talking about this subject. I let it go and accepted the arm he offered me.

Walking away, I glanced over my shoulder one last time at that room. What happened here?

After the engagement was done, the cake was cut and served. And the last dance of the night began.

I continued to look for him. He wasn't there even during the engagement. Did he leave already? He did look extremely roused back in the east wing.

"This isn't fair, Dad! You won't dance with your daughter at her engagement party?" Tess complained. She has been pestering Dad to dance with her so she could take some pictures, but he kept denying due to his lack of experience.

"Sweetheart, you know I can't dance. Why don't you go dance with Caleb?"

"Right, we just got officially engaged, and she's already bored of me," Caleb commented, earning a scowl from Tess.

"I've already danced with him twice. Now I want my dad to dance with me. Come on, just one dance, Dad." She fluttered her puppy eyes.

He let out a sigh. "All right, but for only five minutes. No more."

"Done. Thank you so much!" Squealing, she signaled the photographers to get ready and dragged Dad along after her.

"Now that my fiancé left me alone here, can I ask my gorgeous sister-in-

law for a dance?”

I laughed as Caleb bent a little and offered me his hand.

“Sure. Who can say no to my handsome brother-in-law?” Rolling my eyes, I took his hand.

“Oh, I’m flattered.” Grinning, he led me to the dance floor.

As the song continued, we started to move with the rhythm. A lot of other couples also joined at the last dance. Even Tobias and Mom went along with the beat.

While dancing, Caleb’s gaze went to Tess every few seconds, and the same went with her. In between talking to Dad, she threw adored glances at her fiancé. Felicity radiated off her face. I was happy for her.

At least someone got the love of their life.

“You know, months ago, I never imagined I’d be living my dream one day,” he said, gaze still on her.

“What do you mean?”

His chin pointed to where Dad was twirling Tess in an awkward way. “Tessa. Due to some complications and my idiocy, we were always on and off. There was no certainty between us. At one point, we thought we’d have no future together. Until six months ago, when we decided to give us another chance. I finally got the balls to ask for her hand last month.”

I heard he had problems committing in relationships. And Tess needed one. They had a lot of misunderstandings and arguments over it until everything turned out good. I didn’t know why he had such a fear of commitments, but I was glad he sorted it out and gave Tess what she wanted.

“That’s because you never stopped believing in your love. It’s your heart

that brought you guys together again.” I smiled. “I’m really happy for you guys. Tess is lucky to have you. And I hope you won’t disappoint me in the future for feeling that way.”

He shook his head, eyes genuine. “I won’t, I promise. And it’s the other way around, trust me. I’m the lucky one to have her.”

I shrugged. “That’s true.”

He laughed, looking back at my sister.

Then something struck my mind as I cleared my throat. “When did you guys start dating?”

He turned back to me. “I liked her the moment Achilles introduced her to me. After a while, I knew that I wasn’t alone in the boat, she also had some feelings for me. And just a month before her nineteenth birthday, we started dating.”

“You guys were into each other for that long? How come I had no idea?” I asked, surprised.

“Like I said, we were never sure of anything. We decided to keep it quiet to see where it goes.”

I raised my brows. “Secret relationship, huh?”

He chuckled. “You can say that.”

Shaking my head, I laughed along. Then realization hit me, threatening my smile to fall. A month before her nineteenth birthday? A month before that night?

Something churned in my stomach. She was already in a relationship with Caleb when she kissed Ace that night?

My eyes fell on her. She was laughing at something Dad said.

Did she... cheat on Caleb?

* * *

CONTINUOUS VIBRATIONS PULLED me out of my raw sleep. Groaning, I pulled my phone out from beneath my pillow.

Who's calling in the middle of night?

After rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I squinted at the screen.

Ace?

Every ounce of drowsiness left from my body with the skip of my heart. Why was he calling me at this hour of the night?

Should I receive it?

Of course I should!

But just as I swiped the green sign, the call ended. Disappointment filled my chest as I stared at the screen, hoping it'd ring again. But it didn't. I glanced at the clock. It was twelve thirty.

Why was he calling? Was everything all right?

I couldn't sleep until a while ago. Thoughts of him didn't let me. Everything that happened at the party. His past, his mom's room, Tess and Caleb. So many things were nagging my mind.

I even thought of calling him when I heard he left without informing anyone. But I decided against it. What would I say? I couldn't show how concerned I was for him.

And right now, I was in the same dilemma.

Should I call back? Maybe he'll call back if it's necessary?

My thumb hovered over the dial option, my insides urging me to tap on it. But I threw my phone in its previous place. I couldn't just call him like that. I

had to remember I wanted to keep my distance. Maybe he just wanted to irritate me again?

Biting my lip, I rested my head on the pillow. But my eyes set on the phone, heart waiting. Receiving the call won't go against my decision, right?

I continued to wait, but the phone didn't ring again. Even after an hour, he didn't call. And eventually, darkness slowly pulled me back into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

TAPPING my feet on the floor, I tried to locate any faults in the new designs we got for next season's fashion. But all I could think was about him.

When I woke up this morning, I immediately checked my phone. There were five missed calls from him. I couldn't hold myself back and called him. Again and again. But his phone was unreachable.

Since then, concern was rattling in my mind like a hurricane. The thought of if he was okay ate at me. Even in my office, I sat with the same catalogue in my hand for half an hour.

He didn't come to the office today.

"Will you stop doing that? It's disturbing," Liza said, glancing up from her files.

We had to finish some work together on the upcoming project, so she decided to work from my office today with me.

"What?"

She pointed her eyes to my still tapping foot.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was thinking of something," I apologized, halting the dancing of my leg.

Placing the pen down, she placed her elbows on the desk, giving me her full attention. Her brown orbs watched me. “What is it? I’ve been seeing you lost all morning.”

“Nothing. Just some stuff,” I lied. How could I ask her about him?

She must have some information. Oh yeah, right. The meeting.

“When is the meeting again? Is everyone prepared for it?”

“It’s after lunch. And yes, everything is done,” she said. “Are you sure there’s no issue?”

I flashed her a smile. “Yeah, don’t worry.” Nodding, as she went back to her work, my mouth opened again. “But how would the meeting take place if Ace is not here? He was supposed to be there, right?”

“Yeah, but since he’s not here today, Caleb will handle the meeting,” she replied, not moving her eyes from those files.

Couldn’t she just say where he was?

“Do you have any idea where he is?” I probed.

She shrugged. “I called his PA this morning, and he said the boss would be away for a couple of days. He left early this morning.”

Something dropped in the pit of my stomach. Left? For a couple of days? Where? And why? Was everything all right?

Looking up, a thoughtful expression etched over her face. “Maybe he went to the UK again.”

“UK? How do you know he went to the UK?” Something dimmed inside my chest. He’d be gone for days?

“He often goes there and stays for some days. I don’t know why though, maybe for vacations. He actually needs it. Most of the time, all he does is

work.” She shook her head.

“Does he have any business over there? Or any friends?” I didn’t think he’d go there for vacation.

“Nope. He’s a very closed off person. You should know that as you’re his close family friend. He doesn’t have any friends other than your siblings. Nor does he have any business over there.”

Nodding, I looked down at the catalogue again. Now I was feeling more guilty for not responding to his call sooner and not calling him back last night. Maybe he wanted to tell me something.

What happened that he’d to leave like that? Yes, he did this often, but it didn’t feel right. He was so disturbed last night.

After finally finishing with the work at hand, I delivered it to Matt and called Ace again. But again, his phone was switched off.

A heavy sigh left my lips.

Where are you?

The landline on my desk rang, snatching my attention.

“Hello.”

“Emerald, hey! It’s Matt. Can you please get me the files I sent to you this morning? I’m a little busy here. It’d be a great help,” he said from the other side of the phone.

“Sure, I’ll be down in a minute.”

“All right, thank you.”

Putting the phone down, I grabbed those files and walked out of my office. But my steps halted, spotting Tobias talking to Linn, a girl from the HR department.

“Tobias!” I approached him.

Excusing Linn, he turned to me. “Hey. How’s your day going?”

“Do you know where Ace is?” I was straight forward, not wasting my time asking what he was doing here.

“Whoa! Calm down there,” he said, watching me. “What happened? Why are you so riled up?”

Calm down, Em. Compose yourself.

I scratched under my ear, clearing my throat. “He called me many times last night. But I couldn’t answer them as I was sleeping. And now his phone is switched off. So, I was just wondering if he’s all right.”

A gentle smile tugged at his lips. “Don’t worry about him, Em. He’s all right. He left for the UK at four this morning and will stay there for a few days. Though he doesn’t keep any contact when he’s there, I’m sure he’ll call you no matter what.”

Liza was right. He did go to the UK.

“Do you know why he left all of a sudden?” I asked, ignoring the last line he said.

A somber look crossed over his features. “He always goes there whenever he needs some time alone. But don’t worry, once he thinks he’s ready to return, he’ll come back.”

“Oh. I was just asking because—”

“Em,” he cut me off, peering into my eyes. “I understand. You don’t need to explain anything.”

Gulping, I nodded and silently walked away.

So, the reason behind his leaving was he needed some time alone. It must

have had something to do with his last night's visit to the mansion. Did he want to share something with me last night? And being me, I didn't call him back.

With the pressure in my chest, I went down to the third floor and handed those files to Matt and returned to my office to bury my head into the loads of work that was thrown into pending by me since this morning. I needed to keep myself busy unless I wanted to lose my sanity by thinking of him.

When I was halfway finished with my pending work, it was already dark outside. But I didn't have any time to think of the time if I wanted to go home before midnight.

My phone buzzed on the desk.

Without looking away from the sheets, I put the phone on speaker.

"Yes?"

"I'm at the studio for another of my ad shoots. Guess who the producer turned out to be?" Came the chirpy voice of my best friend.

"Who?" I went along, not really interested in the answer.

"Trent, Leyla's husband."

That redhead friend of his?

"What a coincidence. You called me to inform this?"

She snorted. "Of course! It is surprising news. I thought you'd be interested in knowing her more, as she's a special friend of his?" Her tone was teasing.

Yeah, he had another friend other than my siblings.

"I'm not. You told me they were just friends. What's more to know there?" I shook my head, going back to my work.

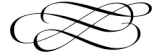
“Oh, you’re so boring!” She rambled on about how she met him and introduced herself as a close family friend of Ace to make some connections with him. It could get her new offers. “And I found out she’s a psychiatrist. I’m thinking about how a film and ad producer met a doctor. What an interesting pair. But I’m wondering how they manage their long-distance relationship. His job is here, and his wife is oceans away in the UK.”

I stopped whatever I was doing. Now that caught my attention.

UK?

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TWENTY: CONFRONTING TESS



The aroma of fresh spices and sauce wafted across the kitchen, proclaiming the delicious food getting ready for the special Italian dinner. The provoking sweet goods baking inside the oven had me salivating.

The hunger of my tummy spiked at that. The result of not eating the whole day. How could I when my mind spiraled with a vanished man's thoughts all the time?

"I'm happy you're here, Em. With all the preparations for the wedding going on, we haven't spent enough time together." Tess added some basil in the spaghetti.

I nodded. "Yeah, but don't worry. I'm not going anywhere, at least not for three months. So, we've got a lot of time to fix that."

Something flickered over her blue irises, but then she smiled. "Right. Anyway, how was your day?"

"It was good."

Not good. Not at all. After last night, I didn't get any peace. What Caleb said about their relationship, about her involvement with Ace, kept my mind busy. Then he suddenly vanished from the country.

In the evening, when I got Cassie's call and got to know about Leyla

being in the UK, it raised a lot of questions in my mind. He had no one out there except her, so the suspicion that she could be one of the reasons for his frequent visits there wasn't unrealistic. Even if I didn't have any right to feel vexed about it, I was. But somehow, I knew he wasn't there for her. There was nothing between them like I thought at the beginning. They were just friends.

That's what you thought about Ace and Tess, too.

That was the main reason for me being here. I wanted answers to my questions. And at this moment, only Tess could enlighten me. I'd lose my sanity if she didn't.

Fidgeting in my seat, I cleared my throat. "I was thinking of asking you something..."

She looked up. Observing my hesitation, an understanding etched on her features. "You can ask me anything, Em. I'll try to answer them as long as it's about me."

I took a deep breath. There was no point beating around the bush now. "Did you cheat on Caleb with Ace seven years ago?"

A gasp slipped through her lips as her eyes widened. "What? What are you talking about, Em? I never did such a thing!"

"Look, I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't ask you these questions. It happened years ago, and I should just keep it there. But I—"

"It doesn't matter if it happened years ago or not! I've always loved Caleb. I know we were never sure of anything, and also dated other people after our first break up. But I'd never cheated on him. Especially with Ace. He was my best friend, for God's sake!" Disbelief filled her eyes.

"So, there was nothing going on between you two?"

“Of course not! Why’d you think that?” A frown set between her brows. Soon, realization hit her as she went quiet, guilt flashing over her features.

“I saw you kissing, Tess. If there was nothing between you two, then what was that?” I queried, a sudden desperation rolled my insides. “Caleb told me you guys started dating a month before your nineteenth birthday. Means you were with Caleb when you... What do I think of that?”

I had no right to ask her these personal questions. It was all in the past. But I needed to know.

Both of them knew of my feelings. That other night on the terrace, she told me she’d never hurt me on purpose. Ace’s words and actions proved he remembered every word he said to me and somehow meant it. That’s what I saw in his eyes every time he called me his. I wasn’t sure if he harbored any real feelings for me back then, but he didn’t think I was a fool in love with him. He cared for me and respected my feelings.

That’s what I understood from all his crazy actions and other things. But if there wasn’t anything between them, why would they do that? Why did I find them wrapped around in each other’s arms like that?

What was the reason he became so distant with me and didn’t even call or ask about me for once after that night? Not even when I moved to New York. Yes, after his father’s death, he did get distant with everyone, but not with me. Even at least for once in a while, he used to visit me. Until one day, it stopped. And then came that ominous night. The night my heart broke.

All these things have been nagging me after Ace, out of nowhere, appeared in my life and declared his claim on me.

“Tell me, Tess. Why did you kiss the boy your sister lost her heart to?” My throat tightened, my eyes burned. “Even after loving someone else, even

after Ace was just your best friend, even after you didn't want to hurt your little sister, as you claimed that night. Why?"

Closing her eyes, she rubbed her face. "I can't tell you that, Em."

"Why?" My voice rose. Couldn't she see how desperate I was to know the truth? The truth they were hiding.

"Just as I said, I will answer your questions as long as it's about me. And it's not about only me here, Em. Nor is it my secret to tell. Only Ace can give you these answers." She blinked away the unshed tears. "But believe me, Em, there was never anything between me and Ace except friendship. And I'd never, ever cheat on Caleb. It's not always what it appears to be. Sometimes, you need to see beyond it."

Her eyes pleaded me not to ask anymore questions as I sat there silently, taking in her words. What did she mean?

It was not what it appeared to be? Then what was it? Maybe Ace had the answer to this question.

Though my confusions remained unsolved, her stating there wasn't anything between them did something to my heart.

"Em?" Her voice snatched my gaze back to her. "I hope you understand why I can't tell you anything. It's not my place to tell you this. I'm sorry."

I nodded. "It's all right. I understand."

She placed her hand on mine. "I know how important it is for you to understand everything so you can take your next decisions of your life. So, I'd suggest you ask him yourself. I think the time has come for you to know everything."

Surprised, I watched her in confusion. Did I really want to know

everything to take my next steps in my life with him? Was I considering Cassie's advice to give us another chance?

And what did she mean by it was the time for me to know everything? Why did it feel like the truth I was going to know soon would change my life forever?

The blare of my phone distracted me from my thoughts. It was Beth.

"Hello," I said, picking up the phone.

"Hello, is this Em I'm talking to?" a male voice spoke from the other side of the phone, some hubbub buzzed in the background.

"Yes? Who is it? And why are you calling from my friend's phone? Where is she?" I frowned.

"Miss, I'm calling you from Dakota's Bar. Your friend here is drunk and alone. She's refusing to leave, and we don't know her address. So, we got your number from her emergency dial list and called you. We'd be grateful if you come get your friend. She's in a pretty bad state and we don't know what to do with her."

"Oh God! How long has she been there?" I shot up from the chair.

"Approximately four hours, miss," the man replied.

"All right, can you please keep an eye on her until I get there? I'll be there as soon as possible."

"Of course, but be quick, miss. We're about to close our bar for the night."

"All right, thank you." I put the phone in my purse.

"What is it? Who was that?" Concern latched in Tess's eyes.

"It's Beth. She needs me right now. I'll tell you everything later. I've got

to go now.” Grabbing my coat, I hurried out.

“Call me once you’re free. And stay safe!” she called as I shut the door behind me.

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TWENTY-ONE: THE BOSS IS HERE



Taking a right, I drove through an almost empty street. My gaze continued their connection with the GPS tracker of my phone. I never heard of that bar's name before, and after tracing Beth's phone, I found it was at Northern Avenue. The street was infamous for old buildings, illegal casinos, small cafés, and bars. And most importantly, hundreds of alleys.

I'd no idea what the hell she was doing here this late at night. And seeing the eerie silence around, I felt people of this area called it a night much earlier than others.

Once I was finally at my destination, in the middle of a narrow road, I double checked the location and the bar's name. A big 'Dakota's Bar' sign was written above the building, red fairy lights lit around the edges. Two wobbly, rugged men stumbled out of the bar, raising the scale of my anxiety.

I'd just pick her up and flee out of this uncanny area.

When I was about to park my car in the small parking lot at the corner, I found it full. And the casino beside it explained the reason. I was about to park my car outside the bar, but a big no parking sign stopped me.

Sighing, I turned to another narrow road where I found a place to park. Taking my phone, I walked back to the bar.

Cold air pricked my skin as I walked along the side of the street. My brown locks swayed with the breeze. Distant music coming out from the casino's closed doors was the only thing I could hear other than stray dogs barking from afar.

As soon as I entered the bar, her sprawled figure came into my view. With a large bottle in her hand, she sang something in her not so pleasant slurry voice. Her dark curly head rested on the round table in the corner. It was a small bar, so finding her wasn't a hassle.

When I approached her, a man in a white shirt and red bow around his neck greeted me.

"I guess you're the friend of hers I called, right?" he asked.

"Yes, that's me. Thank you so much for informing me about her. I had no idea she would be here," I said, genuinely grateful. At a place like this, she could fall into the wrong man's hand. Thank God, this man, who must be a bartender here, turned out to be a gentleman!

"No problem, miss. She's been here for the last four hours, drinking and crying non-stop. When it was our time to close the bar, we asked her to leave, but she wasn't in a state to leave alone, so we'd to call you."

Crying? What happened to her?

"Again, thank you so much for taking care of her until I arrived." I hurried to her and called out her name.

Blinking her red, swollen eyes at me, recognition flickered over her face as an uneven smile stretched across her lips. "Emmm! You're 'ere! I was soooo lonely." She tugged at my hand. "Come, sit 'ere! Now we're going to drink together!"

I brushed her unkempt hair away from her forehead, her cheeks were

streaked with dried tears and smudged mascara. She looked like a mess.

What happened to her? God, I hoped everything was all right. I'd talk to her once she was sober. But I needed to get her out of here first.

"No, Beth. You'd had enough drinks for tonight, you aren't having any more. Let's go, we're leaving." I tried to get her up by her shoulders, but she shrugged me off.

"Nooo, I don't want to go! Need more drinks, an' you'll drink with me," she slurred. "Hey, you! Gimme another bottle!"

The man shuffled in his place, eyeing his watch. The whole bar was empty. He was just waiting for us to leave so that he could close the bar.

"Beth! Come on, get up! We need to go!" Forcing her to stand, I wrapped one of her arms around my neck and snaked mine around her waist.

"No! I want a drink!" she complained but walked along with me, with swaying legs.

"I'll give you one once we're home. Now let's go," I said, glancing at the man. He asked if I needed help, but I refused. Paying her bill, I thanked him again and carried her out of the bar.

Once outside, I glanced around, leading her the way my car was parked. Some wobbling figures appeared and disappeared around the corners.

As I dragged her along, she started crying again, mumbling something incoherent under her breath.

"Shh, Beth. It's all right. We're almost there."

A sudden shiver ran down my spine as I felt eyes on me. My gaze flickered around, but there was no one. Only two dogs passed across the road.

I tried to ignore it, but it was too strong. When I heard footsteps behind

me, I turned around. A fleeting figure moved behind a black Range Rover, making my heart skip.

Someone was following us.

With my heart in my throat, I turned around and urged Beth to walk faster. But her being drunk hindered our pace.

When we passed the head of an alley, I almost ran as a whistle reverberated across the street. Some middle-aged men were huddled under the damaged streetlight, and I could feel their gazes set on us. When one of them pushed against the wall, standing straight, I tightened my grip on Beth and dragged her as fast as I could.

“Come on, Beth! Walk faster! We need to move fast!” I urged her.

She groaned. “I don’t wanna go home!”

“We’re going to my place, don’t worry. Now walk faster!” I said, glancing over my shoulder. No one was there.

As we turned to the road I had my car parked on, I almost sighed in relief. Until footsteps behind us reached my ears. And this time, there were several. My heart pounded in my chest as I walked as fast as I could with her along. With another hand, I fished out my pepper spray and phone from my pocket and kept them in my hand.

Shit! I shouldn’t have come here alone. I should’ve taken the bartender’s help.

The footsteps came closer when we were almost near my car. My brain screamed at me to run, but I knew I couldn’t. Fear gripped my chest, making my knees wobble, but I didn’t stop walking. I almost screamed when one of them yelled out something in a foreign language as they came closer and closer, their footsteps were fast. Tugging the door open with shaky hands and

pounding heart, I pushed her inside and whirled around, with the pepper spray ready.

But to my utter surprise, I found no one. As if they suddenly vanished into the thin air. Just like that. The entire street echoed in silence.

What the hell just happened?

Not wasting any more time standing there and waiting for more trouble, I ran inside the car and drove off. When we were out of that area, away from those alleys, only then I let myself breathe in relief.

While Beth slept next to me, I messaged Tess about us heading home. I was so definitely going to talk to this friend of mine tomorrow morning about the stunt she pulled tonight. While I felt like I just escaped heart failure, she was sleeping in peace. It was just sheer luck we got out of there safely.

But what I wondered was, where did those men go?

* * *

“GOOD MORNING, ALFRED,” I greeted the old doorman, as I entered through the glass doors of OC Textiles.

A warm smile tugged at his lips, the sides of his eyes crinkling. “Morning, Ms. Hutton! Have a good day.”

Smiling back, I walked into the elevator. I checked my phone again. Still no calls or messages from him. Is he ignoring my calls on purpose? I’ve called him this morning after waking up, but again, it was switched off.

Sighing, I typed a message to Beth instead about our pending discussion after the office.

When I took her home last night, my parents were stunned seeing her in that state. Among the three of us, she was always the sensible one and never really drank.

When I left home this morning, she was still asleep. I'd informed Cassie about her condition last night and she said she'd pick her up from my place after breakfast. Even she had no idea what happened to Beth.

Once I reached the forty-ninth floor, I headed directly to my office, but Liza met me on the way.

"Hey!" I smiled at her. But it slipped when I saw her pale face.

"Thank God, you're here! I was just about to call you to ask what's taking you so long," she said, eyes wide.

I frowned. "As far as I know, I'm exactly on time. Why? What's wrong? You're looking pale. Is everything all right?"

She shook her head. "Forget everything. You need to go to the penthouse."

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of the penthouse.

"Why?"

"The boss is here. And he demands your presence, right now."

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TWENTY-TWO: THE DEVIL OF MY DREAMS



Stepping out of the VIP elevator, I blew out a breath, eyeing the sleek black metal doors of the penthouse. The big guards stood at both sides of the elevator like statues, statues with dark glasses. My heart drummed down my chest as I approached the entrance, standing before the fingerprint scanner. I still didn't know how he got my fingerprint.

Though the nervousness of meeting him after that night was overwhelming, the eagerness to see him and find out if he was all right won over my hesitation.

Once I was inside the doors, to my surprise, it automatically closed behind me. The feeling of getting locked with the devil of my dreams was knee weakish. As I walked ahead, the memories of my last visit here rushed into my mind.

Oh, I forgot about the blouse I left here.

I made a mental note to grab it before leaving.

When I entered the living room, I stopped in my tracks.

There he was. Sitting on the grand couch, his form was bent over, elbows resting on his knees with hands joined before him. His stormy irises were set on me, freezing me in my place. Those gray orbs were dark today. Shoulders

tensed.

“Took you long enough, Miss Hutton.” Greek accent was deeper than usual. The boss was extremely mad. But that didn’t stop me from studying his face. It was like ice to my burning heart.

“Well?” His head tilted. But today it didn’t irritate me.

“I could ask you the same,” I said, walking closer. The black long-sleeved, high neck T-shirt fit him well, manifesting the cuts of his hard muscles to me. “What took you so long to come back?”

Surprise flashed over those gray pools, but it was fleeting. “I didn’t think you cared if I were here or not.” He observed me, as if waiting for my answer.

The words ‘I do care’ were at the tip of my tongue, but I held myself back. “It’s not suitable for a businessman to leave his companies behind for days like that.”

He stayed quiet. The anger behind the calm façade threatened to blow out as he watched me. I could tell he wasn’t mad at my comment. It was something else.

Come on, Ace. Get out with it.

When he managed to keep calm for another half a minute, my patience ran out. He couldn’t just stay quiet when I was in a constant hell worrying about him.

“Why did you leave like that?” I spilled. “Your phone was unreachable! I called you like a hundred times! What the hell were you doing?” I wanted to ask if he was all right but held myself back.

Both surprise and shock flickered over his face. But again, he was quick

to cover it. Damn him for such control where I was a mess here.

He stood, strolling towards me, making my legs urge me to step back. Grabbing my chin gently, he peered into my soul. “And may I ask you what the hell you were doing last night, sweetheart?” The edge of his deep voice sent shivers down my spine. Gray orbs flashed with rage. “I was away just for one fucking day, and you managed to get yourself into trouble already?”

“How-how do you know?” I blinked.

“Do you really think I’d leave you behind just like that? Without anyone to watch over my Rosebud?”

A gasp left my lips. “You had someone to stalk me? How dare you!”

“And how did you dare to put yourself at risk by going in that shady place alone! Anything could’ve happened out there, and nobody would even get to know where you were! Damn it, Emerald! What the hell were you thinking?” His nostrils flared, stepping back. “Thank God my men were there watching over you! Otherwise, I—”

His hands balled into fists as his intimidating form shook with rage, jaw clenching and unclenching. His flaming grays told me he wanted to destroy something. A volcano inside him wished to unleash. I never saw him this furious before.

Remembering last night’s event sent chills down my neck. He was right, anything could’ve happened to us over there if those men suddenly didn’t get...

It was his men who did the miracle last night.

Though it was ridiculous for him to hire bodyguards for me, deep down, I was grateful. But I’d definitely talk to him about it later when he would be calm.

“I...I went there to get Beth. She needed me.”

“Then you could’ve just informed Caleb or Tobias. Why did you go there all by yourself?” A muscle of his jaw ticked.

Pressing my lips, I narrowed my eyes. “I know I shouldn’t have gone there alone. But I didn’t know where that bar was exactly located, all right? I had no idea that area would be so eerie at that time.”

“You...” Letting out a sigh, he pinched the bridge of his nose. Then my gaze fell onto his knuckles. They were bruised.

“What happened to your hands? How did they cut?” Rushing near him, I took his hands in mine.

“It’s nothing.” He tried to retract them, but I held them firmly.

“Hold still! Where’s your first aid kit?” I asked, checking the dark bruises and cuts. How did he get them?

When he stayed quiet, watching me in silence, I cast him a look.

A sigh left him. “In my bedroom.”

Dragging him into his bedroom, I made him sit at the edge of the bed and got out the first aid kit.

Sitting beside him, I grabbed his hands and sanitized them before applying balm on his knuckles. He didn’t flinch during the whole process. He just kept watching me with something intense swirling in his gaze.

“How did you get them? And why are they still unattended?” I tried my best not to look into his eyes.

“They weren’t that serious. So, I let them be,” he replied, not answering my first question. “And I’m glad I didn’t, otherwise you wouldn’t be here treating me.”

This time, I looked up into his gray pools.

“T-that’s ridiculous! You could get infected!”

A shrug. “I’m used to them.”

Used to the pain? Why?

“You didn’t tell me why you left.” I wrapped the bandage around his right hand.

After a moment of silence, he answered, “I needed some time alone.”

“For what?” I whispered.

“To clear my head and think straight.”

Just as I thought talking to him gently would make him give straight answers, he proved me wrong. He was back with his complicated replies.

“Is-is everything all right?” I cast him a hesitant glance, completing his bandaging.

Silence.

A gasp slipped through my lips as he hauled me onto his lap. “Ace!”

Nuzzling my neck, he inhaled deep. “Now, everything is all right.”

With blood rushing up my cheeks, I wiggled in his arms. “W-what are you doing? Let go of me.”

His hold tightened around me. “Never. I’m not letting you go away from me, never again.”

Again?

A shiver ran through my whole body when his hot lips touched the sensitive skin of my neck.

“My Rose.” A groan left his mouth as his hand roamed over my curves,

littering sensual kisses behind my ear. As embarrassing as it was, a whimper snuck out of me.

“Ace.” I wanted to stop him, but my voice came out much like a moan with his hot tongue directly against my burning skin.

My hands gripped his strong shoulders when he turned me to him, and our gazes met. The intensity and desire in his stormy grays had me stop breathing.

“Those turquoise eyes of yours, they’ve captured my heart and locked it under their spell the moment they fell on me,” he whispered, kissing my closed eyelids one by one. And then on my forehead, then both of my cheeks.

When he pulled me against him, with not even an inch between us, I let out a shaky breath, snuggling my face against his. Warmth and many emotions soared into my chest.

My arms went around his neck as a whisper left my lips. “Ace.”

“My Rose.” A breath escaped my lips when he placed a lingering kiss on the corner of my lips.

Sagging against him just as I let myself get lost in his warmth, the blare of my phone pulled me out of my bubble.

Blinking, when I jerked away, he didn’t let me. His brows furrowed in disturbance. Fighting with him was useless, so I fished out my phone from my pocket and checked the name of the caller.

Guilt hit me like a truck seeing Warner’s name flashing on the screen.

We were still in a relationship when I was...

I felt Ace growing tense against me, his eyes set on the phone, strong jaw clenched.

“I have to take this.” I got off his lap, but a hand on my arm stopped me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked. Voice rough.

I was surprised to see the sudden malice in his orbs. Was that—jealousy?

“To talk to Warner.”

“Ignore it.”

I frowned. “I can’t. He—”

“He’s more important to you than our moment?” He cut me off, his grip tightened on my arm.

“He was always important. He’s my b—” I squeaked when he tugged me to him and the next thing I found was, I lay flat on the bed, with him above me. “Ace! What are you doing—”

And again, he cut me off. But this time, with his lips. Right against mine.

“He’s nothing to you, you understand?” he growled against my lips, biting my lower one hard. “Nothing! You’re fucking mine!”

My mind went haywire. Shock, rage, warmth and... desire shot through my veins like a wildfire. Pushing against his hard chest, I attempted to snatch my lips from the capture of his scorching ones, but he only deepened the kiss. Grabbing my wrists, he placed them above my head with one hand, while the other went to run over my body with freedom, raising a painful tug in my abdomen.

“Only mine.”

An unintentional moan left my mouth as he sucked my lower lip into his mouth with ferocity. My body was on fire. His free hand ran down my waist to my thigh. Sneaking behind, he grabbed my butt, getting another gasp from me.

He took this chance to enter his tongue in my mouth, devouring me. Just as his hot tongue touched mine, a jolt of pleasure ran through me. My body hummed into delight. My eyes closed on their own as I kissed him with equal urgency and desperateness.

I've never been kissed like this. Never this deep, rough, and intense. My hands struggled into his hold. This time not to get away, but to pull him closer. To feel him. It wasn't enough. I wanted more. I needed more.

"Ace," I managed to whisper out in between his earth-shattering kisses. And he understood as he released my hands.

There was no going back. I clung to him like I was falling, and he was the only thing to grab on in this whole world. Molding our lips around each other, we got tangled in a momentum of want and desire.

Another ring of my phone reverberated across the room. At first, neither of us acknowledged it, but then senses started to kick in my brain.

Disbelief and shame fell over me as I realized what I just did.

How could I do this?

Pushing him away, I grabbed my phone and ran out of the room, not waiting to see his expression.

"Emerald, wait!" he called out behind me, but I was already out of the room. I heard him coming after me, but I didn't stop.

I ran and kept running until I was safe in the four walls of the elevator. Clutching my chest, that was still pounding from his touches and kisses, I leaned against one of the walls and closed my eyes. A tear slipped down my cheek.

I cheated on Warner. Though it was unintentional, though I didn't love

him and soon was going to reveal it before him, it didn't justify my actions. I did wrong to him. I did wrong to the person who was always there for me.

Why couldn't I control myself? Why couldn't I just push him away? Because I can't. I can't resist him. I never could.

Still weak in the knees, I let out a choked breath and rubbed my face in frustration and guilt. It was wrong. I couldn't do this anymore. I knew it could happen again because my heart just didn't know where to stop around him. I needed to fix this.

I have to talk to Warner. As soon as possible.

Wiping my cheeks, I dialed his number. But it went busy. I dialed again, but it was still busy. Getting out of the elevator, I sent him a message.

Sorry, couldn't receive your call. I called you but it went busy. Call me as soon as you're free. I need to talk to you.

It hurt to even think of breaking his heart, but I couldn't lie to him anymore. I needed to tell him everything about my feelings, about Ace and... about the kiss.

I hope he can forgive me because I don't want to lose a friend like him.

Putting back my phone, as I was about to walk away, I caught a figure around the corner that led to another hallway. Half of their body could be seen from where I stood, the other half was covered by the wall. I squinted.

Liza? She was on the phone with someone, eyes flickering her left and right. As I was behind her, she didn't notice me.

Frowning at her tensed shoulders and alert movements, I took a few steps ahead.

"Yes!" she hissed over the phone. "The job is done. Everything happened

just as you wanted. Now I want you to fulfill your promise.” She listened to whatever the other person said and nodded. “All right. I’ll call you later. I’ve to go now. Bye.” Disconnecting the call, she glanced around again. I squinted when she took out something from her purse with shaky hands and threw it into the bin.

As she rushed away, I went to the place where she was just a second ago with my eyes still on her.

What’s wrong with her? She looked extremely nervous and tense.

Looking down into the dustbin, I saw a big, crumbled plastic packet. Some white substance lay at the bottom inside it.

My eyes narrowed. What’s that?

My gaze went back to where Liza had just disappeared. Something was wrong with her. Maybe I’d just talk to her later at lunch. Then my mind went back to what happened upstairs. My hand went up and touched my still tingling swollen lips. Warmth and guilt washed over me at once. The worst thing was, I loved every second of it. And I hated myself for that.

Letting out a sigh, I headed back to my office, with a lot of thoughts jumbled in my brain.

When I was just outside my office, I saw Tess rushing in my way. My eyes widened seeing her disarranged state.

“Tess?”

She grabbed my hands with her cold ones, her face pale with panic. “Em! Where’s Achilles? I’ve called him so many times, but he’s not picking up his phone! Where is he?”

“Hey, hey, relax. What happened? Why are you so riled up?” I grabbed

her shoulder, trying to comfort her.

She shook her head. Her blue eyes were moist with unshed tears.
“Caleb...”

“What? What happened to him?”

Her lips quivered as tears fell down her face. “He’s in jail.”

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TWENTY-THREE: ANTONIO RAYMOND?



“*W*hat?” I gasped. “How? How did this happen?”

She shook her head, wiping her tears. “I don’t know. I just got a call from the police station half an hour ago. And since then, I was calling Achilles non-stop, but he wasn’t picking up his phone! Even our lawyer called him. Where is he?”

A while ago, means we were in his bedroom then...

Blinking away those thoughts from my mind, I said, “Don’t worry, Tess. Everything will be fine. He’s in his penthouse right now.”

“All right. Let’s—” The blare of her phone cut her off. Receiving it, she listened to whatever the other person said and then cut the call. “It was him. He’s waiting for me outside in the car. I gotta go!”

“Wait! I’ll come with you,” I insisted. I didn’t want to leave her alone in that state.

She nodded, sniffing. “All right, let’s go.”

Once we were outside, we found Ace in the driver’s seat with a rigid form. Though his grip on the steering wheel was tight, his expression gave nothing away. Ignoring the memories of what happened in his penthouse and the flutters in my stomach, we got into his car and then drove away.

When the car came to a stop outside the police station, flashing lights blinded my vision. A small crowd of people with cameras in their hands huddled outside of the car, throwing a bunch of questions at once.

“W-what the hell? Who called them here?” Tess exclaimed.

After a moment of silence, he spoke with his jaw tight. “Let’s go.”

“But Achilles—”

He turned to Tess, who sat beside him. His features softened. “Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

At his assurance, she nodded and got out after him as four bodyguards, who came along with us, protected them from the crazy paparazzi. As soon as I got out behind them, an arm immediately wrapped around me, pushing my face into a warm chest.

“What’re you doing?”

I was ready to pull away as he guided me through the chaos with his protective arm around me, but then I decided against it. His hold and the way he hid my face from those hungry cameras told me the reason behind his act. And I didn’t want my face to be printed in tomorrow’s newspaper.

Even in this situation, he didn’t forget about my safety. He didn’t go to Tess, but he came to me...A warm sensation spread across my heart.

Once we were inside, I created some distance between us. The officer behind the big desk was on his feet as soon as we strolled in, or should I say, Achilles Valencian, walked in. Because the draining color from his face was instant.

Carter and a middle-aged man in a black coat and a white shirt with some files in his hand—maybe the lawyer—were already present.

Tess rushed to Caleb, who stood behind the iron bars. With a disheveled shirt, messy hair, and dimmed eyes, he looked shaken. When Tess reached him, he wrapped his arms around her as much as he could with the bars in between.

“Oh God! Are you all right, baby?” she asked, eyes sparkling with tears.

He nodded, kissing her hands. “Yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry.” Even after his assurance, there was an edge in his voice. “Achilles is here. He’ll get me out of here. Everything will be fine.”

“How did it happen? Why did they arrest you?” she asked, wiping her wet cheeks.

A long sigh left him as he rubbed his face. “They found drugs in the trunk of my car.”

Both of us gasped at that.

“Drugs? But how did they get into your car?” I queried.

“I don’t know. They stopped my car on the street out of nowhere and started searching. When they found them in the trunk, they brought me here,” he replied.

“I don’t believe this! Someone is trying to frame you!” Anger flashed in Tess’s irises.

“I know. But they won’t just listen to anything I say.”

“Why don’t you sit first, Mr. Valencian. We can talk then.” The timid voice of the officer made me turn around.

With hands in his pockets, Ace stood before the desk, melting the officer under his steely gaze. “Why don’t you release my cousin first? I’m not here to chat with you. Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” The officer eagerly nodded and instructed one of his men to let Caleb out. “I’m extremely sorry, Mr. Valencian. I just got here and found out our junior officer charged your cousin with possession of a controlled substance. If I knew earlier, I wouldn’t have let him do it.”

The moment he mentioned drugs, the sudden stiffness of Ace’s shoulders didn’t go missed by me. But he managed a blank face.

“Then what was he still doing behind the bars when I came here? I believe my assistant and lawyer arrived before me. Am I right? What were you doing until then?” He cocked his head, a muscle of his jaw ticked.

The officer gulped. “Actually, Mr. Valencian, it’s a case regarding drugs. So we have to do some procedure before releasing the accused.”

“Very well then. My lawyer is here. Read the papers and release him.” As he pointed to his lawyer, the middle-aged man came forward and showed some papers to the officer.

That man didn’t even read them properly before returning them. No one could with Achilles Valencian’s stormy eyes set on them like a tiger ready to jump on its prey.

Once Caleb stood beside him, he gave him a look and they both exchanged nods. The always happy Caleb didn’t have his smile on today. Though Ace was a closed off person even with his family, his love for them wasn’t any less. His actions spoke it more than his words.

Looking down at his watch, he glanced at the officer. “Where is your phone, Officer?”

The dark blue uniformed man frowned. “Why?”

His phone rang in his pocket. As he fished it out, his eyes widened seeing the name flashing on the screen. When he put the phone to his ear, they came

out of his sockets after he heard what the other person had to say on the phone.

“I hope you understood what you’re instructed to do?” Ace asked, cocking his head.

The nod was hesitant. “Y-yeah, Mr. Valencian. The termination letter will be sent to our junior officer as soon as possible.”

Termination?

Of course. The result of crossing Achilles Valencian’s path.

I shook my head.

“Good. Now find out who planted them in Caleb’s car and get back to me within two days,” he ordered. “And you know what to tell the media, don’t you, Officer?”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Valencian. Your family’s name will be cleared, don’t worry. And we’ll try our best to find out who was behind it as soon as possible,” the officer replied.

Nodding, he put his glasses back on and grabbed my hand. But before we were out of the door, he stopped and looked over his shoulder again.

“And yes, Mr. Blake. Be careful of whose family you’re dealing with from now on. Because next time, who knows, it could be you in your junior’s place.”

As all the color drained from the officer’s face, Ace pulled me into his chest again and walked out the door.

* * *

ONCE WE WERE SECURED in the car and drove away, I turned to Caleb, who sat on the back seat with Tess, her arm clutched around him.

“Do you know who could be behind this? Who tried to frame you?”
Though we haven’t seen each other in years, I trusted him enough to tell he wasn’t a person to be tangled with such things.

His gaze met his cousin’s eyes through the rear-view mirror for a fleeting second.

“I’m not sure, but it could be Antonio Raymond.”

“It is him! I’m sure!” Tess hissed. “This time he has crossed the line!”

I frowned. “Who’s Antonio? And why would he do that to you?”

“He’s the owner of our biggest rival company, AR Industries. That man lives with the agenda to destroy our fame and image to get back to the top in the market, the place that was snatched by Valencian Corp from them.”

The same company who was competing with our every deal and using the leaked information? Now it all made sense.

“We’re in progress with the Arabs regarding a mega project. If we get this, our clothing market will spread across the whole Middle East. And that’s what is bothering him. So he wants to defame us by this and turn the Arabs against us,” he continued, lips pressed tight in displeasure.

The whole time, Ace remained quiet. But his tight grip on the steering wheel was the proof of the storm brewing in him. This whole incident was bothering him a lot.

I wanted to reach out and hold his hand, but I held myself back.

“But he couldn’t do it on his own, right? He must’ve used someone to do this.” I pointed out. “Did you see anyone suspicious around your car today?”

Maybe we could find out who was leaking information from the office if we get a hold of this person?

Caleb shook his head. “No. I left home this morning and was going directly to the office until they stopped me in the middle of the street.”

“They must’ve done it either at night or this morning before you left,” Tess thought aloud, her brows furrowed.

“But who could that be?” I looked at Tess. “Did someone visit you last night or this morning?”

She nodded. “Yes, some people I called to resize my wedding dress and make some changes. They needed to see it on me before they fixed it. So, they dropped in this morning.”

“Maybe one of them did it? What about the watchman? I mean, he stays there all the time—”

“He didn’t do it,” Ace finally spoke up, casting me a look. “He’s been working for us for years now. He’s reliable.”

Caleb nodded, agreeing. “Yeah, Joe wouldn’t even think of it in his wildest dreams.”

“Oh, okay.” Then something clicked in my head. “What about the CCTV cameras? I saw them installed in your house. You’ve got one outside, right?”

Tess sighed. “Yes, we do. But it wasn’t working since the night of our engagement party, and I was too busy to call someone to repair it.”

From the party night? When a lot of people were present there?

“That means...”

“It was all planned. They did it on purpose so that they could execute their plan easily.” Ace finished for me, his nostrils flaring.

“Oh God! And we were so clueless about it,” Tess whispered.

“Did you notice anything weird about those people who came for your

dress repair?”

She shook her head. “No, all of them were there with me all the time.” Then a realization crossed over her features. “Yes, Liza came this morning to collect some files.”

“Liza?” I was shocked.

“No, babe. Don’t go there. I told her to come and collect those files for a meeting I wouldn’t be able to attend at Valencian Corp because I had some urgent work at OC Textiles. And she is one of the most trustable employees of our company. She didn’t do this,” Caleb said.

Even I agreed. She was a good person and had been a great friend of mine from the day I met her. Honest and hardworking. And then something flashed in my mind. Her weird behavior this morning around the corner and...

I sat back against my seat and stayed quiet, waiting to reach OC Textiles, while Tess and Caleb whispered sweet things to each other in the backseat. Ace matched my silence. But I could feel it, it was the calm before the storm.

* * *

AS SOON AS we reached the office after we dropped Tess and Caleb to their home, I rushed inside. Taking the elevator, I went directly to the forty-ninth floor and went to the place where I saw her talking to someone on the phone.

The bin!

Thank God it was still here, and no one took the rubbish out.

Crouching down before it, I moved some paper cups and tissues aside. My nose crinkled as I touched those tissues. Only God knew what they were used for. But I had to do this.

I just hope it’s still there.

With my fingers crossed, I moved some more things until it came into my view. The plastic bag with some white substances at the bottom.

She threw it in here.

With shaky hands, I picked it up. I hoped it was not what I thought it was. Opening the bag, I slowly took a sniff. I froze.

It was indeed drugs.

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TWENTY-FOUR: I NEED YOU



That means... Liza?

My suspicion was right. She did it. She was the one who put drugs in Caleb's car and maybe leaked information outside.

My shoulders slumped as disappointment washed over me. How could she do it? She was such a nice person and worked with Caleb for years. What would make her betray him?

I have to inform Ace about it.

Getting up, I clutched the packet tight in my hand and rushed to his office. My heart thumped in my chest. As I approached his office, I found Carter outside on his desk.

"Is he inside? I have to see him right now."

Looking up, he smiled. "He is. Though he's a little busy, as ordered, you're always free to go in without any permission."

Huh? I could just walk in just like that?

Not wanting to waste anymore time, I threw a thanks at him and barged inside.

But I was shocked witnessing the scene before me.

"—asking you for the last time, Liza. You better speak up now!"

Arthur was seated in a chair, and Ace stood in the middle of the office. His clenched jaw was a declaration of his mood. A trembling Liza stood right before him with her gaze on the floor. Silent tears streamed down her face.

What's happening? Did they get to know the truth already?

When their eyes fell on me, I didn't know what to say. His stormy gaze softened as soon as they met mine.

"Rosebud? What're you doing here?"

Gulping, I glanced at Liza. Her gaze didn't lift from the floor. Her shaking state raised pity in me. She was my friend, after all. But I couldn't just let go of what she did. It was a crime.

"I-I want to say something."

His attention was on me as concern filled his eyes. Forgotten the serious issue before him.

Nodding, he looked at his uncle over his shoulder. "Arthur, please take Liza outside. I'll be meeting you in a moment."

Acceding, as Arthur stood, my voice stopped him. "No!" Every pair of eyes landed back on me, even Liza's. "It's about the drugs. I found something."

Liza's face paled dramatically when she saw the packet in my hand.

Hanging the plastic bag before her face, I asked, "I found it from the dustbin you threw it in this morning. Guess what it is?"

She remained silent.

"What's that?" Ace touched the packet, taking a closer look.

"Drugs," I replied.

His hand jerked away from the packet as if it burnt him. Stepping away, his hands clenched into balls, shoulders tensed.

I frowned. What's wrong?

I tried to search for something in his eyes, but he was swift to move his gaze from my questioning one and turned to Liza.

“So, it's proven then. It was you who planted those... *drugs* in Caleb's car.” His expression tightened. “Why?”

She let out a sob, her hands shook at her sides.

“I said why?” His deep voice boomed across the office.

Flinching, she scurried back. “I-I was being blackmailed. H-he told me he'd frame my brother for a crime he didn't even do! It was his friend. But somehow he found out about it and started to threaten me. If I didn't do what he said, he'd send my brother to jail. A-and, h-he is just a kid. I-I couldn't let it happen. I... I had no other choice. I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!” She spilled everything in one go, shaking, sobbing, and stuttering.

For a moment, I wanted to reach out to her. But whatever she did it for, it didn't justify her actions. She couldn't just harm someone else to save her brother.

Ace's lips curled into a sneer. The vein in his temple popped out. “So, you decided to ruin my brother to save yours?”

“I-I'm sorry, boss! I'm so sorry! I didn't know what to do. I had no other way! Please forgive me,” she pleaded, her lower lip trembling.

“Forgive you?” Ace took a threatening step towards her, making her stumble back. “After what you did and were doing, God knows for how many months, you dare ask for forgiveness? One thing you should know after

working for me all these years is that I hate betrayers, Liza! And you just did that.”

When Liza could barely stand on her feet, Arthur was too relaxed in the chair, watching the whole drama to unfold. Shouldn't he be as mad as Ace after knowing what she did?

Putting a hand on his chest, I tried to hold Ace back. He seemed like he was about to burst. “Ace, calm down. Let me talk to her.”

When his furious irises met mine, I held his gaze.

“Please?”

His lips thinned in displeasure. Sending Liza another look of wrath, he nodded.

“Thank you,” I said, before turning to Liza. “You said someone was threatening you about your brother?”

She nodded, sniffing.

“Who is he?” Whoever it was, he was definitely someone who was working for Antonio Raymond, or... it was Raymond himself. Everyone knew how blindly everyone trusted her. So targeting her for his interest was a smart move by him.

She averted her gaze, hands fidgeted before her. “I-I don't know.”

“Don't you dare lie to us, Liza. Trust me, you don't want to see my dark side,” Ace warned.

She swallowed.

“Give us the name, young lady. Maybe we'll consider reducing your punishment.” Arthur stood beside us, his expression matched Ace now, almost. For a fleeting second, our gazes met, those dark eyes remained

indifferent.

“Liza, who is he?” I asked again.

She shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Trust me. I don’t know. H-he used to talk to me on the phone. Never had he met me in person or revealed his name. I don’t know who he is.” Her nails dug into her palms as she looked at me with something in her eyes. Pleading?

I went to ask her again, but the terror in her brown orbs stopped me.

“Another lie. You—”

“Ace.” I stopped him again and shook my head. “It’s all right. We know she did it. Now let’s end this right here.”

His brows furrowed, eyes flashing. “So, you’re telling me we let her go? Just like that?”

“No, she’ll get punished for whatever she did. I’m just saying it’s not our job to punish her.”

“I want that name, Emerald.” The muscle of his jaw ticked.

“We both know who it is. Directly or indirectly, Antonio is behind it. So, let’s just drop it.”

“But—”

“Ace, please,” I whispered. Taking his hand in mine, I squeezed it, trying to give him my message.

Staring at our joined hands, with clenched jaw, he gave a curt nod.

“Arthur, you know what to do.”

Nodding, Arthur replied, “I already called the cops. They’ll be here soon.”

A whimper left Liza's lips at the mention of the cops. I didn't want to feel bad, but I did. Though she was wrong, she did it for her family.

Why didn't she just inform Caleb or Ace about it? They could've helped her.

Arthur grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the office. But before walking out of the door, she glanced at me over her shoulder and threw me a look of gratitude.

"Why did you stop me?"

"Because if we force the name out of her, there is a risk the blackmailer will harm her family." I turned to him. "If they could plan something that big, think about what they would do for revenge."

He pondered for a moment. "But I would've protected her family if she gave us the name. If she gave the statement, we could get proof against him."

"But what if it's not Antonio himself? What if it's someone else he's using?"

"That's what I'm talking about." He looked into my eyes. "There's a middleman working for him who knows everything about us, and the people related to us. If we got a hold on him, we could use him against Antonio."

Oh, I didn't think like that. All I thought at that moment was Liza's fear for her family.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think of that." I bit my lip.

He shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's not your fault. You were just thinking of her family's safety. Don't worry, I will find out about the man myself."

I nodded.

Running his hand through his hair, his gaze went to the distance. His shoulders were still tense, eyes disturbed. The five o'clock shadow on his face gave him an edge.

He needed rest. I don't think after arriving in LA, he'd even a pinch of sleep. Because he was too busy being furious about my recklessness.

I sighed.

"Let me get you some coffee." I turned around and walked towards the door.

A hand grabbed my arm and pulled me back. The next thing I knew, I was wrapped up in his arms with his face in the crook of my neck.

"What're you doing?" I gasped.

Brushing his nose against my skin, he took a deep breath. "Hugging my Rosebud."

"You're tired. All you need is a cup of coffee and some rest." I tried to wiggle out. But as always, he only tightened the grip.

"You being in my arms is everything I need," he rasped in my ear, kissing the junction of my neck and shoulder.

A shiver ran down my body, along with the warmth that spread across my chest at his words.

"Stay with me for a moment, baby. I need you." His hot breath fanned my skin as he let out a tired sigh.

"I will if you don't call me 'baby.' Because I'm not your baby." But my arms slowly went around him as I rested my face against his chest. My eyes went shut, soaking in his warmth and scent, as if they had their own mind.

Hugging someone to provide comfort wasn't wrong, right?

A deep chuckle reverberated through his chest. “We’ll see.”

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TWENTY-FIVE: CHEESY GARLIC SHRIMPS



*W*e'll see? This infuriating man!

"I'm just letting you hug me because you needed it. Don't think of anything else. I'm still mad at you for what you did up in your penthouse." My cheeks flamed at my slip of tongue. Why did I need to mention it right now? My lips tingled recalling the earth-shattering kiss on his bed.

He pressed his nose against my hair. "And don't think I forgot what you did last night. It was a really reckless move. And about kissing you," he rasped, arms tightening around me, "I don't regret a second of it. I'll do it again and again, even if you don't like it."

A gasp slipped through my parted lips as he placed an open-mouthed kiss on my neck and then on my throat.

"And I know you loved it," he said in a deep husky voice, brushing his lips over my jaw.

My heart raced in my chest as hot desire shot through my veins at the touch of his scorching mouth. A tug in my lower region made me want to seek those sinful lips again, the same lips that were on mine this morning. My skin burned with his bold touch over my curves.

But even if I wanted to burn in his flames for the rest of my life with

pleasure, with all the strength I'd in me, I untangled myself from him and stepped away.

I couldn't do this again. I couldn't let my control slip again. I had to go.

When I turned around to run, his arms again shot out to me. Holding my shoulders, he pulled me back against him.

"Stop running away from me, Rose. We both know what we want. Stop escaping the truth," he murmured in my ear, stroking my mid-section.

His touch was making me unable to think. My body reacted to him strongly every time he touched me. My mind warned me to keep my distance, but my heart longed for him every time he was away. His closeness was a sweet poison to my brain. Because it loved it, even if it made it numb.

Keep it together, Em!

"I have to go. Let me go." My voice came out as a weak whisper.

"Never. I'll never let you go."

Huh? He'll keep me in his office forever?

"I have work. Let go," I huffed.

"No work today. It's your free day."

"What? Why?" I turned to look up at him.

"It's been a long day for you. Not to mention the terrible night you had. It's your day off." He brushed some tendrils away from my face. He was so close...

"Can you keep some distance? Move!" I wiggled, slapping his strong arm.

Amusement etched in those gray orbs. "Why? My closeness bothers you, Rosebud? It makes you all hot for me?" he teased.

My eyes widened. The arrogance!“Not at all! I don’t feel anything. Now let go!”

“Only on one condition.”

My brows narrowed. “No conditions!”

He shrugged. “Then no leaving.”

I groaned. “Fine! What’s it?”

The corner of his lips twitched as he kissed my forehead. My heart stuttered at the gesture. “Have lunch with me?” When I didn’t answer, he continued.“Let’s talk. I even ordered your favorite dish.”

At the mention of food, my stomach growled. I didn’t have breakfast this morning in a hurry.

I tried to ignore the amusement in his eyes. “Okay. But only because I’m hungry.”

Nodding, a smile spread across his face. A genuine one, which was very rare. “Only because you’re hungry.”

* * *

I STARED at the cheesy garlic shrimps with extra sweet and sour sauce before me. Exactly how I liked to take it. Not a usual combo, but it used to be my favorite. Our favorite. Whenever he used to visit our home, he’d bring it for me. It was our regular thing after our chess matches.

“You remembered?” I whispered, looking up at him.

Leaning forward, he put some prawns on my plate and then poured the sauce onto it. “It’s not possible for me to forget even a single thing about you, even if I want to.”

The look in his orbs was so intense it left me breathless. I had to avert my

gaze. I couldn't let him see the moisture the old memories fetched in my eyes. Picking up a prawn covered in the sauce, I put it into my mouth. Exceptional! Just as I remembered. The sweet and savory taste blasted on my tongue.

A moan left my mouth. "It's so good!"

I've missed it so much. In those years, in the process of avoiding him, I avoided everything related to him as much as possible. Even this sweet and sour heaven. It awakened too many memories.

A smile danced across his lips as he watched me, still not touching the food. "You're not eating it with your hand anymore."

Embarrassment rose from my neck to my ear. I used to hate using forks to eat them. Using my fingers, it was easy to lick the cheese and sauce. I'd do the same right now, but self-consciousness held me back.

"You don't need to be embarrassed, Rosebud. It's just me. I want you to be yourself when you're around me," he said, taking my fork from my hand.

When I didn't proceed, still hesitating, he also put his fork aside and picked a prawn using his fingers. I watched him with surprise. He never used to use his hand while eating. He thought it was gross. But now...

"What? You want me to finish them all alone?" he asked when I stared at him.

Shaking my head, I happily dug in, using my fingers. Now it tasted even better.

"Since when did you start eating with your hands?" Taking a piece of pepperoni pizza, I took a bite.

Glancing up, he watched me with a strange emotion while sucking the

sauce off his thumb. My eyes fell on his wicked mouth before I shifted my attention to food again.

“Since it started to help me keep my sanity.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Why don’t you taste the baklava? My chef is from Turkey, so it’s an authentic recipe. Here, take some. You’ll love it.” He put some of the dessert on my plate, clearly changing the topic.

I had so many questions preserved for him, and here he wasn’t even answering the simple ones.

“No, thanks.” I snapped, my temper suddenly flaring. I pushed the plate away. “I’m full.”

His brows furrowed. “What happened to you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing. Why don’t you eat the baklava? I’m sure you’ll love it,” I phrased his line.

He pressed his lips together. “I don’t need to eat it to know if I’ll love it. I do love it. Now, will you tell me what’s wrong?”

I wanted to ask the questions I asked Tess, but I didn’t know how to approach him with them.

Looking away, I replied, “Nothing is wrong. I’m done, so I gotta go.”

“You won’t leave without having dessert with me and answering my question.”

“Excuse me? And who are you to order me?”

He tilted his head. “Your boss.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh yeah! I forgot. No one can deny the king here.”

“No one, except my queen.”

My gaze snapped up to him. His stare was intense. Pushing the dishes away, he tugged me onto his lap, emanating a gasp out of me.

“And as you’re my queen, you have every right to order and deny me around, my Rosebud.” My breath hitched in my throat and heart pounded down my chest as I stared at him. Cupping my face, he said, “I’m sorry if anything I said displeased you. I didn’t mean it. I’d never do anything intentionally to hurt you.”

“I-I’m not your queen,” I mumbled, not knowing what to say.

Placing a kiss on my forehead, he peered into my soul. “You are. You can deny anything you want, you have the right to do it. But you don’t have the right to deny this one thing. So, get that into your beautiful head. *You are my queen*. My every fucking thing. My world.”

I let out a shaky breath as a fierce emotion slammed into my heart, making me breathless. His every word was like an arrow to my heart, breaking the bricks one by one of the walls I made around my heart all these years. I wanted to ask why. But I feared I wouldn’t be able to handle his answer.

“I-I want to ask something,” I said.

Kissing my eyelids, he nodded.

“How did you know Liza was the one who put the drugs into Caleb’s car?”

“Like you suggested at that board meeting. I had people look into the recent activities of the staff having a direct connection to the projects. And I just got the reports after we returned from the police station.” His features tightened. “Liza’s phone records raised suspicion. She was also one of those

people who went to Caleb's house this morning. So, it was pretty clear it was her. That plastic packet just confirmed it."

Nodding, I took in the information.

"Are—are you okay?" I bit my lip.

A crease set between his brows. "Why do you ask that?"

Clearing my throat, I said, "You were disturbed regarding something since we left the police station. I can tell it's not just Caleb, it's something else. What is it?"

Silence.

"Your reaction was strange when I told you there were drugs in that packet." I still remember how he flinched away from the packet.

His jaw clenched as his grip tightened on me. "It's a very vile thing, Emerald. People should stay away from it as much as possible," he replied. Tone hard.

What are you hiding from me?

"Any other questions you have for me?" he asked, brushing his fingers against my cheek.

My heart skipped. *This is the chance, Em. Say it. Ask him.*

"Will you tell me the truth if I ask?"

He watched me for a moment, then gave a slow nod.

"I-I want to know everything, Ace. Everything that I should know. Everything that's been hidden from me," I whispered. "I-I want to know what happened that night, seven years ago."

TWENTY-SIX: NOT HIS WOMAN



*H*e knew what I was asking. He knew very well what I wanted to know.

His feelings just didn't grow within these last few days. It had to be from our past. And if he felt something for me, why did he do that? Why did he push me away like that?

"I want to know, Ace. Will you tell me?"

Not only about the night years ago did I want to know about. What happened to his mom and his hatred for his old house also nagged at the back of my mind. I didn't forget the venom and pain reflecting in his eyes when he stared at the doors of his mom's former room at Tess's engagement party.

There were so many things I had questions about. But the answers weren't anywhere in sight.

Taking a deep breath, he took my hands and brushed his lips against my knuckles. "I will. I will tell you everything you want to know. You have every right to. But not now. At least not today."

A heaviness lifted off my chest. I felt relieved. At least he didn't deny.

"Then when?"

He opened his mouth when a knock landed on the door.

I jumped off his lap as Carter poked his head through the door. His eyes

widened, seeing my flushed cheeks and Ace's murderous glare.

"You better have a valid reason for the interruption, Carter."

His secretary visibly gulped. "Y-yes, boss. I've got the reports on—" taking a glance at me, he stopped, "—project CA."

Ace stood as soon as Carter mentioned the project. The ambience around us veiled itself into staid.

Project CA? It must be something really important.

Noticing Carter's hesitance of talking openly due to my presence, I cleared my throat, glancing at Ace. "I gotta go now. I'll see you later."

When I turned to go, he grabbed my hand for the third time. Pulling me closer, he left a peck on my forehead.

"We'll talk soon."

Staring at his gray pools, I nodded, and walked out of the room, giving Carter an awkward smile.

God, I don't know what he might be thinking catching us in that position! But I was more frustrated than I was embarrassed. Ace was just about to tell me when he was going to unravel the past before me. But Carter ruined it all.

The nagging desperation to know the truth vexed me.

I had to know everything before making a decision, but I was falling weak. I was finding myself giving up every time he was around. One look at his stormy gaze, and I was that fifteen-year-old Emerald again.

How long can I resist? Not for long.

I have to talk to Warner.

And just as I thought of him, my phone rang. His name flashed on the screen.

“Hey!” I tried to smile, but failed miserably. Nervousness and guilt swirled inside me at once. Nervous because I had no idea what to tell him. And guilt because I didn’t want to hurt him. But I had no choice. It was for the well-being of both of us.

“Hi! I’m so sorry I couldn’t pick your calls. I was in a meeting. And when I finally got some time and called you, you didn’t answer.”

“Yeah, I was... uh, a little busy,” I lied, clenching my fist.

“No problem. By the way, I called to inform you I might not be able to attend Tess’s wedding. I don’t know what’s up my boss’s ass. He just hates the word ‘leave.’ I don’t think he’ll allow me to attend the wedding. It’s too much work here,” he complained.

“What? But you can’t miss Tess’s wedding!” He had to come. Otherwise, how would I confront him? I couldn’t keep it in for that long.

This guilt will kill me.

“I’ll try my best, Em. But I can’t guarantee anything.”

I took a deep breath. “Warner, listen to me. I need to see you. I—”

“I know, I miss you too! But—”

“We need to talk. It’s really important.” I cut him off.

He went quiet.

“I-I’ve something to tell you. I can’t tell you on the phone. I need to talk to you in person.”

Silence.

Just when I thought the line went dead, he spoke up. “It’s about Achilles, isn’t it?”

A gasp slipped through my lips. How did he know?

“H-how...”

A humorless chuckle reverberated through the phone. “Isn’t it obvious? Whenever he’s around, your eyes only stay to him, even if your boyfriend is standing right next to you. You think I didn’t notice at that party and racetrack?” He scoffed. “And now that you work for him, I should’ve seen that coming. But I was too foolish to think of trusting you.”

Biting my lip, I looked down. Shame and guilt burned my vision.

“It’s not what you think. I didn’t—”

“How could you do this to me, Em? You’re ready to leave me now that you found your lost love? You forgot how I was there for you when no one was?” His voice croaked.

“How do you know he’s the one I loved?”

He laughed. “You’re always uncomfortable around him and the look in your eyes whenever you look at him, it says it all. Childhood love, a family friend. Now it all makes sense. He’s the family friend who broke your heart seven years ago, isn’t he?”

I gulped the lump in my throat. “Warner, please. Listen to me. I tried my best—”

He again cut me off. “That’s the point. You tried your best to manage to look happy with me. But you never were, were you? You were always in love with him. No matter how much I loved you, you never reciprocated my feelings. Because you never loved me, you never even tried to.”

“Warner—”

“This is not done, Em. You shouldn’t have played with my feelings like that!”

Then the line went dead.

I stared at the phone as a lone tear fell down my cheek. I just did what I was afraid of. Hurt one of my best friends. The person who always supported me in everything. I didn't think he could ever forgive me. I felt like the worst person in the entire world.

Wiping my tears, I tried to call him again, but it went unanswered. And the next time, it was unreachable.

Deciding to give him some time, I let out a breath and walked away. I didn't know what I'd tell him once he was calmer. But I had to sort it out. Convincing him wouldn't be easy, but I didn't want to lose a friend like him forever.

Maybe I should just go meet him myself? I didn't think he'd come here after our conversation. And I didn't want him to confront Ace. That's what I feared right now.

A possessive man and a hurt ex-boyfriend's face off wouldn't be good.

It'd be a chaos.

* * *

WHEN I WENT to collect some files from my office I needed to take home along to work on them, I found Matt on my way out. With a heavy carton in one hand and another small white box in the other, he struggled to walk out of the elevator. His ruffled blond hair and the perspiration on his forehead announced his misery.

“Matt? What's all this? Where are you going with these boxes?”

He huffed. “To my new office.”

“Why? Are you shifting?”

“Yeah, after whatever Liza did, she got terminated immediately. And now the boss wants me to take Liza’s place. I’m happy he showed such trust in me, but damn! My job was much easier than the secretary’s job.” He shook his head.

I remembered how Liza didn’t even get a minute to take a break most of the time. She was best at her job, but unfortunately, everything got ruined.

“Yeah, I understand. But hey, look at the positive side. Your salary would now be doubled.” I winked at him. Even though I was joking with Matt, the talk with Ace and Warner lingered in the back of my mind.

I mentally shook my head. I wouldn’t get any peace until everything was fixed.

He laughed. “Yeah, that’s why I didn’t waste a moment to say yes!”

Chuckling, I glanced at the boxes. “You need any help with these? I’m free right now.”

The eagerness was lucid in his eyes. “Yes, please! I’d be more than grateful if you do.”

Smiling, I took the smaller box he handed me and accompanied him to Liza’s former office.

Laughing at some joke he shared from his first day at job, we were just outside the empty office when we noticed Ace and Carter.

Carter was explaining something to Ace while trying to match his employer’s powerful steps. The tense jaw and clenched fists of his declared of the storm that was raging inside him.

He was... furious.

He came to a halt when his eyes met mine. The swirl of intense emotions

that ran in his gray pools was unknown to me. My smile faded.

What happened to him? Even Carter was pale and out of breath.

When Ace's gaze fell on Matt, his jaw tightened even more before they moved back to me, eyeing the box in my hands. In my peripheral vision, I saw Matt taking a step back, fumbling with the box as the boss glared daggers at both of us.

Slightly moving his head, he pointed Carter to the white parcel in my hands and in seconds, it was taken from me.

"I'll help Matt from here. Don't worry," Carter said, casting a nervous glance at Ace.

I narrowed my eyes at his boss as he came closer.

"What's with you now? And do not give me that look. I'm not scared of you!" I snapped, even if I found difficulty not to step back under his towering figure.

Placing a hand on my waist, he cupped my chin as if Carter and Matt weren't standing there, watching us. "I told you to go home and rest. Then what are you doing here? And with—" he threw another sharp look at Matt, "—one of my employees?"

"I was just helping him," I replied, confused.

"He can help himself. And if he can't, then he can just ask someone else. You don't need to help him."

"And what's wrong with me helping him?" I gave him a challenging look.

Pressing his lips together, he kept silence.

"I should go now. A lot of work is pending," Matt stuttered.

“You better!” Ace hissed, not looking away from me.

Throwing a thanks my way, he fled inside the office, followed by Carter.

All the while, our gazes didn’t break. We did the staring match for some moments, until he took a deep breath and closed his eyes, calming him down.

Once opening them back, he pressed our foreheads together. “You always make me lose my sanity, Rosebud.”

With my brows still furrowed, I said, “And you drive me insane!”

His lips twitched at the side. “Do I?”

I nodded, slowly melting. “Why so angry?”

Expression back to serious again. “I’m a very possessive man, Rosebud. I don’t like my woman laughing with some other man.”

My eyes widened at the ridiculousness. “He’s just a friend. Stop behaving like a caveman! And I’m not your woman!”

His orbs darkened as he pulled me closer, his nostrils flaring. “You are. You’re mine, Emerald Hutton. The sooner you accept it, the better.” He took a swift glance at his wrist. “I’ve got somewhere to go right now. I’ll talk to you later. This talk isn’t over yet.”

“But this is ridic—”

My words died in my throat with his mouth claiming mine in a punishing kiss. As if thousands of electric shocks ran down my entire body the moment his lips touched mine. Delicious shivers shot through my insides as his expert tongue explored every inch of my mouth.

Instead of fighting him, a whimper left me as my eyes closed on their own. And just as I was about to cling to him, he pulled away.

No...

Still dazed from the euphoria of his scorching kiss, my treacherous eyes cast him a look of irritation.

Why did he pull away?

“Nobody can take you away from me,” he growled close to my yearning lips, his eyes flashing with rage.

Carter came out of the office and stood behind him, but I was too busy thinking of his words.

Giving me a last deep kiss, he said, “I’ll see you later. Go home.”

Then he was gone, leaving me unsated and confused.

“Nobody can take you away from me.”

What did he mean by that? Somehow, I knew he didn’t say it because of Matt. There was something else. I saw it in his eyes. Rage, hatred and... fear.

Why was that?

Letting out a sigh, I touched my bruised lips.

Intolerable man! How dare he behave like he owned me? I’ll definitely kick his ass if he kisses me once more without my permission!

Huffing, I decided to head back to my office.

As I turned to another hallway, I stopped when Sierra came out of the main conference room.

The thing that had my brows knitted was her trembling state. With her arms around her, she silently wiped her cheeks, her dark hair hiding her face from me. Without looking anywhere, she put her head down and rushed away.

What’s wrong with her?

As far as I knew, there was no meeting today. So what was she doing in the empty conference room?

Then the door of the conference room opened again and came out a person I knew quite well.

Arthur Valencian.

With a blank expression on his face, head high in confidence, as usual, he shoved his hands into his pockets and followed the way Sierra just took. He didn't notice me standing at the other corner of the hallway.

Confusion webbed inside me. What the hell was he doing inside an empty conference room with Sierra? She looked pretty shaken. Was he threatening her about something? Or was there something else?

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TWENTY-SEVEN: WARNER?



“God, girl! You should seriously dump that ass boyfriend of yours! I thought he was a nice guy, but I didn’t know what a mommy’s boy he was!” Cassie cursed, shaking her head while Beth grabbed another tissue from the tissue box on her lap and blew her nose.

“It’s not that easy, Cass. I love him. We’ve been together for three years.” Beth sniffled, wiping her cheeks.

“Just because you guys have been together for three years, doesn’t mean you’ll take his mother’s shit. You deserve much more than this!” Cassie snapped.

After getting the early leave, I came directly to Cassie’s place. And though I didn’t find Beth in the same state I found her last night, she wasn’t any better. She was still a mess. After asking Cassie of what happened to her, she told me everything.

Beth and her boyfriend, Mason, were happy in their little world. Until his conservative Catholic mother stepped into the picture once she got to know that her one and only son was going to marry a non-Catholic girl. His mother’s displeasure with their relationship was creating problems between them. And being a mommy’s boy he was, as Cassie mentioned, he didn’t have the guts to go against his mother and stand by Beth and their love.

Now Beth feared he might as well break up with her, heeding his mother's advice. And that's why I found her at that bar, drunk out of her mind.

Looking down at her hands, Beth whispered, "You won't understand. I can't just leave everything like that. I-I can't live without him."

Cassie scoffed. "But it seems like he definitely can. Otherwise, he wouldn't let you leave his apartment so easily. He didn't even fight for you! And here you thought he'd come after you if you left him."

"Now I'm repenting it. His mom will use this situation against us," Beth sniffled, her lower lip trembled.

Placing my hand on hers, I squeezed gently. "Don't worry, Beth. I know Mason. That guy really loves you. Maybe he's confused between his mother and you right now. But I'm sure, as soon as he realizes his mistake of letting you go, he'll come after you. I know he will."

"Huh, I can't second that. Not everyone is Achilles Valencian," Cassie stated, rolling her eyes.

Though a blush burned my cheeks, I sent a glare her way. That girl never knew when to shut up.

She shrugged. "What? Don't give me that look. I support those men who know how to treat their women. Not some mommy's boy who lets his girlfriend go just because his mom doesn't approve of it."

Sighing, I shook my head. "I'm not siding with him. But we should give Mason some time, right? We all know how much he loves his mom. Maybe he needs some time to convince her and then get back to Beth? Yeah, letting Beth go like that wasn't appreciated at all, but Beth shouldn't just give up on her relationship like that."

She raised her brow. “Oh, I’m glad you think one shouldn’t give up on something so easily.”

I averted my eyes quickly, getting her hint.

“Okay, enough talking about my life today. I really don’t want to discuss it anymore. I need some time to think. And Em?” Beth said, turning to me. “I’m so sorry for last night. Because of me, you had to carry so much trouble. I don’t remember much, but Cassie told me everything. I’m sorry, I didn’t even realize how much I drank.”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to say sorry,” I smiled. “But you definitely should’ve thought twice before going to that shady place. It could be risky, you know? Why did you even go to such a place? As far as I know, we’ve never visited there before.”

She blew out a breath. “I just wanted to go somewhere where nobody could find me. When I went there, I was already drunk. I didn’t even realize where I was going. And when I saw this bar at the side of the road, I just went in.”

“Don’t do that again. It’s not safe.” She didn’t know what trouble we were about to fall into last night. If Ace’s guards weren’t there...

She nodded, giving me a small smile. “I won’t, I promise.”

“All right, anyone need some coffee? Because I definitely need one,” Cassie exclaimed, rising from the couch we all were sitting on.

“Tea, please,” I said.

“Of course!” Chuckling, she sauntered into her kitchen to get us some hot drinks.

Once she was back with the coffee and tea, she got herself busy

discussing her upcoming modeling project with Beth. While I, on the other hand, thought of everything that happened today.

No matter how much hurting Warner perturbed me, my treacherous mind went back to the kiss Ace and I shared in his bedroom this morning and then in the hallway.

Another blush rose from my neck to my ears. Goosebumps crawled up my skin recalling the sinful sensations I'd felt with his scorching mouth on mine. My heart missed the warmth of his arms around me, or the husky murmurs of his in my ears.

A sigh slipped through my lips.

“Where are you so lost? Mind a penny of your thoughts?” Cassie’s voice pulled me out of my trance. Her perfectly arched brows raised at me. Even Beth’s concerned hazel eyes were trained on me.

Shrugging, I looked down at my wrist, twirling my bracelet. “Do you think I’m being selfish doing this to Warner?”

I’d talked to her about the phone conversation before coming over.

“Of course not! Whatever you’re doing is good for all three of you. And even if it’s not for Achilles, you would’ve done it sooner or later.” She held my gaze. “The relationship was only one-sided, Em. And one-sided relationships don’t go for long. You and Warner both knew it, even though he’s being an ass right now.”

“His reaction is justified. Anyone would’ve reacted like this in his place. I shouldn’t have hurt him like that.” I’d tried to call him again, but his phone was still unreachable. He didn’t even reply to any of my messages.

“You don’t love him, Em. Even he knew it deep down. So the sooner he’ll accept it, the easier it’ll be for him to move on.”

“Cassie is right. Don’t fret yourself that much. It’s not your fault. You can’t make yourself fall for him, can you?” Beth said, placing her mug on the table.

She was right. But I couldn’t just shake off the guilt. Even after knowing I wouldn’t be able to love him, I got into a relationship with him. Even if it was him who convinced me to give us a chance, I shouldn’t have agreed with him. This day wouldn’t have come if I denied him that day.

“So, what did you decide? Will you go to Seattle to talk to him if he doesn’t come here?” Beth queried.

I nodded. “Yes. Honestly, I don’t want him to come here. I don’t want him to meet Ace, and there’s a possibility if he really shows up here.”

I knew Ace wouldn’t take it lightly if he sees Warner around me again. I still remember the rage and jealousy in his eyes this morning when he saw Warner calling me. And then the way he frightened Matt with his murderous glare, God! This man seriously knew how to get on my nerves.

“Oh, let him come here. I want Achilles to beat some sense into him for accusing you of betraying him. I mean, how dare he? Now he can’t force you to stay with him in a relationship, can he?” Cassie fumed, her lips curled into displeasure.

“Aren’t you siding with Ace too much these days, Cassie? What’s the matter?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“Because I know what’s good for my best friend. And who knows, maybe he bribed me with something to ship you guys?” she replied, wiggling her brows.

Shaking my head, I chuckled at her words. And Beth joined me.

It wasn’t impossible Ace would do something like that. He has done

crazier things before. Our mirth took a break when my mobile buzzed. A message popped up on the screen.

Seeing my sudden change of mood, Cassie straightened. “Who is it?”

“It’s Warner,” I replied, my eyes locked on the screen. Anxiety latched on my mind.

“What did he say?”

I looked up at her. “He’s coming.”

* * *

ONCE I WAS DONE blow drying my hair, I padded into my closet to choose a dress for tonight’s event.

Tonight, our company will sign the final contract for the upcoming deal with the Arabs. The defamation Antonio Raymond tried to stamp on Valencians was cleared sooner than it was even possible. Ace didn’t even let the news of Caleb’s getting arrested spread across the media. Though some of the journalists were present there that day, clearly, Achilles Valencian knew how to deal with troublemakers.

Now that Liza accepted her crime, everything went back to normal. The Arabs were too eager to work with our company. And on the occasion of our coming together with a project, they invited us for dinner at the hotel they were staying at.

Mr. Hakimi specifically requested my presence at the dinner with Ace tonight. And to my surprise, the boss wasn’t happy to tag me along. He didn’t want me to go there.

But he couldn’t dictate me in this matter. I was too excited to try the traditional Arab dishes to heed his grumbling. So he agreed at last, but only on one condition. He would come pick me up and during the entire time of

our stay there, I'll have to cling to him.

Not to forget, I'm not allowed to talk to any Arab guy about anything that doesn't concern work.

Freaking crazy man!

Shaking my head at his ridiculous behavior, I searched for a suitable outfit for the night. Lots of choices but not impressive enough for me to decide.

Then something caught my eye between those heaps of clothes.

Pulling it out, I ran my hand over it. An involuntary smile tugged at my lips. His T-shirt. The same one I borrowed to change into after my blouse incident. I still didn't return it to him. I didn't want to. One secret maybe I wouldn't ever tell him, I sometimes wear it at night when I can't sleep. Oddly, it comforted me.

He was never going to get it back. Though I didn't think he'd mind if I didn't return this one shirt. He didn't have any shortage of clothes.

Folding it, I placed it in its previous place and took out the black dress from the back of the row. It was a dress Tess forced me to buy when I went shopping with her.

A thigh length sleeveless dress with a sweetheart neckline. Simple yet classy. This was a bad choice for this cool weather like tonight, but...

I bit my lip to hold back the smile that threatened to spill.

Walking back inside my room, I got ready for the evening.

My heart skipped when the doorbell rang.

He was here.

Blowing out a breath, I checked myself one last time in the mirror. My

curves were winking at me due to the perfect fitting. The sweetheart neckline put a part of my cleavage on display when my wavy dark brown locks fell freely down my shoulders. And the dark smoky eyes, nude makeup and red lipstick finished my look.

Satisfied with my makeup, I grabbed my clutch and phone.

At the mention of the phone, I remembered I didn't check it the whole day due to my busy schedule at the office. It's been two days since I got that message from Warner, but I didn't hear anything back from him since then.

I did a quick check on my phone. No calls or messages from him. I didn't know what was going on in his head. Was he really going to come?

I will call him again later. I have to hurry now. Ace is waiting for me.

Putting the phone inside my purse, I rushed downstairs, as much as I could with my high heels. Once I was before the closed door, I smoothed my hair once more. My heart raced at the thought of his reaction after he would see me. Nervousness and excitement burst through my veins.

I wonder what this night has in store for me.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, and stepped outside.

TWENTY-EIGHT: RED FREAKING WITCH!



When I was finally outside, I was frozen in my place. The cold breeze that kissed my skin wasn't the culprit. It was him. Looking like he just dived out of a magazine, he stood there leaning against his car, waiting. The crease between his brows was the proof of his impatient.

Even comparing him to those models printed on magazines would be an insult to his beauty. He was... beyond gorgeous.

Flaunting a navy-blue Armani suit, paired with a charcoal black shirt beneath and a pair of polished expensive shoes, he took my breath away. As always.

Noticing me, he stood straight. "You're five minutes late." And then his eyes went to the rest of my body. My skin burned under that heated stormy gaze of his as they ran over me.

His strong jaw clenched, nostrils flared as he let out a curse. Gray eyes darkened.

"You aren't seriously going to wear that in front of all those men, are you?" he asked in his deep Greek accent, pointing at my dress. His eyes flickered to the small display of my cleavage and legs again, hands curling into balls.

“Why? What’s wrong with this dress?” I feigned innocence.

Striding closer, he pinned me with his hard stare. “You did this on purpose, didn’t you? You wanted to get on my nerves.”

My eyes widened slightly. Oh, so he figured it out.

Now, Mr. Valencian, how does it feel when someone irritates you out of your mind?

I gave him a look of horror. “What are you talking about? Why’d you think that? I wore it because I liked it. I didn’t think of you when choosing this dress! Don’t be delusional!”

Stepping closer, he gently cupped my chin. “Let’s not waste anymore time arguing, shall we? Go and change it. We’re getting late for dinner.”

My eyes narrowed. “I’m not changing this dress.”

“Until you’re changing this dress, we aren’t leaving.” His tone was serious.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I shrugged. “I’m fine with curling under my blanket right now and watching Netflix.”

“Rosebud.” With warning etched in his voice, he waited for me to obey.

But I was too comfortable in my place.

His lips curled into displeasure as he let out a curse. “Fine. Let’s go. But I swear, it won’t be my fault if someone goes to their early grave tonight.”

“You won’t dare!” Casting him a look, I passed him and sauntered into the warmth of the car.

Thank God he couldn’t see through my skin. Otherwise, he’d definitely notice how badly my bones were shivering with cold.

Irritating him had cost me much more than I thought.

Once inside the car, he shrugged off his coat and put it around my shoulders, still scowling.

“I-I don’t need it!”

“I can see that very well. Now put it on and stay quiet,” he ordered with a grunt, adjusting the heater.

I didn’t argue anymore.

Once we were outside of The Blue Paradise, the hotel the Arabs were staying at, he got out and opened the door for me. Stepping outside, when I was about to give him his coat back, his hands stopped me.

“No, keep it on.” Securing the coat around me, he took my hands in his. “They’re cold.”

I didn’t pull my hands from his much warmer ones as he rubbed them in his. My heart fluttered with warmth. My silence remained even when he took my hands and kissed them, mumbling how I needed a pair of gloves.

I wished I could just hide myself from the cold into the cocoon of his arms and never pull away.

“Mr. Valencian!”

At the voice of Mr. Hakimi, I jerked my hands away from him and took a step back. Composing myself, I flashed the approaching old man a smile.

“Welcome, Mr. Valencian and Ms. Hutton! I’m glad you both could join us tonight for dinner.” He shook hands with Ace, then with me.

“Our pleasure, Mr. Hakimi. It wasn’t possible that you invited us with such respect and we wouldn’t show up.” Ace wrapped an arm around me. A blush kissed my cheeks when the old man’s observing eyes caught the gesture.

“I’m glad you did. Now please, come in. It’s freezing out here.”

But before we could even move, a flash of red engulfed him in a hug, causing his arm to fall from my shoulder.

“Oh my God! You’re finally here, Mr. Valencian! I was waiting for you for so long. I almost thought you wouldn’t show up!” Pulling away, she threw him a red lipped seductive smile.

My fists clenched.

The secretary of Mr. Hakimi. Cindy. How could I forget her?

My eyes cut through her from head to toe. She wore a red gown with a high slit and neckline so deep if she lowered herself a little, her assets would spill out. Was red her favorite color?

The nickname was perfect for her. Red witch.

With a hardened face, Ace gave her a curt nod before turning to pull me back into his arms. But his disinterest seemed to do nothing to her shamelessness as her eyes eyed him up and down.

My nails dug into my palms.

“Please come inside, Mr. Valencian, Ms. Hutton,” Mr. Hakimi said with a tight smile before turning to Cindy, his eyes harboring warning. “And Cindy, why don’t you recheck everything in the meantime so our guests won’t have to face any inconvenience?”

Tearing her gaze from Ace, she looked at her employer and nodded before sauntering away. Her hips swayed as she walked.

Where did Mr. Hakimi even find this witch?

Once we were inside, we met the other Arabs, and Arthur, who was already present. I didn’t know he was supposed to attend. The Arabs

welcomed us with warm regards, drinks were served. As always, Ace didn't have any. And the whole time his arm was around me, clutching me to him firmly.

“You don't need to tie me with you all the time, you know? I'm not a kid. I won't get lost,” I whispered as another man came up to us and started a conversation.

His form tensed for a fleeting second before he composed himself. Even though it was just for a second, I noticed it. What was that?

He nodded at something the man said and tightened his hold on me. “I know. But you'll have to stay in my clutch, whether you like it or not. Think of it as your punishment for wearing this ridiculous dress. You should be happy I'm not pulling every man's eyes out of their sockets in this room for staring at something that's mine.” His words came out as a hiss as he murmured in my ear.

I shook my head at him. “You're a crazy man. Do you know that, Achilles Valencian?”

Holding my gaze, a smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. “Oh, you have no idea.”

Something flipped inside me at the emotion that flashed across his eyes. It was unknown to me. The more time we were spending with each other, he was opening up to me. He showed me his emotions, his state of mind. But I always felt there was still something I didn't know. Something he hid deep inside. He held himself back every time he was around me. As if hiding a vast part of him. And this emotion that just washed over his eyes, it was a glimpse of that side he kept a secret from me.

I couldn't comprehend the emotion his gaze held. Whatever it was, it was

profound enough to send a shiver down my spine.

Our gazes broke away from each other at the voice of Mr. Hakimi as he invited us to join them in the entertainment room. And I was surprised to see they especially organized a belly dance in our honor. Though I didn't like those stunning beauties in their provocative dance attires, I was excited to behold the famous traditional dance.

Traditionally, their costumes weren't that revealing, but on foreign lands, things tend to change a bit. Because it had become one of the most popular dance practices among folks.

The dance started once we took our respective seats. Me, of course, beside Ace, while Arthur enjoyed the show with Mr. Hakimi and others. Between the dazzling dance and enticing Arabic music, I kept glancing at Ace from time to time to see if his eyes were watching more than the dance. But he was too busy playing with my hair and taking a whiff every once in a while. He didn't even pay any attention to the show.

To my utter surprise, I didn't mind him doing that. I was happy he wasn't looking at those beautiful dancers. Even at that witch, who glared at me from afar, watching Ace's attention on me.

An involuntary smirk tugged at my lips as my eyes locked with hers. Her facial features only twisted more.

As soon as I realized what I was doing, I looked away and concentrated on the dance.

What's wrong with me? I shouldn't be behaving like a jealous girlfriend.

But I couldn't help it. This ugly sensation seemed to rise its head every time some other woman whirled around him like a bee. I wanted to hide him somewhere every time one of those bees came into my sight.

“What’s the matter, Rosebud? You seem to have lost interest in the dance,” he asked, his voice close to my ear.

I didn’t turn to him. “What told you that?”

“That adorable scowl on your face. It looks like you’re planning to murder someone in a very innocent way.” His tone was filled with amusement.

This time I did turn to him, frowning. His face was inches away from mine. “It’s nothing like that. And no one can murder in an innocent way. A murder is a murder. And it’s always vicious.”

A deep chuckle left his lips. Leaning in, he kissed my nose. “My Rosebud can.”

“How?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“With those turquoise eyes of yours.” His voice turned husky as he pinned me with his hot gaze. “Just like they did to the conscience of my heart and turned it into a slave of theirs.”

My heart stopped beating down my chest as I sucked in a breath. A delicious shiver ran down my entire being. Those stormy eyes of his engulfed me whole in their flames.

“Mr. Valencian!” Mr. Hakimi’s voice tore his attention from me. “Sorry for the interruption, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a word with you.” The old man threw me a glance of apology.

I didn’t miss the unreadable look Arthur gave me from the other corner of the room. His face was blank of any emotion.

“Sure, no problem.” Ace turned to me. “Stay here. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be back in a minute, all right?”

I rolled my eyes, my wild heart still thumping under my rib cage. “I can take care of myself. You go.”

Still hesitating, he nodded. “Just don’t go anywhere alone. If you need anything, call me.”

When he was finally assured I wouldn’t go anywhere, he left with Mr. Hakimi. But not before sending me another glance.

I let out a deep breath I didn’t know I was holding.

Grabbing my purse, I got up and asked the passing waiter where the bathroom was. Once I was away from the hubbub, into the bathroom, I let the cool water calm my nerves.

Closing the tap, I grabbed some tissues and dabbed onto my face. My eyes met the reflection of mine.

With every passing day, he was breaking my walls. The boundaries I made around my heart to keep everyone away from it. Especially him. But I was finding them crumbling, crumbling with his presence, actions, and words.

How long could I hold myself from falling again?

“Tsk, tsk! Look who I got here!”

TWENTY-NINE: OMINOUS



Whirling around, I came face to face with the red witch. With arms crossed over her chest, she sized me up and down with her cat eyes. Her nose crinkled with disgust.

“I don’t know what he saw in you. But I have to say, you trapped him pretty well in your web.”

Biting my inner cheek, I cast the tissue into the bin and turned to her. “And guess what? I didn’t even have to throw myself on him like a shameless woman to trap him. Seems like that trick got quite old now.”

Her face turned red, matching her dress, eyes flashing. “So, you used the bed then? Otherwise, a man like him wouldn’t even look at you if not you pleased him well. Am I right? Where did you take your classes to please a man like that, anyway? He seemed so lost in you.”

My hands fisted into balls. “From the same place you took your PhD. I’m sure you got your answers. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go back inside. He must be looking for me.”

Leaving her flushed with rage, I walked out of the bathroom.

Bitch! How dare she? Oh, how I wanted to pull her hair out of her scalp!

Fuming in anger, I passed a couple wrapped around each other, pulling at

their partner's clothes out of desperation. Noticing me, they jumped away from the other like even the mere proximity burned them. Their faces flamed crimson as they shuffled into their places.

Saving them from the embarrassment, I got out of the corridor as fast as I could. Even my own cheeks grew hot at someone's personal spectacle.

As I passed a floor-to-ceiling window, something caught my eye. Halting, I neared the window and peeked outside. Two figures stood there under the shadow, down in the hotel garden.

I squinted. I... knew them.

Was that—Arthur?

When he ran his hand through his hair, the numerous rings on his fingers lustered under the moon. It was indeed him. Along with him was a figure of a woman, but I couldn't make out her face properly from this far.

Who was he talking to?

The woman's shoulders shook as she placed her hand over her mouth. I didn't know Arthur could crack a joke. All I saw him do was stay emotionless and cold.

Deciding it was none of my business, I was about to go back inside when the woman stepped behind and walked away from him with her arms wrapped around her. When the hotel's walkway's light fell on her face, a gasp slipped through my lips.

Sierra?

When she wiped her cheeks, I understood she wasn't laughing, she was crying.

What was she doing here with Arthur? As far as I knew, her presence

wasn't required here at all. Nor was she invited.

Even the other day I saw her with him. After that day, when I went to talk to her about it, I found out she took a week's leave due to sickness. And now she was here. She didn't look sick to me at all. She looked exhausted, though.

Strange. What was going on between them?

I needed to talk to her. Something was wrong, I could feel it.

I watched her as she rushed into the parking lot and then got into her car before driving away. When I looked back at Arthur, who still stood there, his gaze was already set on me.

My breath caught in my throat.

His dark, blank eyes sent an ominous shiver down my spine. But I didn't let it show on my face as I held his gaze with my chin high.

A small smirk tugged at the edge of his lips. As if... mocking me. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he turned around and left.

What was it about this man that always unnerved me? He sounded like a really kind and helpful person from Tess, Caleb, and Ace's mouth. But he didn't feel like that to me.

Still processing the meaning of his smirk, I pulled away from the window and walked back inside.

Once I was back in the hall, the dance was over. But Ace was nowhere in sight. He was warning me not to go anywhere, and here he was, the one who disappeared.

The small crowd around the place now enjoyed drinks and light conversations under the slow music. I found Mr. Hakimi with two Arabs in a corner.

Approaching them, I cleared my throat, and their attention fell on me. “I apologize for the interruption, Mr. Hakimi. But did you see Ace—I mean, Mr. Valencian?”

A kind smile appeared on his face. “He had an urgent call to attend to. Don’t worry, your man is still here.” He winked.

My eyes widened at his words as a blush crept up my neck. My man? I wrung my knuckles, glancing around. “Uh, can you please tell me which way he’d gone?”

He nodded, chuckling at my bashfulness.

Following his pointed way, I left to find him after I thanked the old man.

Everyone was here, but I couldn’t find a glimpse of him.

Getting out of the hall again, I continued my search. The almost empty hallways gave royal vibes with high ceilings, golden and white walls where huge antique paintings were hung. The dark red curtains of the floor-to-ceiling windows kissed the marble floor. I was momentarily lost in the beauty of the paintings until I bumped into someone.

“I’m so sorry—” My words caught in my throat, realizing who the person was.

The red freaking witch. And...her eyes were filled with tears?

Her eyes widened as soon as she saw me. And the crestfallen face disappeared, replaced by a smug smile as she wiped the slight red smudge from the corner of her lips.

I frowned.

Flashing me a smirk, she glanced over her shoulder and then walked away.

My eyes fell on the person standing far at the end of the corridor. His gaze was fixed on me, expression unreadable. With my heart palpitating in my chest, I walked to him. My legs hesitated. An ill feeling rose in the pit of my stomach.

As I neared him, my gaze fell onto his ruffled dark locks, and then... the red marks on his neck.

My heart stopped.

I didn't even flinch when my nails pierced into my palms, as my eyes didn't move from the marks of lipstick. Lipstick of that bitch!

"Wherever the gears of your brain are turning to, stop right there. It's not what you're thinking it is," he said, not even an emotion flashing over his stoic face.

The clench of my heart made my eyes burn. My blood boiled in my veins.

"These marks of her lipstick prove that I'm thinking just fine! You don't need to hide anything, Mr. Valencian. After all, you're a single man free to do anything with anyone!" I spat out the words.

A muscle of his jaw ticked. "I said it's not what you're thinking it is. Nothing happened between us. She threw herself at me and I pushed her away. That's it."

"Oh, really?" I snapped, stepping closer. My voice rose. The raging fire inside me didn't let me process his statement. I was too mad for any kind of understanding. "She threw herself at you and you pushed her away? Your disheveled hair and these marks came just like that? Do you think I believe that?"

"Rosebud," he warned, expression hardening. "I'm telling you for the last time. Nothing happened between us. She tried to kiss me, but I pushed her

away. Nothing more.”

The word ‘kiss’ had me see red.

“S-she tried to kiss you?”

A whole different emotion ran through me. Insecurity. Though whatever I called her, she was a stunning woman. More beautiful than me, more poised than me. She was everything a man would ever want in a woman.

He must’ve felt something.

My heart squeezed at the thought.

I gulped the thickness of my throat as I pushed down my anger. I had no right to feel that way.

“W-whatever. I don’t care what you do or not.” I averted my eyes. “It’s your personal life. I don’t have any say in this. Forget I reacted this way. Let’s go inside. Everyone is waiting for us.”

His eyes flashed as I turned around and began to stride away.

A gasp slipped through my mouth when I was pulled back and pinned against the wall, his body pressed against mine. My breath caught in my throat with our faces just an inch away.

“Didn’t you hear what I told you? Nothing happened between us,” he growled, lips curling into a snarl. “And don’t you dare show me your back after you just indirectly accused me of cheating on you! Fuck! I can’t even think of another girl, let alone letting one come close to me!”

He had my hands pinned on the wall on both sides of my head, his hot breath falling on my lips.

Pressing our foreheads together, he closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he opened those gray oceans again. “How can I be single when I have my

Rosebud in my life?”

My lower lip trembled as a lone tear escaped my eye. Jealousy and insecurity burned my heart. “Y-you didn’t feel anything when she touched you?”

He kissed the tear away. “Her hands were only on me for a second before I put her in her place. And to give your answer, no. The only feeling I felt was disgust.” Cupping my cheeks, he peered into my soul. “This heart only beats for you, my rose. It only knows to react to your touch, no one else’s. I belong to you, just like you belong to me.”

With waves of emotions crashing into my chest, another tear rolled down my cheek as I slammed my lips against his. His arms wrapped around me while my hands snaked around his neck, getting lost in his thick hair as our mouths molded into an intense passion for each other.

Fingers digging into flesh and hands tugging the hair, we were lost into a bubble of desire and possession. I pulled him as much closer as I could. There wasn’t even an inch of space between us. I showed with my actions what my words couldn’t say. Waves of pleasure ran down my body when our tongues joined. My moans were desperate while his groans just intensified the tug in my lower stomach.

Seeming to be losing his control, his hand moved to my back and cupped my behind, pulling me closer, if possible.

“My rose,” he groaned as his hand roamed over my curves. “You’re driving me crazy!”

Even if I didn’t want to pull away, my lungs gave up. Detaching my lips from his, I rested my forehead against his. With closed eyes, I took erratic breaths. My heart drummed in my chest.

He kissed the corner of my lips and then on my neck. Giving him more access to my neck, I leaned against him. After placing a last kiss on my shoulder, he wrapped his arms around me with my face in his chest. The fast rhythm of his heart almost lulled me to sleep.

When sense kicked into my head, though I was shocked how I initiated the kiss this time, I didn't pull away. Instead, hugging him tight, I snuggled my face more into his warmth.

We stayed that way until I broke the silence.

“Why did you do that seven years ago?”

His shoulders tensed at the mention of that night.

“What do you mean, exactly?” His voice was tight.

I slightly pulled away, enough to look up at him. Gathering some courage, I finally asked, “D-did you know of my... feelings for you?”

With a clenched jaw, he nodded. “Yes. I knew everything.”

My heart skipped. Even if I knew of his acknowledgement, his admission up front was a whole different thing.

Now I detached myself completely from him. Balling my fists, with a tightness around my throat, I asked him, “Then why did you break my heart?”

Silence.

He watched me with unrecognizable emotions in his eyes.

“I-I saw you with Tess that night. I know, just because I had feelings for you didn't mean you'd also feel the same. But... your words, your actions said you did feel something. Then why? Why did you do that?” I was scared. Uncertain. Maybe everything I presumed was wrong. Maybe I got the wrong

meanings out of his actions. I was afraid he'd start laughing at my face at any moment and call my illusions off. But he didn't.

The only thing he did was stare at me with the utmost silence.

"I know I can be wrong. Maybe I just assumed everything and—"

"You're not wrong." He cut me off.

My breath hitched.

"I always wanted you." His eyes darkened as he said, "I've always wanted you for myself."

I opened my mouth and then closed, too shocked to say anything. Finally, I breathed out, "Then why?"

Again, silence.

"Why Ace?"

He tilted his head. "You want to know?"

I nodded.

"Come on a date with me. And you'll get all your answers."

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THIRTY: ESCAPING HIM



Twirling the spoon into the mug, I mixed the sugar with my tea. Steam stopped dissipating from the beverage, but my moving the spoon didn't halt. I was too lost in my thoughts.

I've always wanted you for myself.

Come on a date with me, and you'll get all your answers.

His words haven't left my head since last night. Even at night, I couldn't sleep due to his revelation and proposal. Proposal to go on a date with him. And as usual, not being able to give him any answers or make a decision, I ran away.

After returning home, when I recalled everything that happened at the hotel, I was stunned by my own doings. The jealousy, the kiss, and the demand for answers.

Last night I was too brave to pull off the stunts I never thought I'd do. But the bravery didn't stay long when it was time to do something.

It wasn't my fault. First I kissed him, and then I asked him the questions that had been running in my head for so long. Yes, I was going to do it sooner or later, but I wasn't prepared for it yet. It just came out of me. And when he opened his mouth, I was shocked and surprised. His condition to disclose the

truth had me dumbfounded.

Being confused and overwhelmed with emotions, I didn't know what to say.

I still didn't know.

I'd ignored his calls and messages. I was killing time so I didn't have to go to the office early today. Why? Because I was too nervous to face him.

The blare of my phone snapped me out of my trance.

My heart skipped.

Is it him again?

Relief flooded over me at once when I read Cassie's name flashing over the screen.

"Hey, what's up?" Setting the spoon away, I took a sip of the cold tea.

"The disinterest of your voice says that you aren't happy getting my call?" Her tone was accusing.

I rolled my eyes. "It's nothing like that. Just having a bad day."

She hummed, "Had a fight with your Romeo?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Duh! Who'd be the Romeo of our Juliette other than Achilles Valencian?"

I shook my head at her. Even being sassy and sarcastic, she was into Shakespeare's romance.

"No, we didn't have any fights. But..." I sighed.

"Spill!"

I spilled everything to her. And she listened without interruption.

“I don’t know, Cassie. I’m so confused. I can’t just go out on a date with him. And I know him. He won’t tell me anything if I don’t agree.”

“What’s wrong with going out with him? You guys are jumping on each other’s bones any chance you get, anyway. What’s the issue?”

My cheeks burned at her remark. “We don’t jump on each other! Definitely not me! It’s always him!”

She snorted. “Yeah, right! Who initiated the kiss last night?”

I bit my lip. “I—the situation was different then. I... I was...”

“Jealous?”

“Yes,” I said, swirling the liquid in the mug. What was the point of lying? She knew everything, anyway.

“That means you admit you still want him?”

My heart stuttered.

Did I?

The fuzzy feeling in my tummy gave me the answer.

“It’s not that easy, Cassie. I still didn’t have the talk with Warner,” I uttered the main reason I was facing so many difficulties to give Ace an answer. And wasn’t it too soon? I mean, we were just getting to a level of understanding each other, even not there yet if I was speaking frankly. Even if Warner wasn’t the issue, wouldn’t it be too soon to go out with him? Everything was moving so fast between us that it overwhelmed me.

“Now, where did Warner come from? I thought he already knew of you and Ace,” she squeaked.

I didn’t know what problem she had with Warner. She just hated the idea of him being between me and Ace.

“He has an idea about us, but we still haven’t had an official break-up. So, technically, he is still my boyfriend,” I explained. “I can’t just go on a date with someone else while still being in a relationship with another.”

“Fuck this shit! This isn’t a relationship! You don’t love him, and he knows it, end of story. Don’t spoil your real opportunities for the fake ones!” she snapped.

“Cassie,” I cautioned. “Though I wasn’t ever really in the relationship, our friendship was real. And I already did wrong enough to him by letting Ace close to me. I can’t do more. I can’t start something new by keeping the former hanging.”

“So, where the hell is he? He was supposed to come here and talk to you, right? When is he coming?”

I set the mug down and rubbed my neck in frustration. “I don’t know. He’s still mad at me. All he told me was he’d be here soon. That’s it. We haven’t talked since that day.”

I didn’t even know where he was. He wasn’t receiving my calls or responding to any messages. I even called his cousin, but he had no idea when he was coming to LA.

“Then what are you gonna do now?” she asked.

I shrugged, sighing. “I don’t know.”

“You can’t ignore Achilles for long, you know that, right? You’ll have to face him today or tomorrow. He’s not going to wait for your answer that long. Knowing his obsession with you, you should be lucky he isn’t already knocking your doors down to get a yes out of you.”

A giggle bubbled up my throat as I shook my head. I was relieved he didn’t do such a thing.

My eyes fell on the fresh flowers in the kitchen vase that arrived for me this morning, just like everyday. Even when he must be mad that I was ignoring him, he didn't forget to send those red roses to me. At first, Mom and Dad were curious about those flowers, but now they kind of got used to them.

"All right, I'll talk to you later." I glanced at the watch. "Gotta go to the office now."

"Don't forget to keep me updated."

"I won't."

* * *

THE FIRST THING I did after arriving at the office was to ask the watchman if Ace was present. And I had to curse my luck knowing he'd arrived earlier than his usual time. And already one of the unlucky employees got fired due to his extremely sour mood.

I was certain I was the reason behind his ill temper.

Gulping the nervousness down, I kept my chin high and walked inside the building.

I hoped I wouldn't have to face him today.

But as soon as I wished that, the elevator's doors slid open, and he walked out. Running behind him were some black-suited men, busy explaining something desperately.

The tightness of his jaw and a day's old stubble announced his mood. Anyone with a sane conscience wouldn't want to cross his path today.

With widened eyes, I turned around and ran to the staircase before he could notice me. Climbing the stairs was a good exercise, anyway. But of

course, my legs didn't let me listen to my mind and took the elevator to the fifth floor.

Once I was at my destination, for the first time, I pushed the thought of him to the back of my mind. I had something else important to do.

I went to look for Sierra.

Even with so many things, her exhausted, pale face didn't slip my head. Nor did Arthur's mocking smirk he threw me as a challenge. Even though I could be wrong, I could feel it in my gut that something wrong was going on. And I needed to find it out.

But again, I didn't find her at the office. Matt was the closest friend of hers after Liza in the office, so I asked him her whereabouts. But even he didn't know much about her, except her not being herself for the past few weeks.

"What do you mean?" I asked him, outside of his current office.

He shrugged. "Her always bubbly personality was gone, as if something was really troubling her."

"Didn't you ask her what it was?" My brows furrowed. I had this doubt that whatever it was, Arthur had something to do with it.

"I did. But she didn't tell me anything, Em. She can be really secretive when it comes to her personal life," he replied, seeming to wonder himself. "Anyway, why do you ask?"

"Uh, nothing. I haven't seen her for a few days. I heard she is sick. So, I thought to ask you, as you're quite close to her," I lied.

I couldn't tell him my doubts. Arthur was a very reputable man in the office. I couldn't just bluff anything without solid proof. It was just my

intuition that he shouldn't be trusted.

He nodded. "Yeah, due to ill health, she took a few days off. But don't worry, I'm sure she'll get better soon. I'll let you know if I hear anything from her."

I smiled. "Please do. Anyway, I'll see you later. Got some work to do."

Again nodding, he went inside his office.

I tried to call her last night, but she didn't pick up. She even ignored my messages and emails. It wouldn't bother me this much if I didn't see her with Arthur. And seeing tears in her eyes at both times I found her around him didn't sit well with me.

She looked scared.

What was going on?

I let out a breath. I wished she would tell me.

Shaking my head as I pushed the door of my office open and padded inside, a gasp slipped through my lips. My eyes widened.

I was running away from the devil, and here he was waiting for me in my own cave. With one hand in his pocket, he stood before my desk, touching a picture of me and Tobias. Putting the frame in its previous place, he turned around. Dark, stormy gray eyes fell on me.

"W-what are you doing here?"

His head tilted to the side. "Did you really think you could escape me for that long? In my own office?"

THIRTY-ONE: TIME TO MAKE A DECISION



“*W*hat are you talking about? I’m not escaping you,” I said, not meeting his eyes.

“Really? Then what was that at the lobby?” Gaze hard.

Surprise lit inside me. He saw me?

Damn! I knew I’d gained weight. My fat ass couldn’t even run faster!

“W-what was what? What did I do now?” I feigned innocence.

His lips pressed together in annoyance. “You ran away seeing me.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was already late for the office. A lot of work was piled up. I was busy. You’re mistaken.”

“Busy talking to my employee?” he asked, nostrils flaring.

My eyes widened. How did he know I was talking to Matt? Was he keeping an eye on me now? Could this man be any weirder?

“You don’t have time for me, but you have time to talk to another man?” I staggered back as he took slow steps towards me, like a predator approaching his prey. “How many times do I have to tell you I don’t like seeing you with other men? You seem to be fond of him too much.” A muscle of his jaw ticked, hands curled into fists.

In another time I’d have told him off, that he didn’t have any right to

decide who I would talk to and who I wouldn't. But at that moment, I decided to cool him down first.

“I was just talking to him about work. And yes, I do like him. But just as a friend. Nothing else.”

My heart skipped when my back hit the wall and I realized I had no other way to escape with him standing just a hand away from me. I was stuck between him and the wall. Closing the rest of the distance, he put his hands on both sides of my head on the wall, trapping me completely.

Leaning closer, he said, “And it's better if it remains that way. It'd be good for him.”

I frowned at his warning. “What's wrong with you? You're behaving like a caveman!”

My breath hitched as he pulled me against him, resting his forehead against mine. The heady scent of his had me light-headed. “You're mine, Rosebud. And I can be worse when it comes to you.”

Staring in his stormy grays, I went speechless at the intensity of his words.

“I have been going mad since last night, thinking about what your answer would be. You weren't picking up my calls or answering my messages.” He sighed, brushing his thumb on my cheek. “I was even outside of your house last night, but seeing the lights of your room off, I left.”

I gasped. “You were outside my house? Why?”

“For your answer.”

Oh!

I averted my eyes from his piercing ones, biting my lip. “I-I can't go on a

date with you just like that.”

“Why?” His tone was somber.

“Because...” I trailed off, not knowing how to give him an answer.

His shoulders tensed as his nostrils flared. “Is it for that boyfriend of yours? That boy is still in your life?”

I remained silent.

With his lips curling into a sneer, his arms tightened around me. “When will you stop denying us? When will you let that sham of your relationship go and accept the truth? The truth that you belong to me?”

When I still didn’t say anything, closing his eyes, he let out a breath. When those gray pools opened again, it wasn’t anger that I witnessed. It was pain and exhaustion.

My heart clenched at being the reason for his pain.

Cupping my cheeks, he grazed his lips at the curve of mine. I let out a shaky breath at the tingling sensation his touch left behind. My heart pounded beneath my chest.

Was going to kiss me again?

“Tell me you don’t feel what I’m feeling right now. Tell me you don’t feel anything for me, for us. Tell me your heart still doesn’t beat for me,” he said, grazing his lips against mine. Just a slight brush and I was leaning for more.

“Ace...” a breathy whisper left me.

With his intent eyes on my lips, he rasped, “I’m going to kiss you now. If you kiss me back, I’ll take it as a yes that your heart still belongs to me. And if you don’t... then I’ll take that as a no.”

My eyes closed on their own as his soft, firm lips pressed against mine and molded around me into a slow, passionate kiss. My whole body trembled at the sensations that ran through me, at our mere lips touching. Fireworks exploded in my nerves. I didn't know what would happen when he'd do more...

I tried my best not to respond to his kiss. But when he sought my lips like they were his salvation, the words he said turned vogue in my head. Throwing my arms around his neck, I pulled him closer and returned his affection with equal urgency and passion.

Groaning, he pinned me against the wall and put my hands above my head with one of his hands, keeping them in place. And with the other one, he felt my curves. My body arched into his touch, wanting more.

But as if fate had some issues with my wishes, he pulled away, leaving me whimpering.

The words 'come back' were at the tip of my tongue, but I was certain my eyes were enough to display my desperation.

With a tiny smirk tugged at his lips, he cupped my chin, his breathing still ragged. "So, it's a yes, then. Now I assume you shouldn't have any problem going out on a date with me."

"I-I..." I was still recovering from the sensations he made me feel. My mouth couldn't form words. My heart still thumped wildly in my chest.

I kissed him back.... But it wasn't fair! How could I stay sane when he had his mouth and hands on me? His mere proximity was enough to make my thoughts jumbled.

Gripping my neck, he smashed his lips against mine into another hard but fast kiss. Pulling away, he peered into my gaze.

“Now that it’s clear who owns your heart, I want my answer before evening. You have only a few hours to give me a yes. Because I won’t wait for long.” With finality engraved in his voice, he glanced at my mouth one last time before walking out of my office.

And I just stood there like a statue. Still reeling from everything he just did and said. He wouldn’t wait for long? What did he mean? What would he do if I didn’t say yes? Drag me out on a date with him?

I shook my head. Who knew? Achilles Valencian was capable of anything.

It was my fault! I shouldn’t have kissed him back.

Now what do I do?

My hand touched my swollen lips. Heat crept up my cheeks along the fluttering in my tummy as the recollection of him wrapped around me flowed into my mind.

I sighed. Even if it was wrong, it felt so right to be in his arms. His embrace felt home. A home I never wanted to leave.

* * *

GATHERING the pile of files against my chest, I strutted out of my office towards the conference room. Another important meeting would be held in a few minutes, and even after being an ordinary employee, the boss needed me beside him.

I just hoped the evening wouldn’t come soon. Even though I didn’t have to answer him anything just because he demanded me to, if I wanted the answers to my own questions, I’d have to give him a yes.

But it wasn’t that simple. I couldn’t just go out with him when I didn’t have a proper conversation with Warner.

As I neared the meeting room, I saw Tobias, busy in discussion with Matt.

“Hey! I didn’t know you were gonna drop by,” I said, when he turned to me.

Smiling, he shrugged. “Wanted to surprise you. And maybe you’ll keep getting these surprises more often now.”

I raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

Seeing me, Matt’s eyes widened slightly as he excused himself and scurried away.

What’s with him?

“Do you know what the meeting is about?” Tobias asked.

I shook my head.

“Well, apart from our family business, I thought about opening something of my own. As you know, I always had an interest in doing something in the clothing line. So, I’m planning to do so now. And Achilles decided to invest in my new company, helping me with the launch.” His face brightened with a grin.

My mouth formed into an ‘O’. I had no idea about his plans, though I always knew about his dream. It was great he was finally doing something to achieve it.

And Ace was helping him? He didn’t mention anything about it to me.

Ignoring the warmth that surged through my chest at his gesture, I gave my brother a bone-crushing hug. “That’s great! I’m so happy for you! I’m sure you’ll kick ass even in this field.”

He laughed, reciprocating the affection.

Patting his back, I pulled away. “Does Dad know?”

He nodded. “Yes, he said he’d be always there if I needed any help or support.”

As usual. Dad never stopped any of our siblings to chase our dreams. He always supports us. Just like Mom.

“Uh, Ms. Hutton?” Carter slipped through the conference room’s door. Face weary, shoulders slumped. “Could you please do me a favor and inform the boss that the meeting is about to start? I’d do it myself, but I need to take care of some urgent issues before the meeting starts.”

I’d told him a thousand times to call me by my name, but he seemed to be adamant on calling me formally. So I stopped objecting.

I nodded. “Sure. I’ll go get him.” My mind screamed to say no. I really didn’t want to be alone with him again. But I couldn’t deny Carter. It’d be rude.

Flashing a relieved smile, he thanked me and rushed away down the hallway.

“It’s him again, isn’t it?”

At Tobias’s question, I raised my brow.

“Him being around you still troubles you.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not like that.”

“Then why are you procrastinating?” he queried. When I didn’t answer, he sighed. “I know how you might be feeling, Em. I can see your resistance. But don’t. We both know how he still affects you so much. At least give him a chance. Maybe you don’t know, but trust me, that man’s world revolves around you.”

My eyes snapped to him, breath catching in my throat. That meant whatever Ace said was true? He did have feelings for me. Even Tobias knew it. Then why didn't any of them tell me?

This time, I didn't deny his claiming what Ace meant to me. Instead, I asked, "You knew? Yet didn't care to tell me?"

Sadness washed over his blue eyes. "Everyone knew except you, Em. Everyone knew what you meant to him. But no one can fight the fate."

I frowned, my throat tightening. What did he mean by that?

"Life has given you another chance, so don't let it go. Achilles has suffered a lot in his life, Em. He needs you," he said, his tone was soft. A distant look came over his eyes, as if recollecting the past.

My heart clenched at the thought of him suffering. I knew his father's death put him into a lot of agony, but hearing Tobias's words, I could feel there was more.

"What suffering?" My gaze searched for answers.

He shook his head. "Ask him yourself. But know this one thing, Em. His past is a sore subject for him. Especially... his mother. So be careful with your questions."

His mother? I had this idea that his mother had something to do with his pain. I saw the hatred in his eyes when he looked at his mother's former room. What happened to him and his mom? Where was she?

Taking in his warning, I nodded and walked away to find Ace. I could ask Tobias about his mom, but I knew he wouldn't tell me. Because it was another of the few secrets Achilles Valencian had locked inside him.

The only way to find out was, ask Achilles Valencian himself. And for

that, I knew what to do.

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THIRTY-TWO: JUST AS FRIENDS



When I was outside of his office, the door was ajar. Voices were coming out through the gap.

As I raised my hand to knock, I heard him.

“I’m glad you took care of the police regarding the drug case when I was... busy. Thank you, Arthur. I knew you’d handle them well.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Achilles. I wanted to sort everything out with them as soon as possible. I know how you and Caleb don’t do well with the... law.” Came Arthur’s voice. “The more they stay away from us, the better.”

A crease formed between my brows. Ace and Caleb had problems dealing with the police and law? Why?

“But we have to do something to stop Antonio. Because the way he’s adamant to dig up our past, I’m afraid if he gets his hands on something—”

“He won’t.” Caleb was cut off by Ace’s sharp voice. “People don’t get anything out of ashes.” Everyone went silent until Ace cleared his throat and spoke again. “Don’t worry about him. I will handle him myself.” His voice dripped with venom.

What do they have in their past that Antonio wants to find out so badly?

Not wanting to be caught eavesdropping, I knocked on the door and stepped inside.

All three pairs of eyes fell on me.

Caleb flashed me a warm smile when Ace's hard gaze softened up.

"Hello, Emerald. How are you?" Arthur asked with a polite smile. The smile that never reached his eyes.

What are you up to with Sierra? I wanted to ask. But I returned his fake greeting, plastering a smile as well. "I'm good, Arthur. Thank you."

"Rosebud? What're you doing here?" Striding closer, he placed a hand on my waist. Gray eyes waited for my reply.

Couldn't this man keep his hands to himself?

With flushed cheeks, I threw glances at Caleb and Arthur. While Caleb hid a simper, Arthur wore a blank face.

"Uh, I've come to call you for the meeting. It's about to start."

His lips pressed tight. "Where is Carter? He sent you here instead of doing his job himself?"

I rolled my eyes. "He's busy. That's why he sent me. It's not a big deal."

"Of course it is! He can't order you to do anything. It's the other way around!"

I frowned. "He didn't order me. He requested me. And what do you mean? How come I can order him around? As far as I know, he's my senior. So technically, he can order me to do something."

If possible, his features twisted more, his frown deepened.

Caleb coughed into his hand. "Let's go to the conference room. Everyone must be waiting for us. Don't take too long." Nodding at Ace, he walked

outside, dragging Arthur along.

The tick of Arthur's jaw didn't go missed.

What got him breaking his teeth now?

Turning to Ace, I raised my brow, placing my hands on my hips. Damn this man! Due to his towering height, I felt like a toddler looking up at a pillar.

"Well?" I urged for my answer.

"He can't order his boss's girl, now can he?" My eyes widened at his remark. He pulled me closer. "And he has to answer for that. Now we're getting late for the meeting, let's go."

I didn't argue as he led me out of his office. No matter how many times he declared his claim on me openly, I still managed to get shocked and all fuzzy.

Instead of getting irritated, I get... well, dumbfounded.

* * *

I EYED Mr. Johnson as he fidgeted in his place beside the head of the table. Well, it should've been my place to sit right, beside Ace's chair. But I insisted him to swap our seats today.

On our way to the conference room, Ace had to attend an urgent phone call, and I took that moment to flee from his clutch and arranged a new chair for myself. Far away from him, at the end of the table.

Why did I do it? His proximity didn't let me think straight. And I needed to stay tight on my decision. I didn't want to sway by his stormy grays.

I averted my gaze when Mr. Johnson spared me another uncertain glance. Poor man! But someone had to be the scapegoat. And I wouldn't be the one

today for sure.

When the door opened and walked in his majesty, his already crinkled brows creased more the moment his eyes fell on my supposed to be chair. Sharp jaw ticked as he froze Mr. Johnson with his icy glare.

Everyone stood in respect of the king, except me. I sat there with my arms crossed over my chest.

Caleb bit his lip, shaking his head at me in amusement. Tobias beside me raised a querying brow at me, while Arthur didn't seem to be pleased at the situation at all.

“Be seated, everyone. And Mr. Johnson, I'd like you to return to your usual place,” Ace said as he settled in his chair, casting me a look.

While everyone took their seats, Mr. Johnson still stood there with his petite height, unsure of what to do. He threw me another helpless look, but again, I tore my eyes away.

“Uh, actually, Mr. Valencian, Ms. Hutton requested me to—”

“I don't like to repeat myself, Mr. Johnson. You know who sits here in every meeting. So go sit in your own place. Everyone is waiting for the meeting to start.”

At his sharp tone, Mr. Johnson scurried away and rounded the table, standing beside me. His expression was pained, sneaking a glance at the displeased king.

“Ms. Hutton, as you heard what Mr. Valencian said, uh, could you please go back to your chair?” His request was humble, aged brown eyes were pleading.

Everyone's gaze was set on me, waiting for my adamant ass to move.

Can't I even sit somewhere of my own choice?

Caleb threw a helpless shrug, and my brother turned away from me. Traitor! I let out a huff. Scowling at the king, whose hawk eyes were set on me, waiting for me to go near him, I stomped over to the chair beside him and plopped down.

When I was finally in my usual place, his form relaxed. His tensed jaw eased. The moment his heady cologne hit my nostrils, the warm fuzzy feeling returned inside me. My resistance again threatened to fall weak.

But I couldn't just let myself sway so easily.

He nodded to everyone. "The meeting may proceed now."

His beautiful, devilish features didn't hold any remorse that he again dictated me with his orders. Instead, he seemed at total ease now, inching his chair closer to mine.

Pressing my lips together, I typed on my phone.

What's wrong with me sitting in some other chair? It's not compulsory to sit beside you always, is it?

His phone buzzed on the table, snatching his attention. With long, lean fingers, he picked the phone up and checked the message. Without giving me a glance, he started typing.

My phone vibrated.

A queen's place is always beside her king. Not anywhere else.

My heart skipped at the text. Butterflies erupted in my tummy as heat crept up my cheeks. But not wanting to show him the effect of his message on me, I managed a stern face as I narrowed my eyes at him.

This time, he looked at me. His gaze roamed slowly over my face before

meeting my eye.

Not being able to hold his stare, I turned to the conversation of the meeting. Though my mind ran the opposite way. To him.

His queen?

I bit my lip as I felt the sensation of his gaze roaming over me, pouring water on my concentration on the meeting. That's why I didn't want to sit beside him. His eyes would never leave me during the whole conferences. And the curious stares I got from around the table were embarrassing.

Irritating man!

Then I remembered I only had a few more hours before his given time would be over. Though I knew what my answer was, I didn't think I could give him my answer when we would be locked in his office. He somehow would tamper with my head and change my decision.

So again, grabbing my phone, I messaged him.

Yes.

My phone beeped.

Yes, what? You agree you should always be beside me?

My eyes widened.

What? No! I meant, yes, I'd go out with you.

After tapping send, I typed another one hurriedly.

But don't think of it as something else. We'll go out together, but just as friends, not as a couple.

His jaw clenched as his eyes hardened. When his gaze snapped up to me, I held it.

Another message.

We both know that we're anything but friends. We're going on an actual date as a couple. And that's final.

I mentally groaned. God! Why was it so difficult to convince him? I wanted him to agree. That was the only way I could get all my answers. Because I wanted to know more than what happened seven years ago. I wanted to know more about him, his past, his pains. Everything. And if I didn't go on a date with him, he wouldn't tell me a thing. And going on a date with him right now wasn't possible for me. Not until I had everything settled with Warner.

And to be honest, going out with him as a couple scared me. The thought of starting something with him officially made me nervous. The fear of getting hurt held me back.

I needed him to agree. Going out as friends was the only option for me right now.

I will only go out with you if it's just a friendly date, not something else. It's your decision now. Yes or no.

Putting down the phone, I crossed my fingers on my lap.

Please say yes, please say yes! I needed my answers!

Gray eyes flashed as they read my message. With a vice grip around the phone, he turned it off and put it down. Not giving me another glance, he turned to the meeting.

My heart fell.

What? He won't say anything?

But... I thought he'd argue more. Disappointment filled me as he didn't

look back at me. With his steely features, he joined the conversation.

He wouldn't take me out with him? Yes, as friends, but what's wrong with that? Did he already give up?

My hands itched to take back my words and surrender to his wishes, but I decided against it. I wouldn't move from my decision this time. Letting out a huff, I turned my body away from him and focused on the meeting, not giving him any attention. Just like he did for the rest of the hour.

* * *

“So, you guys aren't going on a date anymore?” Beth asked, over the phone.

“Damn, Em! Why did you stamp that ‘as friends’ mark on this? Now you have lost all your chances to get your answers.” Cassie's discontent voice came from the other side of the conference call.

Holding the phone in between my shoulder and ear, I washed my hands in the basin and dried them with some tissues.

Walking out of the bathroom, I grumbled, “I thought he'd say yes. At least I agreed to go out with him, right? He should be happy!”

“After you stamped those words on his face when he wants you more than just friends? I don't think anyone would be happy in his place. We're talking about Achilles Valencian here.”

I could imagine her rolling her amber orbs.

“But he also should understand her situation, right? She needs some time before making any serious decision about their relationship,” Beth argued. Always the sensible one.

I nodded, as if they could see me.

In the middle of their banter, when I turned down another hallway, I

found Arthur outside on the balcony. With his phone in his ear, he was engrossed in a heavy conversation. With his dark eyes flaming, nostrils flaring, he hissed something into the phone. Due to the glass door between us, his words couldn't reach me.

Who is he talking to in such a manner? I've always seen him composed and calm. Not this furious and anxious.

Closing his eyes, he ran his hand through his almost gray locks. Listening to something the other person said, he slowly nodded and a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

A sinister smile.

"Em? Are you listening to us?" Cassie's voice called out to me, but my gaze was set on him as he turned and his eyes met mine.

The sinister smile slowly faded, and a deadly look took over his features. A shiver ran down my spine.

Not wanting to be there anymore, I hurried down the corridor.

Something was going on in his head. But I couldn't find out what.

What if I'm just assuming things?

I shook my head. I couldn't decide anything until I talked to Sierra.

"Em? You there?" Beth inquired.

"Yeah!" I cleared my throat. "I'm listening."

"Where were you so lost? Saw your devil charming again?" Cassie whistled.

A chuckle snuck out of my mouth. "No. I wasn't lost anywhere. Anyway, what were you talking about?"

"I said ask him directly. Maybe bat your eyes a little. I'm sure he'll agree.

He can't deny his Rosebud. And that way, you can get your answers also," she suggested.

I sighed. "It's not that easy. He was pretty mad when he read my message. He didn't look at me after that. I don't think he'd agree."

"Maybe give him a kiss?" Her tone was teasing. Beth chuckled along.

"God, no! No kissing! Keep your perverted thoughts to yourself. I'll think of a way out myself!" I said, exasperated.

As they started to argue again, I almost cut the call when my phone buzzed.

My heart jumped when his name popped up on the screen.

I opened the message. My legs stopped in my tracks, but my heart started racing to miles.

Be ready tomorrow evening. I'll pick you up at seven sharp.

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THIRTY-THREE: OBSESSED



ACE

Sweat trickled down my neck to my spine, the thriving heat in my body accelerated my speed, and the buzz of zeal coursing through my veins encouraged me to force myself more. Even the wounds on my knuckles didn't stop me from hitting the hard punching bag once more.

The more pain I was in, the more I could keep myself in check. The more my head focused on my physical agony rather than my heart's desires and... fears.

As I worked on my agony and salvation, his brown eyes never left me from the corner of the gym.

"Achilles, stop it. Your knuckles are bleeding! What's wrong with you tonight?" Caleb's voice reached my ears. But the anxiousness of his tone couldn't halt my movements.

Intense working out every night to help me sleep and keep myself sane was a routine of my life, but the pain and exhaustion became a necessity for me since I had her in the same city as me.

Not being able to see her and have her into my arms even after her being so close to me drove me crazy. But not to scare the light of my life away from me by revealing the intensity of the craving I had for her, I had to bind myself back with everything I had.

Red stains smudged on the gray punching bag as I continued.

“You’ll have to meet her tomorrow evening. You remember that, right? What explanations will you have after she asks about the cuts?”

My hand halted in midair, going for another shot. My gaze fell onto my wounded knuckles. He was right. She already asked me once.

Though those wounds were from showing those bastards their places who tried to hurt my Rosebud.

My jaw tightened at the recollection of that night when some vile drunkards followed her. The night she went to rescue her friend, not thinking of her own safety.

Only I knew how I stopped myself from destroying them to bits for even thinking of harming her.

Running my hands through my wet locks, I let out a curse. Frustration and anger raged through me.

I was away for just one day from her, and she got herself into trouble. And it wasn’t the first time she pulled that kind of stunt. She tended to be careless, even back in New York.

If I hadn’t put guards after her for her security, I didn’t know what nightmare she would bring me to.

I wished I could keep her with me for twenty-four hours, so I could just hide her in my arms and never let anyone even touch her, let alone hurt her.

My fists clenched. Glimpses of that accident that day flashed into my mind. A volcano swirled inside me to be released.

No one will touch even a strand of your hair. I promise you that.

“Let me bring the first aid kit. Your hands need some bandaging.”

“No need. I’m fine.”

“But you could get an infection if you don’t get them treated,” he argued, a frown etched between his brows.

While I was just in my workout shorts, he stood there fully dressed in a formal black shirt and gray trousers.

“They won’t. I’m used to them.” Last time I let someone treat my wounds was my Rosebud. She was the only person who could heal me. Her mere presence was enough for my pain to fade away.

“But—”

He was cut off with a sharp look of mine.

Letting out a sigh, he ran his hands over his face, shoulders slumping in defeat. Concerning about me became his habit for years now. Be it cousin or adopted brother, it seemed he was the older one among us, not me.

Whilst I respected his concern, I didn’t prefer anyone’s meddling in my life.

Unless it was my Rosebud.

I wiped myself with my towel and took some swigs from the water bottle.

After a moment of watching my movements, he opened his mouth again. “Do you... do you think this date is a good idea? I mean, once the truth of that night seven years ago comes out, a lot of the past will be at risk.”

I tensed at the mention of the past. The past I buried in the furthest corner of my memories.

“I know what I’m doing. She has the right to know everything,” I said, gazing out of the window at the night that matched the color of my past.

His response was hesitant. “You can lose her forever if she finds out the

truth, you know that, right?”

Something snapped inside me as my whole form turned rigid. But I kept my calm.

“If I don’t tell her anything, I won’t get her either.”

“But once she knows about your—”

A knock on the door interrupted him.

“Come in!”

Carter walked inside with a file in his hand. “Hello, boss. I, uh, got some reports on project CA.”

Car Accident.

Not losing my cool, I nodded at Caleb. Getting my dismissal, he let out a breath and walked out of the gym, closing the door behind him.

I turned to Carter. “Did you get your hands on that driver yet?”

Averting his gaze, he fidgeted in his place. “No, boss.”

My jaw clenched.

“I tried to locate him everywhere I could, but it feels like he just disappeared from the face of the earth. Antonio did well to cover his tracks,” he added.

I took some deep breaths, trying not to lose it. The volcano roared to be released inside me. My hands itched to kill. Kill that bastard who hired that driver to harm me the day I was returning from my new house with Emerald.

Antonio Raymond.

If I was alone in that car, I’d have considered giving him back what he gifted me, but unfortunately for him, my Rosebud was with me.

My fingers dug into the bottle in my hand. Anything could've happened to my precious rose.

He did many of his little tricks in the past, but this time, he crossed all his limits. He even framed Caleb with... drugs. The same day I found out that the accident wasn't an actual accident, it was planned. And that was the line he shouldn't have crossed.

Now he is going to pay.

I still remembered the way she shook with fear and shock in my arms after that crash. The way she clutched onto me.

Antonio was going to pay for every tear that left my Rosebud's eyes. He was going to regret the day he took birth in this world.

“Did you get the names of his recent involvements?” My question came out more like a hiss. I wouldn't get any peace until I crushed him like an insect.

He bobbed his head, handing me the file. “Here are their names and backgrounds. But boss, I don't understand. What will you do with his one-night stands? Most of them just stayed with him for money. They don't share any more relation with him to know about his plans or deeds you can use against him.” Confusion crossed over his features.

Flipping the pages, I ran my eyes through the lists until one name caught my attention. She was one of those few who had more than just one night with him. They even went on a few dates last month.

Perfect.

I pointed at the specific name. “Call her. Tell her to meet me at my penthouse back at Valencian Corp. And make sure no one knows about it. Not even Caleb.” Giving him a look, I asked, “Am I clear?”

Perplexed, he slowly uttered a yes and took the file from me.

“You may go now,” I said as my phone buzzed beside my towel.

Nodding, he turned around and strode away.

Grabbing the phone, I read the message.

I felt the corner of my lip stretching up.

It's time.

* * *

SITTING inside my car in the darkness on the side of the street, I waited for her signal.

The black cars parked not far away from their house had me reassured once again. Though due to the murk I couldn't see them, I knew they were in there. Watching.

Just as I instructed.

The screen of my phone lit up in the darkness.

Time to go.

The front door opened, revealing a pair of blue eyes. Ushering me inside with her head, she slowly closed the door behind me once I stepped in. Following her, I climbed up the stairs silently. My heart sped up when we stopped before a pair of doors. Twisting the handle, she opened the barrier between me and my salvation.

My Rosebud.

I took a sharp intake of breath at the view. My beautiful rose curled into a ball with her chestnut locks spread across the pillow. Even in the dimmed light, I didn't miss those luscious lips formed into a slight pout.

“After lots of twists and turns on the bed, she finally fell asleep. I almost

thought she wouldn't be able to sleep in anxiety and nervousness," Tess whispered, not wanting to make any noise. "She tried her best to hide the date with you tomorrow from me, you know?" She giggled.

With difficulties, I tore my gaze away from my rose and turned to her. "Thank you, Tess. For helping me tonight, like you did every time I needed you."

Just so I could see my rose, she decided to stay with her family tonight. Even convinced her sister to share a bed so they could relive the memories of their childhood.

A smile grazed her face. "No need to thank me. What are best friends for, after all?" And then she glanced back at her sister, who was sleeping peacefully. "She is still your Rosebud. Years passed, but her heart still belongs to you."

She pointed with her chin to the giant bear I'd gifted Emerald the day after she returned from New York. Warmth surged through my chest as I watched how tightly her small arms were wrapped around the vast doll. And then the T-shirt she wore caught my attention. It was the same one she borrowed from my penthouse.

"Even if she is resisting, she can't keep herself away from the things connected to you." Her blue orbs met my gaze. "Promise me you'll always take care of her heart, Achilles."

Putting a hand on her shoulder, I gave it a firm squeeze. "Forever." This was a promise I made to myself years ago. I would die before I hurt my Rosebud ever again.

Sniffling softly, she nodded and then left us alone. "Don't take long. I'll wait outside, watching over." She closed the door behind her.

Striding closer to her bed, I sat beside her. My eyes bathed in her enticing beauty. Those turquoise eyes that had stolen my heart were firmly closed. Long eyelashes shadowed over her rosy cheeks as her eyelids fluttered occasionally.

Raising my hand, I tucked some strands away from her angelic face. As if in a trance, my fingers glided over her soft skin. From her cheeks to her pouty lips, and then down her slender neck. She slept soundly as I watched her. I could do it for the rest of my life without getting tired.

Leaning down, I buried my nose into her hair and inhaled deep. As if like a touch of ice, her presence distinguished the fire of my soul. My heart finally found its serenity.

My beautiful Rosebud.

Now turned into a tempting rose.

A groan left me. Her sweet scent, like honey and citrus, her silky porcelain skin, and her soft breaths fanning my skin, were tempering with my senses.

My lips touched the place where the vein of her neck pulsed. My eyes followed the curves she hid beneath that oversized T-shirt of mine. Not being able to control myself, my hands roamed over her tiny waist, to her hips, down her legs. My little vixen didn't wear any pants under that T-shirt. It ended just below her mid thighs, showing her long killer legs.

Clenching my fist, I moved my hand away from her inviting legs before I lost total control of myself. But I couldn't help but feel her soft lips against mine.

A sigh left through her lips as soon as mine met them.

Pulling away, my thumb brushed over her cheek.

Mine.

If I hadn't seen her tonight, I wouldn't be able to equip myself to reveal everything before her tomorrow. I needed her touch to keep myself sane from my fears. Fears of losing her.

Resting my forehead against hers, I shook my head as a steely determination cut through me.

I won't lose you. I can't. Not again. Not if I wish to live.

I let out a shaky breath. "Without you, my life is incomplete, my rose," I whispered, kissing her forehead.

I won't let anything come between us ever again. Everything will be destroyed that will try to become a hindrance to my way of getting you. I won't allow anything to take you away from me, not even my past. I need you like I need my next breath, and I'll make you mine at any cost. Because Achilles Valencian is obsessed with his Rosebud.

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THIRTY-FOUR: THE DATE



EMERALD

Placing my hand over my chest, I took a deep breath. He wasn't even here yet, and I felt like my heart would jump out of my ribcage at any moment. The vicious war of butterflies in my stomach didn't help either.

Calm down, Em. It's just a date. A friendly date. It's not that it's the first time you're going out with a guy.

Yes, but this time it's the guy I lo—

My breath hitched in my throat. Shock and surprise crashed over me. Was I just about to admit my... feelings for him?

I shook my head. No, no! Yes, he did affect me a lot, but I didn't do the 'L' word.

Not wanting to chew over my treacherous mind, I padded into my closet and reached for the maroon dress Cassie sent me. A very short and backless one she wanted me to wear on this date.

Give him some tease. Were her exact words.

Though the dress was beautiful, I didn't know where he was taking me. I asked him so I could wear something accordingly, but he said to get into anything decent I wanted. He didn't care as long as I was with him.

A blush rose up my cheeks. Mr. Valencian could be cheesy sometimes. I

didn't know he had it in his bones.

But of course, I wasn't going to listen to him. As I didn't know if it was a public place or not, I grabbed for a jacket to wear over the dress. Then my eyes fell on the red gown he'd gifted me. It called me to wear it, but like every other day, with difficulties, I gave it my back and walked out of the closet.

Once I was ready with light makeup and a low bun just above my neck, I inspected my look once again in the mirror. Brushing away some loose curls from my face, I tugged the ends of my dress a little lower.

A breath snuck through my lips. I was ready.

And just at that moment, the doorbell rang. So did my heart.

I glanced at the watch. Seven P.M. sharp.

My mouth went dry, and my hands turned clammy. God, why was I so nervous?

It's okay, Em. You can do it!

Chanting the mantra in my head, I grabbed my purse and trudged downstairs.

Once at the door, I found him tackled into Mom's bear hug. As surprising as it was, a soft smile was stretched across his face as he returned Mom's affection.

Flaunting a black tux and his usual rough look, he didn't fail to take my breath away. Like always.

"I thought you forgot the way to our house. The only times we get to meet you if there are some occasions or parties," she said, pulling away. Affection shone in her eyes. "Though I'm extremely happy to see you here

after so many years, can I ask the reason for your sudden visit?”

Before he could answer, I butted it. “We have a business party to join, Mom. That’s why he’s here, to pick me up.”

Along with Mom, his stormy grays also moved to me. They stilled on my face until they traveled to the rest of my body. Slow and lingering touch of his intent gaze had me breathless.

“Oh my! Look at you! My baby is so beautiful, isn’t she, Ace?” she gushed, casting a glance towards him. She was the only one who called him by his nickname other than me. And he didn’t mind. But it was only reserved for the two of us.

Not removing his stare from me, he gave a slow and tight nod. “Indeed, she is.”

Heat crept up my neck at his words while Mom watched the interaction with her wicked eyes.

“Well, honey? You didn’t mention any parties like that to me,” she queried, her tone teasing. Of course, she got some hints from all the flowers everyday and gifts.

I cleared my throat. “Uh, it was a sudden invitation. So we have to attend.”

“Oh, all right then. I won’t keep you guys any longer.” She put a hand on Ace’s shoulder. “I would like to ask you for coffee, but clearly, you’re on a run right now. So go, and... take care of her.”

Giving her hand a firm squeeze, he nodded. Sincerity engraved in his eyes. “I will.”

* * *

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” Fastening up the seat belt, I turned to him.

Something tugged at my lower region when I found his dark gaze on my legs. With a grunt, he put his big callus hand on my knee.

“You enjoy torturing me like that, don’t you?” he groaned.

A shiver ran down my skin, raising goosebumps across. Noticing it, his hand raised sensuously to my thigh. With my breath hitching in my throat, I removed his hand. My heart thudded in my chest. The temperature of the car ambience suddenly peaked.

“K-keep your hands to yourself, will you? And don’t think that high of yourself. I didn’t wear it for you.” I gulped. “I wore it because I liked it.”

Liar.

The twitch of the corner of his lips was the evidence of my lie getting caught.

Biting my lip, I averted my eyes. “You didn’t answer my question. Where are you taking me?”

Ignoring my warning, he took my hand in his and placed a kiss at the back of it. “It’s a secret. So let my secret surprise you, shall we?”

Huffing, I tried to snatch my hand from his, but his grip was firm. His knuckles caught my attention. They were littered with cuts and bruises.

I gasped, taking a hold of his hand. “What happened to them?”

How come I didn’t notice them before?

His demeanor changed. Pulling away, he gave a nonchalant shrug. “Nothing, just got carried away with exercise.”

The way he averted his gaze opposed his own statement.

“Don’t lie to me! Your knuckles were bleeding, and you didn’t even feel anything?” I snapped, taking his hands back, examining them. They were just

like I remembered the morning he came back from the UK. Did he work himself out to exhaustion and pain? What could make him that ignorant of his pain?

When he didn't answer, I glared at him.

"Well? Mind giving me an answer? And why didn't you treat them?" Anger, irritation, and concern nagged into my veins.

When he looked at me, my heart clenched. His eyes held pain, desperation, and something intense that I couldn't decipher. Though his eyes said a lot, I wanted him to speak to me.

"Tell me," I whispered.

"I will. After the date. But not now," he said softly, placing another lingering kiss on my hand.

"Let me treat them first—"

"It's all right. They're fine now."

"But you could get an infection!" I argued, once again reaching out for his knuckles.

He shook his head. "I won't. Don't worry. I'm used to them."

Something squeezed my chest at his words. He said the same thing the other day. He was used to the pain. Did he hurt himself purposely?

"Rosebud, I can't go on a date with bandages, now can I?" He raised his brow when I didn't agree with his suggestion of letting it go. When I continued to hold his eyes, he sighed. "All right, check them once the date is over, all right?"

I nodded. At least he agreed to get them treated. I'd have to talk to him about it. He couldn't be so careless.

The whole ride from my house to our destination was silent, my hand was secured into his. Only occasionally to change gears, he left it, only to grab it again. No matter how much I complained, I loved the feeling of my small hand getting lost in his bigger and safer one.

When the car stopped before a huge iron gate, just a little far from the highway, I scrutinized the place. It looked... familiar. But I couldn't put my finger on it.

Getting out of the car, he opened the door for me. When I went to do it for myself, he'd stopped me with a discontented look.

Well, if he wanted to be a gentleman, who was I to stop him?

Taking his hand, I got out and looked up at the vast gate. Turquoise Heaven was the name written in bold, golden words above.

"Where are we, Ace?" I asked.

With his arms around my waist, he murmured in my ear, "Go in and find out yourself."

Pressing my lips together, I wiggled out of his arms and approached the gate. With a loud croak, the wings opened itself, welcoming us in.

Then I saw the guard inside, nodding in greeting. "Good evening, Mr. Valencian. Welcome, Ms. Hutton."

He knew my name?

I turned to the Greek god behind me. He must've told him about my arrival.

Wrapping his hand around my waist again, he nodded back at the watchman, while I politely reciprocated his smile.

"Is everything ready, Jeremy?"

The guard nodded. “Yes, Mr. Valencian. Everything is ready, just as you wanted. And the staff are gone.”

Everyone was gone? Why?

That means I’ll have to stay alone with him?

Now my nervousness leaped to a new height. Who knew? He could compel me with his charm and stormy grays, and trap me somewhere with him forever?

Not that I’d really mind.

I shook my head at my ridiculous thoughts.

“Good.”

A beautiful familiar two-story white mansion greeted me. Built with a mediaeval arc, an enormous fountain adorned its front yard, with a lush rose garden surrounding it.

But it was daisies before...

A gasp slipped through my lips. It was the place I’d visited once or twice in my childhood with my family for small get-togethers. The family of Tobias’s childhood friend owned it.

That’s why this place felt so familiar. I vaguely remembered the backyard where we used to play. And this was the place I—

My eyes snapped up to him. My heart fluttered beneath my rib cage. “Why here?” My voice came out breathless.

His eyes bore into mine. “I thought why not start our new beginning where all of it started? After all, this is the place where I saw my turquoise eyed beauty for the first time.”

THIRTY-FIVE: TEASING MR. VALENCIAN



H-he remembered that?

Though our visits here were vague in my mind, I still remembered the day Tobias brought him along to introduce his new best friend. How could I forget the day I encountered those stormy grays for the first time?

The reserved yet shy boy was uncomfortable among so many unknown people, until his gaze locked with mine. The soft smile that had tugged at his lips in the return of my own toothy one had engraved into my heart since then.

He gently brushed his thumb on my cheek. “Those adorable freckles are almost nonvisible now.”

“I still have them. It’s just the makeup,” I said, lost in his gray pools.

A tiny frown set between his brows. “The makeup that hides your beauty, you should avoid it.”

“Back to dictating me, are we, Mr. Valencian? I’m not in your office right now.” I teased, though the mushy feeling inside me at his compliment didn’t go missed.

“I’m not dictating you, just stating the truth.” He pulled me against him. “Those powders just hide your natural beauty.”

I bit back my smile. Did he just call makeup as powder?

Then I realized how he had me pinned against him. Throwing him a stern look, I pulled away and turned to the house. It was beautiful. The sound of waves crashing onto the shore and retracting into the ocean reached my ears.

Memories of old days regenerated into my mind.

“The beach!” With my eyes wide, I cast him a glance before running inside the house.

The velvety sound of his chuckle reached me before his footsteps followed behind.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins. Pushing open the backdoor, I relished the salty sea breeze that touched my face as soon as I let myself free outside under the open sky.

But before the ocean could enthrall me, the beautiful gazebo in the middle of the beach caught my attention. The decoration of white lilies and fairy lights, and the candles lit on both sides of the way to it, had me speechless. Not to miss the red petals of roses scattered on the pathway.

My mouth was on the ground until I forced myself to shut it. Everything was just... extraordinary. Just like the movies.

And he did all of that...for me?

“You liked it?” His deep voice rasped close to my ear.

Not being able to form any words, I just nodded.

“Come.” Securing my hand in his, he maneuvered me to the gazebo through the path full of soft rose petals.

I cleared my throat, my insides went all shy. “Your staff did a good job decorating everything.”

Popping open the cap of the champagne, he poured the liquid into two glasses. Casting me a glance, he said, “They just set up the gazebo. The other credits would go to me.”

My eyes widened again. “You did all of this all by yourself?” I looked around at the beautiful view.

Putting the bottle down, he took my jacket off. As soon as the upper side of my dress revealed before his eyes, he stilled.

“Yes,” a hiss came out of his mouth. His heated gaze roamed my body, lingering on my dipped neckline.

Cassie was right. He looked extremely bothered. Observing his tight jaw and darkened gaze had me doubting my decision to wear this dress now. We were all alone here...

And he didn't even see the back yet.

When he took a step forward, eyes not moving from me, my heart skipped. But I held my footing. I wouldn't let him see my weakness for him today.

But my determination couldn't live long. As he glided closer, I stuttered out, “W-what are you doing?”

He didn't answer. Raising his hand up, he brushed his fingers against my neck in a feathery touch. I shivered. Reaching for the back of my neck, he let my hair fall free from the bun.

“Now it's better,” he whispered, inches away from me.

Heat crept up my cheeks as I fumbled with my bracelet. Gray eyes followed the movement. Clearing my throat, I pulled away from him, causing his hand to fall from my hair.

His thick brows crinkled at the loss of touch.

Seriously, this man was obsessed with my hair. He seemed to love touching it every now and then.

Taking the glass of champagne, I took a sip. The cool liquid soothed my suddenly dry throat.

“I can’t believe you did all of this all by yourself. All the lights and flowers. You could just ask your staff. They would have done it for you. When did you do it, anyway?” I went back to our previous conversation, cutting the tense ambience around us.

He took his own glass, eyes still on me. “I was here before I went to pick you up. I wanted to do it with my own hands. After all, it was for my Rosebud.”

A warm sensation spread throughout my chest. Needing some more liquid to quench my thirst, I took another gulp. This man always had a way with words. He knew how to affect me with them.

The fruity flavor of the champagne felt good in my mouth. Then something clicked into my head.

Even for champagne, he didn’t go for the alcoholic one. He opted for a clean drink instead. I’d noticed it before. He didn’t drink anymore. Not even at parties.

As far as I remembered, wine was his favorite drink of all time. On some occasions, I’d seen him drink alcohol like water. What changed?

“What’re you thinking, Rosebud?” Tucking a strand behind my ear, one of his hands gently placed over my hip.

Then the hefty roar of the wave crashing onto the shore snatched my

attention. Gentle wind blew across the beach. The full moon dangled in the sky, cradling its luster in the water as it shimmered along the waves.

With the beautiful sight before my eyes and his heat right behind me, I held my questions back for some time. I didn't want to break the peace raising the queries of the past.

Getting out of my heels, I walked up to the shore feeling the cool, supple sand under my bare feet. Soon a curse of his followed from behind me. But I didn't stop. The corner of my mouth twitched, imagining the look on his face, seeing my revealing back cut of the dress.

The moment the waves reached me, tingling my toes with cold water, a smile stretched across my lips.

It's been so long since I'd last visited a beach, let alone a private one like this.

Soon, I felt his presence beside me. And to my surprise, he was also bare-footed. I noticed how big his feet were compared to mine. Just like our hands.

Looking up at the moon, I took a deep breath. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Not more than my Rosebud."

My head snapped to him. Stormy gray met my turquoise.

Did he write some cheesy lines for tonight before coming here? He seemed to be the total opposite of the cold businessman I saw everyday.

Averting my gaze from his intent one, with the fluttering of my tummy, I walked along the shore, enjoying the cool water and breeze. He followed behind.

Flashes of us playing on the beach floated across my mind. A grin spread across my lips. And then I did what I didn't even dream of doing ever again.

Crouching down, I took some water into my hand and splashed him. Achilles Valencian.

Jerking back slightly, he stood frozen for a second. After registering what just happened, a wicked gleam flickered over his eyes. When he took a hasty step towards me, I let out a squeal, and ran.

A musical laughter followed me as I sprinted away from him. Not wanting to miss the chance of this rare sight, I looked over my shoulder.

With just a foot away, he chased me. Moonlight fell onto his heavenly features as his eyes twinkled with happiness. The smile lines on both sides of his eyes, and the beautiful grin across his lips had me breathless. And it had nothing to do with my running.

Another screech left my mouth when he leaped for me. But speeding up my legs, I ran away from his clutch.

“Do you think you can escape me, Rosebud?” His light voice mixed with mirth rang like harmony in my ears.

“Looking like you’re falling behind, Mr. Valencian. Catch me if you can!” yelling over my shoulder, I ran faster. The night breeze slapped against my skin and the water splashed under my feet. I felt like I was flying. Free from everything. I felt lighter.

“Gotcha!”

Another squeal left my mouth as he tackled me. But before we could land on the ground, his strong arms around me pulled us straight.

“This is cheating! Your legs are bigger than mine!” I complained, wiggling in his hold. But the smile on my face was still there.

“Now that’s also my fault?”

“Yes, it is!”

A throaty chuckle reverberated through his chest as he pulled me against him, resting his forehead against mine. The way he tightened his arms around me, as if he never wanted to let go. His gaze shone with contentment and felicity as he let out a breath. “Rosebud, what do I do with you?”

“What will you do?” I peered into his eyes, relaxing into his chest.

As an answer, he cupped my cheeks and placed his lips on mine. My eyelids fluttered close, already drunk on him. With his thumb brushing just beneath my lower lip, his mouth danced with mine into a slow magical synch.

This time, it wasn’t an urgent, possessive, and demanding kiss. This time, it was a sweet, slow, yet passionate touch of affection. It had my heart racing like his punishing kisses did.

Pulling away, I gasped for breath, placing my head against his cheek. “It’s just a friendly date, you remember that, right?”

“I didn’t know you kissed your friends.”

My face turned hot as I hid myself in his chest, causing him to chuckle.

So not fair! He couldn’t just kiss me and expect me not to kiss him back. Who could resist this Greek god?

And just then my stomach decided to embarrass me more. A grumble had me turn into a beetroot.

Pulling away, he cupped my chin. Amusement curved in his eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me you were hungry?”

I shrugged, looking away. Stupid stomach!

Biting his lip, he took my hand and dragged me with him. “Come, let me feed you something.”

I didn't complain.

When we reached the gazebo again, he turned to me. "Wait here. I'll go get the food."

"I can help," I offered.

He shook his head. "No, you wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

I nodded, and he turned, walking back into the house.

Sighing, I took my glass and drank the rest of the champagne. Gazing at the ocean as I waited for him to come back with the food, something caught my attention.

A vibration.

My phone?

When I grabbed my purse, my suspicion turned out right. But as soon as I opened the purse, the vibration stopped.

Shaking my head, I fished the phone out. God knew who was calling me.

As soon as my eyes locked with the screen, I stilled.

Three missed calls.

From Warner.

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THIRTY-SIX: THE PAST



Warner? Why was he calling me?

The phone buzzed again. But this time, it was a message from him.

“Who is it?”

My thumb halted in mid-air from opening the message. Slowly turning around, I put my phone back into my purse. “It’s Mom. She asked if we’ve reached the party safely.”

I couldn’t mention Warner’s name. No matter how sweet Ace was at that moment, jealousy didn’t sit well with him. He proved it many times before. And I didn’t want to ruin this night when it just started.

I’d just talk to Warner later.

Nodding, he put the trays of food on the table and gestured to me to sit. Of course, he pulled out a chair for me.

Shaking my head, I smiled. “Thank you.”

When he settled in his chair, my eyes fell on his broad shoulders. His jacket was gone, now he was only in his black shirt. It clung to his sculpted chest and arms like a second skin. Those folded sleeves up to his elbows, displaying the veiny strong hands, had me staring.

A breathless sigh left my lips. Why was he so perfect in every way?

Except his stubborn self, of course!

The delicious aroma of the covered food snatched my attention. My stomach growled again. He took the lids off the food platters, and my mouth watered.

Cheesy garlic shrimp!

My eyes snapped up to him. Smiling at me, he put some shrimp on my plate, drizzling the sweet and sour sauce on it. Just the way I liked.

Seeing my surprise, he said, “How could I forget to make my girl’s favorite food on our first date?”

I gasped, eyeing the shrimps, roasted potatoes, chicken sizzling, and spaghetti. All my favorites. “You—you made all of this?”

I didn’t know he had culinary skills.

His gaze locked with mine. “You didn’t argue about me calling you my girl or it’s our actual date.”

Oh!

My cheeks turned hot. I was so stunned he made all those dishes for me I totally ignored his other words.

“I—yes. It’s just a friendly date. Don’t forget that! And I’m not your girl.” I cleared my throat, shifting in my chair.

He chuckled. That beautiful sound always made me feel something inside me. It felt like he was a totally different man around me. He talked more, he laughed more. His eyes held light.

“Well, our kiss proves both of your beliefs are wrong.” He put some spaghetti on my plate and reached for the roasted potatoes. “And yes, I

cooked them myself.”

I tried my best not to turn beetroot out of embarrassment. Though whatever I said, my actions told the opposite. But it wasn't my fault. I tried my best to resist him, but he always crossed my boundaries.

“I didn't know you knew how to cook.” I changed the subject, sticking my fork into a shrimp.

He shrugged. “I only know to make my girl's favorite dishes.”

My fork stopped halfway to my mouth. My heart skipped as I stared at him. He only learned to make my favorite dishes?

“W-why?” I stuttered.

“So I could always keep my queen happy and full.”

His intense gaze made me gulp. Something soared in my chest as I struggled with the tons of emotions he made me feel.

Averting my eyes, I took a bite of the cheesy shrimp. And I was amazed. It was delicious! Eager, I put two more into my mouth, and then tasted the chicken. My eyes closed at the savory flavors bursting into my mouth.

Once I opened them, I noticed he didn't even touch his plate yet. With an uncertain expression, he watched me. As if waiting for something.

With my mouth full, I raised my brow.

He scratched the back of his head. “Uh, how's the food? Did you like it?”

I gaped at him. Was Achilles Valencian nervous? And he needed my approval?

Swallowing, I bit back my smile and nodded. “They're delicious. You'd be an excellent chef if you weren't a businessman,” I answered truthfully.

Relief washed over his features as he relaxed in his seat. Wait, was I

hallucinating? Was that pink tint I was seeing on his cheeks?

Achilles Valencian was blushing! Oh shit! I should have clicked a picture of it!

Noticing my wide eyes, he cleared his throat, and put back on his confident expression.

This time I couldn't hide my smile. "You were blushing."

"I wasn't! Now eat your food. They're getting cold," he said, filling his own plate.

"Here, try some spaghetti. I'm sure you'll like it."

"You were blushing. I saw it!" I argued, teasing him. "It's okay to blush, you know. It's normal."

He cursed under his breath.

I snickered. "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. No one will ever know that Achilles Valencian blushed."

"Rosebud!" he warned, his gray orbs formed into a scowl. "Eat your food."

Biting my lip, I finally decided to leave him alone and concentrate on my food. As we silently ate, my eyes fell on his knuckles again. None of the movements of his hands seemed to bother him, even if they were black and blue. He didn't even wince once.

My hands itched to drag him inside and put some ointment on them. But I knew he wouldn't let me until the date was over.

"When did you buy this place from Tobias's friend's family?" The way the guard outside greeted him, staff working for him here, and the way he planned everything said that he owned this house and the private beach.

He didn't have to look up at me as he already was watching me. He was watching me more than he ate his food, not letting me eat comfortably. How could I when his hawk-like eyes were watching me?

Annoying man!

“Three years ago. They didn't want to sell it at first, but I convinced them.”

“How?”

His shrug was casual. “By offering them triple of the actual price of this property.”

My eyes widened. “Triple? But why? You could just buy any other property, much bigger than this.”

Again, the intensity was back in his gray pools. “Those didn't remind me of my Rosebud.”

My heart caught at my throat as I stared at him.

He-he brought this beach house for me? First that company, then that canvas, and now this.

I was out of words. I didn't know what to say or react. So dumbfounded, I went back to my plate.

Once we finished the dinner, he stood and gave me his hand.

“Dance?” A slow music hummed in the background.

Hesitantly, I placed my hand on his, letting him pull me to my feet and gather closer to his warmth. His heady cologne filled my senses as we swayed slowly along with the harmony. Gazing at my eyes, he tucked a strand behind my ear.

“Did I say how beautiful you're looking tonight?” his low voice said.

With heated cheeks, I shook my head.

“Well, you’re looking enchanting tonight, Rosebud,” he rasped.

I blushed some more. “Thank you. You’re not looking bad either.”

“That’s it? Nothing more I get to hear?” He raised his brow.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re looking good.”

“Just good?”

I glared at his mischievous gray eyes. Though he teased me, I could feel the change of mood in him after the dinner. His shoulders were tense, eyes were disturbed.

“What happened? You look tense,” I asked.

The smile slipped off his face. He shook his head. “Not now. Later, Rosebud. Let’s enjoy our dance first.”

With a sigh, I nodded and allowed him to pull me closer to his chest and hug me. I placed my head under his chin, closed my eyes and enjoyed our slow dance, the music, and his warmth without objecting. Just as he said.

* * *

“CHECK MATE!” I said, lining my soldier right before his king.

With his hands adjoined before him, he just stared at the chessboard in silence.

After our dance, he led me inside to play chess, just like old times. In the first match, he won, as always. But in the second match, I won. Same went with the third one. Not because I was better than him on the chessboard, because he let me win. His mind was somewhere else.

The more time that passed, the more his stance got tense. Those gray eyes grew more anxious as our game came to an end. He was stalling, I was aware

of it.

And even I was now afraid to ask questions. What happened in the past to make him this agitated by the revelation?

What terrified me most was the fear in those gray pools. Tonight was the night I discovered his many faces. But I didn't ever expect I'd see fear in his eyes.

"Ace? You again let me win. It's not fair!" I pressed my lips together. He used to do it in our childhood. He'd always let me win and even after I was aware of the fact, I'd be jumping up and down on my seat out of excitement. And he'd just watch me. But I wasn't the little Emerald anymore.

"No problem. We can play another match," he said, rearranging the board.

I stopped his hand. His stormy gray met my turquoise. "Three matches are enough for tonight. Don't you think it's time to fulfill your promise?"

His jaw clenched, eyes looking away from me.

"You promised, Ace. I want to know everything." My voice came out firm, though my hand fumbled with my bracelet under the table.

Hands balled into fists, he took a deep breath; gaze set on the board. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," I whispered, gulping. "Everything that happened that night seven years ago. If you claim you always had feelings for me, you always wanted me, then... what were you doing with Tess on the balcony?"

I let out a breath, finally asking the questions that have been nagging under my skin for so long.

Silence.

The only sound I could hear in the room was the ticks of the hanging clock on the wall, and my pounding heart in my chest.

His gaze drilled into mine as he sat there with an unreadable façade. Though the storm in his gray eyes was transparent.

“Ace?” I probed.

“Before you know what happened that night, you should be aware of my past first,” he said. “Remember, Emerald. Before reaching any conclusions, know that whatever I did was for everyone’s good. Especially yours.”

What good was in there for me? But putting my question aside, I nodded, encouraging him to go on.

He closed his eyes before opening them again. The muscle of his jaw ticked. “After my father passed away, my... mom went into depression. She couldn’t take the loss of her husband and drowned herself in alcohol and parties. I was about to turn eighteen at that moment.” The pain in voice was visible, though he tried to mask it hard. “As you knew, my father was an idol for me. Even if he never spent much time with us, I... loved him a lot. And after he passed, I—I was lost. I didn’t know what to do with my life then.”

Something squeezed in my chest, imagining how much agony he must have gone through.

“With my mother never at home, I found myself alone. Though Caleb was there, no one could take the place of my parents. On the top of that, the company’s burden was falling on me. For an eighteen-year-old, it became too much for me, Emerald.” He looked away from me as if ashamed. “Not being able to take everything in, I—I took the support of drugs.”

A gasp slipped through my lips as I sat there, shocked.

“I became a drug addict.” His voice was as hard as steel, eyes flashing.

“There wasn’t anything I hadn’t tried to forget everything. To get a moment of peace, not knowing it was only pushing me towards destruction.”

My eyes burned. My heart pained at the emotional downfall he went through. And I hadn’t had even any idea of it. Guilt washed over me like a tsunami.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything?” My voice croaked.

He held my gaze. Different emotions swirled into those stormy gray pools. “I couldn’t let my darkness taint you, Rosebud. I’d never.”

“You could at least tell me. I’d be there with you. Maybe I could help you out.” A lone tear escaped my eye.

A soft smile tugged at his lips. “You were helping me, Rosebud. You were the only hope in my life that didn’t let my darkness engulf me completely. You were the only one who kept me sane.”

My lower lip trembled. No matter what he said, I couldn’t help but feel the guilt clutching me in its grip. Here I was fantasizing about him, not knowing what problems he was going through.

“Then what happened? H-how did you get out of your addiction?”

“I couldn’t for two years. Until...”

“Until?”

“Until I lost you.” Taking a deep breath, he cleared his throat. “I knew about your feelings for me, Rosebud. I knew everything. You were my princess even before you asked me to make you one. But...” His features hardened. “No matter how much I wanted you, I couldn’t let you wait for me and ruin your life when I didn’t even know if I had a future or not. What I’d do with my life.”

Something churned inside me. An ominous feeling rose in my chest.

“That’s why that night I took Tess’s help. To...”

My heart pounded down my chest, breath came out harsh, eyes burning.
My nails dug into my palms.

“To push you away from me.”

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THIRTY-SEVEN: HEARTBROKEN



Taking a sip of the tea, I ran my eyes over the newspaper. The noise of Mom chopping vegetables and moving utensils in the kitchen rang across. But nothing moved my attention from the paper, not even her curious glances.

“You know the Blackwood’s daughter ran off with her cousin’s fiancé?” Her sigh resonated from the opposite side of the counter. “I got to know from the kitty party last night. Children these days, I don’t know what runs in their head.”

I flipped another page.

“Your aunt called me this morning to inform me how she’s enjoying her vacation in Switzerland with her third husband and soon will be sending me some pictures of their little honeymoon.” She snorted. “As if I wanted to know, anyway. I’m glad your dad didn’t go after his elder sister. Thank God she’s not in the country right now. At least I got some relief from her frequent visits.”

I stayed quiet. Not warning her about Dad’s hearing her slandering about his sister to me, just like I did every time.

“Em?”

“Yeah,” I answered, my voice came out croaky.

“You need some more tea?”

I shook my head, not looking at her.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asked, hesitating.

This time I did glance at her, plastering a small smile on my face. “Yeah, why do you ask?”

Her turquoise eyes observed me. “You’re looking... tired. Didn’t get any sleep last night?”

I knew what she was indicating. The dark circles, the puffy eyes.

Nothing goes missing from Mother’s eyes, does it?

A squeeze in my chest made me take a deep breath. I wish I could tell her.

“Nothing like that, Mom. I did sleep last night. Just having a headache since the morning. It’ll get better, don’t worry.”

“So that’s why you didn’t go to the office today?” Concern etched on her features. “Why didn’t you tell me? Did you take medicine?”

I nodded. “Yes, I did. I’ve also informed Caleb about it. I took a leave today.”

“Good. Take some rest. You’re taking too much work stress nowadays.”

Work wasn’t the issue. They barely gave me any actual work to do to be stressed.

Smiling at her, I looked back at the newspaper. The newspaper I’d been sitting with for the last half an hour. Not reading, just staring.

The clicking of heels against the tiled floor reached my ears. My fists

clenched.

“Tess?” Mom exclaimed. “What’re you doing here? I thought you had an appointment for cake tasting today. Are you done with it already?”

“I cancelled it, Mom. I had to go to a conference with Caleb this morning.” Placing her designer bag on the countertop, she sat beside me. “Hi, Em.”

I gritted my teeth, not reciprocating. My eyes glued to the big bold headlines.

Mom’s silence indicated that she noticed the tension lurking around us. “I made some tea for Em. You need some?”

“Sure,” Tess said, staring at me.

After giving her a cup of steamy tea, Mom excused herself to talk to Dad regarding something and left us alone. Not wanting to sit with her alone in the kitchen, I got up from my seat. That’s when her voice stopped me.

“Why aren’t you answering Achilles’s phone or messages? You didn’t even go to the office today. He’s a mess right now, Em. That guy was outside of our house the entire night, and you didn’t even let him explain anything!”

My head snapped to her, staring at her in disbelief. She was accusing me being the cause of his misery when she was the one who should be apologizing to me?

She knew! She freaking knew everything and joined hands with him in his absurd plan to display me some ridiculous show! To hurt me. To push me away from him. She was aware of everything but didn’t even try to tell me once in these years. And here she dared to question me?

“Are you even hearing yourself? After what he did, what you did, you’re

telling me to give him a chance to explain?” I shook my head in exasperation.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, letting out a sigh. “I know, Em. And I’m extremely sorry for that. You don’t know how guilty I’ve been feeling for hurting you. But Em, you have to understand. Whatever we did, yes, it wasn’t the best way to do it, but it was for your own good. Trust me.”

I snorted. “My own good? What was good in there, Tess? I don’t see any good in my living with a broken heart for seven years. I don’t see anything good in my suffering for the last damn seven years!” My voice rose as I spoke. With my heart beating fast in my chest, my breathing was harsh as hot lava ran through my veins.

“I know the pain in love. I’ve experienced it. And I also know we shouldn’t have done it. But at that moment, we were young, Em. We didn’t know how to handle this matter. The phase Achilles was going through...”

She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them back, as if not wanting to remember the memories.

“Maybe he told you about his condition back then, but he didn’t tell you of the severity of it. He was going through a living hell. And Caleb, Tobias, and I saw it. We saw him writhing in pain in his bed when he didn’t get his dose. We heard his screams from his nightmares. No matter how much he tried to get over it, he couldn’t. And no one in their sane mind would want the girl they loved to see them in that state.”

I stopped breathing at her revelation. Imagining him in that situation shook me to my core. An urge to reach out to him rose in me, but I suppressed it.

“After knowing how important he was for you, he couldn’t let you dream of him anymore. Even we didn’t think he’d be able to get out of his addiction

ever. And when I told him about your plan to confess to him that night, he sought my help. And as his best friend, and thinking of your well-being, I agreed. Please forgive us, Em. Whatever we did, we did for you.” She added, moisture sparkled in her eyes.

“This doesn’t justify anything. I wasn’t that young that you guys couldn’t tell me. But I was young enough for the scene you guys created to have me shattered completely,” I said. My jaw clenched. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it anymore. You did whatever you thought was right. And now I’ll do whatever I think is right.”

With my chin high, I turned around to leave.

“Em, please. If you don’t want to talk to me, then don’t. I understand. But at least let him explain. Listen to him once. Don’t just shut him off like that,” she almost pleaded. “You don’t know what you mean to him, Em. That man is nothing without his Rosebud.”

My heart clenched. Gulping the thickness in my throat, I walked out of the kitchen without another word.

* * *

THE WARM WATER trickled down every curve of my body, soaking me into its heat, relaxing the knots of my shoulders. But it couldn’t soothe me, the pain in my chest. Though it washed away the tears that fell down my cheeks relentlessly.

It hurt. It pained so fucking much! As if someone was physically churning a dagger into my heart again and again. A choked sob left my mouth. Clutching the place over my heart, I slid down the glass wall of the shower and hugged my legs to my chest.

“Why did you do it? Why?” I whispered, letting the tears free.

It felt like the wound I got that night had been scratched anew. I felt the same agony I endured years ago. And the irony was, the incident I've suffered for so long for wasn't even real. It was all a sham. A joke. A cruel joke life had thrown at me. Not life—my sister and the boy I loved.

They say they did it for my own good. To save me from getting hurt. But did they really save me from getting hurt? No, they only threw me into the ocean of tears I'd flown every night in silence after that night. They had thrown me to the disgust I'd felt dating so many guys who I didn't even feel any connection to. The kisses I'd shared, even if it hurt my own heart. The man who was always there for me, I'd hurt him in the process. I could never return his love.

And all of this happened because he thought it'd be good for me by pushing me away, breaking my heart.

To push you away from me.

It'd felt like I'd been struck by thousands of arrows the moment he said those words. The moment I knew how easily they broke my numerous dreams, intense emotions, and years of love in just a moment. Even after knowing everything.

“Don't! Don't you dare try to explain anything. You've done enough already! Leave me alone!” I'd snapped at his face when he'd tried to stop me from leaving last night.

Running his hands through his hair desperately, with wide panicked eyes, he'd asked for a chance to let him explain. “Rosebud, please! Just hear me out. I had no choice. I couldn't let you ruin your life waiting for me. Trust me, I'd never wanted anyone else in my life the way I'd wanted you. You were my everything. You still are.”

“And that’s why you wanted me away?” My vision was blurry with tears. “Now I’ll make your wish come true for real this time. I’ll go so far away from you that you’ll never be able to reach!”

He’d watched me as if he’d been stabbed. But the pain in his eyes couldn’t surpass the one I held in my heart at that moment. Ignoring his calls and pleadings, I’d turned away from him and ran away from there. From the man I never knew would hurt me this way.

More tears fell from my eyes, my throat tightened, causing me gasp for air. My nails dug into my palms as I cried my heart out. But the burn inside me didn’t go away.

I love you...

I closed my eyes, not being able to withstand the squeeze that shot through my chest. The words he whispered to me just before I left him last night still rang in my ears.

I hate you! I hate you, Achilles Valencian! For fucking up my life in this way!

* * *

“THANK GOD, Em! You finally picked up your phone! That obsessed man of yours is blowing off my cell phone since last night!” Cassie huffed through the line. “I called Tess. I know what happened.” Her tone softened.

I stayed quiet, closing my eyes.

“Though I had to literally plead her to tell me everything. Trust me, I wanted to kill that sister of yours and that idiot man when I knew what they did to you. Fucking pricks!” she cursed some profanities. “By the way, the way he’s blowing up my phone just to get even a little news of you, I’m wondering how he’s not already barging into your house to see you right

now.”

With my jaw tight, I threw the huge teddy on the floor from my bed. I didn't need it anymore. “He tried to last night. But I informed the watchman to tell him if he even tries to do anything to get into the house following me, he won't see my face ever again.”

I knew he'd follow me and try to talk to me. So I'd already given the watchman my message to deliver to him. And to my surprise, he didn't cross my set line. Instead, he'd waited outside my house, right beneath my window. Though I didn't know he was there the whole night.

A pinch of guilt surged through me, but I composed myself soon. I didn't care. He could go to hell for all I cared.

“Oh! That explains his desperation,” she mumbled. “I've never seen someone so miserable, to be honest.”

“Are you siding with him again, Cassie? I can't believe you!” I fumed. Whose friend was she here?

“Of course not! How can I? Whatever he did was extremely wrong! He shouldn't have done it even though he only wanted your well-being.”

“Cassandra!”

“All right, all right. I'm sorry. I won't say anything now. Are you okay, though? I have to tell him something when he calls me again,” she asked, sighing. Though there was concern in her voice, it only oiled my anger. She was somehow still supporting him. I'd blocked him in every way possible, and now he was trying to reach me through Tess and Cassie.

“You know what? I'm putting the phone down. You can talk to that prick all you want!” I cut the call and threw my phone on the bed.

That man! How dare he? He was now taking my friend on his side? The nerve! I didn't understand why no one was seeing what heartache I was going through. They were just seeing his misery. His pain.

Covering my face with my hands, I took deep breaths, trying to calm down my boiling rage. But it wasn't helping. As if the heartache blew more wind into it.

The bell of the door made my heart skip.

Is it him again?

I didn't want any drama before Mom and Dad. But I didn't think he'd do it after what I'd said. But not believing my instincts, I ran downstairs before anyone else could attend the door. I'd just flip him off and send him back if he dares to show up on my—

The moment I opened the door, I was shocked. But for an entirely different reason. The man that stood before me was someone I didn't ever think would come back to my threshold again.

Warner.

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THIRTY-EIGHT: SURPRISE VISIT



“Warner?” I stared at him in shock and surprise.

He called and messaged last night, but through all this going on, I couldn’t check his message. And now, seeing him standing before me rose the guilt inside me again.

“Hey!” Tucking a strand behind my ear, I greeted him with an awkward stance.

His brown orbs roamed my features, a frown set between his brows. “You all right? You seem... not well.”

Even after what I did, he was still concerned about me. That’s why I didn’t want to lose a friend like him. Before we started dating, he was my best friend in New York.

I had a sudden urge to hug him tight and share all my problems with him. But I knew I couldn’t.

Gulping, I nodded. “I’m fine, don’t worry. Come in!” I held the door wide open for him, flashing a small smile.

Once we were settled in the living room, I got him some coffee and another cup of tea for me. I needed it for my growing headache.

“Thanks.” Taking the mug from me, he looked around. “Where is

everyone?”

I took a seat on the opposite side of the couch. “Dad’s in the office. And Mom had another of her kitty parties.”

Thank God they weren’t home. They already sensed something was going on between me and...*him*. And seeing Warner here would be extremely awkward.

He nodded, his gaze not moving from me. “You sure you’re okay? Your eyes are dull today.”

No, I’m not. I wanted to say. Instead, I bobbed my head again. “Yeah. Just a little headache.”

He didn’t seem convinced. But not wanting to intrude, as always, he let it go and took a sip of his coffee. The corner of his lips turned upwards. “I’ve missed your coffee in the last two months.”

“And I’ve missed you,” I said truthfully.

He held my gaze for a moment and then let out a sigh, putting the mug down on the table. “I wanted to apologize to you, Em. The way I talked to you last time... I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have spit out such words for you. I didn’t know what I was thinking. I was just—hurt and confused.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to say anything, Warner. It’s me who should be apologizing. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for breaking your trust. You didn’t say anything wrong. It was me who was at fault.” A tear escaped my eye. I couldn’t keep my tears in since last night. As if there was a tap left open inside my eyes.

“Hey, hey!” He slid closer, wiping the tear from my cheek. “Please don’t cry, Em. Truth to be told, yes, I was extremely hurt. But it wasn’t your fault. I should’ve known something like this was going to happen. I always knew I

was never in your heart. But still, being selfish, even after you telling me sometimes that we were better friends, I didn't let you go. I got too blinded by my love that I didn't see you weren't happy in that relationship. You didn't love me."

The last line came out as a whisper through his lips. Seeing the melancholy in his eyes made me feel more terrible. Another tear rolled down my cheek, but I wiped it fast.

"Warner, I-I tried my best. But I just couldn't do it. Nor could I... stop myself from falling for him. I swear, I tried with everything I had in me. But..." I looked down at my hands, biting my lip.

He squeezed my hand. "It's all right, Em. The way you can't force yourself to love me, you can't force yourself not to fall for the guy who was already in your heart."

I looked up at him, not denying the fact. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't want to hurt you."

He shook his head. "Don't be. And I know. My Em can't hurt someone on purpose, even if she wants to."

I didn't show the discomfort on my face when he said 'my Em.' Maybe he said it just as a friend.

"I'm sorry too. Feeling betrayed and in the fear of losing you, I'd ignored your calls and messages," he said. "I just needed some time, you know? By the way, I called you last night. Even messaged you. You didn't answer."

I shifted in my place. "I was a little busy."

Nodding, he grabbed his cup again. "So, how's everything going?"

"We're still friends, right?" I ignored his question. Though a huge burden

lifted off my chest that he forgave me, I still wanted the assurance that he wasn't breaking our friendship.

“Of course, Em! No matter what happens, you'll always be my best friend,” he answered, brown eyes were sincere.

This time, a genuine smile stretched across my lips as I pulled him into a bear hug. “Thank you, Warner! I'm really lucky to have you in my life!”

Pulling away, he grinned. Though the gloom still lurked behind his eyes. “Nothing can break our friendship, Em. Not even some old feelings.”

My smile threatened to fall. Even though things weren't that tense between us anymore, it was still awkward.

He cleared his throat. “Anyway, you didn't answer my question. How's everything going on with your life? How's the office?”

* * *

“Wow, you've made quite a collection here for yourself,” he awed, assessing the designs I'd drawn in the office when I'd no work to do. At least I'd invested my time in something productive. “Damn, Em! You should open your own clothing line. You'll rock the market!”

I shrugged. “That's the plan. But not now. I still have so much to learn.”

After giving him a brief description about the office, he'd decided to stay back till evening since he was free. Even if I wanted to curl up under my blanket and cry, I agreed with his plan. At least we could catch up a little till then.

I brought him upstairs to show him my designs. The designs I wanted to show to a certain person after the date and fixing everything with Warner. I wanted to ask for his thoughts on them. But it seemed like that certain person wasn't going to have the luck anymore.

My eyes went to my phone again. The flashing screen told me some unknown number was again calling non-stop. Good thing I put it on silent.

I blocked his one number, so he got several new ones.

“Em? Are you listening?”

I blinked. “Yeah. Sorry, I was just thinking about something. What were you saying?”

“I said why don’t you show them to Caleb or your senior designers? I’m sure they’d love to add them to their next catalogue.” One of his brows raised.

I shook my head. “They’re for my collection, Warner. When I start my business, I want my best pieces to be available exclusively on display then.”

I threw another glance towards the phone again. My hands itched to grab it and receive the calls. But I knew better.

Something soared in my chest as Tess’s words flashed across my mind.

We saw him writhing in pain in his bed when he didn’t get his dose. We heard his screams from his nightmares.

My hands curled. Jaw ticked.

Why? Why...

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, calming the storm inside me that has been swirling since Tess left.

You don’t know what you mean to him, Em. That man is nothing without his Rosebud.

Sitting straight, I rubbed my face in frustration. The more I wanted to not think of him, the more my mind was flooded with him.

“You all right? And please don’t sell me your lies again. I can see how

restless you are. What happened?”

“Nothing, Warner. I—”

A series of furious non-stop honks of car stopped me. It came from outside of our home.

I frowned. What’s going on?

Then his voice froze me in my place.

“Emerald!”

Some more honking.

“Rosebud, please! At least come to your window!”

What the hell? He-he was outside again?

Warner threw me a perplexed look. Scrambling out of the bed, I ran to the window and peeked outside. There he was. Standing beside his giant black expensive car, in a three-piece suit with the tie loose around his neck and hair ruffled, he looked up at me with those intense gray eyes.

He let out a visible sigh of content as he watched me silently for a moment. While I just glared.

Tess was right. He looked miserable. The always perfect Mr. Valencian was a mess today. But he was Achilles Valencian, after all. He even wore the messy look in a perfect way. This look of his didn’t disappoint to have my heart skip like every other day.

“Rosebud,” his low voice reached as a whisper to my ears. I tried my best to ignore my pounding heart and his desperate eyes. Treacherous heart!

“What are you doing here? And what’s this? Don’t create a scene here, Ace! Go away!” My lips pressed tight as I glanced around in the neighborhood.

“Baby, please. Just talk to me once. I know I’ve hurt you and I’m extremely sorry for that. Punish me if you want, I’d do anything. But just don’t shut me out. Please, baby.”

Baby?

My heart tugged at the pain in his voice and eyes, the edge in his stance. But then I made myself remember everything. Even though my eyes burned, I kept a stoic face.

“The only thing I would want you to do is leave me alone. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. So please, just leave.”

“Don’t say that. We can talk. Baby, please...” He halted as he looked at something behind me. His pleading eyes suddenly turned hard as steel, his shoulders tensed, and fists clenched.

“So, this is the reason for your restlessness,” Warner said.

Looking over my shoulder, I found him standing right behind me. His unreadable gaze set on the man down on the road whose murderous glare was drilling holes into him.

“What’s he doing here?” he hissed in his deep Greek accent. With his stormy grays dark with fury, his nostrils flared. Achilles Valencian was back again.

I wanted to send Warner back inside, but instead, I held my chin high. “That’s none of your business.”

When his fierce eyes snapped to Warner again, I felt him stepping back behind me.

Taking a deep breath, he set his flaming, preying gaze on me. “Rosebud, if you want him to stay in one piece, tell him to leave right now. Don’t test

my patience. You can punish me all you want, but I *won't* tolerate this.”

I gaped at him. The nerve of this man!

“Is that a threat, Mr. Valencian? If it is, then I’m not scared of you.” Warner stepped forward again.

The muscle of Ace’s strong jaw ticked.

“He won’t go anywhere! He’s my friend, so he can stay here as long as he wants. The one who needs to go is you! So leave, Ace! I won’t say it twice! Otherwise, trust me, you won’t like the outcome.” I pointed my index finger at him.

What would I do if he didn’t leave? I didn’t know. I just hoped he wouldn’t barge into my house like a bull and do something rash.

With his fists clenched, eyes icy cold, he looked at Warner again. “Don’t get in my way, Mr. Wilson. Trust me, I’m not a person to mess with.”

This time, Warner stayed quiet.

Taking another deep breath, he turned to me. “I’ll give you another night, Rosebud. I want you in the office tomorrow. And believe me, if you don’t show up—” he cast a glance towards our front door, “—even your set lines wouldn’t be able to stop me from reaching you.”

With that, he sent another warning look to Warner before getting into his car and driving away.

THIRTY-NINE: ARRESTED?



“What’s wrong with him? I don’t know how this insane man can impress you that much?” Warner asked, baffled.

Sending him a look, I walked back to my bed and plopped down on it.

“What’s going on here, Em? Will you tell me now?” he queried again. “Did you two already break up?”

“We were never together for the breakup you’re talking about.”

“Then?” Raising his brow, he probed me to explain further.

Sighing, I told him everything. And he listened, taking a seat beside me.

But I kept some parts from him. Ace’s past. Especially his being a drug addict back then. It felt wrong to disclose his extremely personal and sore past to Warner. Instead, I told him after Ace’s father’s death, he went into depression and pushed me away from him, taking my sister’s help.

Taking everything in, he just watched me for a moment.

“If he wanted you away from him, why is he after you now?”

“Because now he thinks he can take me back into his life,” I replied through gritted teeth. When he was lost in drugs, he thought it was better if I was away from him. And now that he was stable again, he wanted me back. I wasn’t a freaking toy he could toss around. It was my life to decide, not his.

He took my decision away from me. The decision if I wanted to stand beside him even after knowing his secret or not.

A sharp pain shot through my chest. How could he do this to me?

“No matter his reasons, Em, he shouldn’t have done it. Breaking your heart like that. How could he be so inconsiderate towards the girl he claimed to care for so much?” Discontent flashed across his eyes as he shook his head.

I averted my gaze as a tear slipped down my cheek.

Wiping the tear away, he grabbed my hands. “If a person causes you that much pain, let them go. Your tears are too precious to be shed for a person who doesn’t care if you’re hurt or not.” When I didn’t answer, he tucked a stray lock behind my ear. “No matter how long you guys have known each other or have feelings for each other, no one can love you more than I do, Em. I would never hurt you like that.” His voice came out soft.

Snatching my hands from his hold, I put some distance between us. “Warner, please. I think we already talked about this.”

Hearing him eliciting his feelings for me made me uncomfortable.

Hurt flashed across his eyes, but he masked it soon as he sent me a look of apology. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t just stop myself.”

“It’s all right. I can understand. But please, Warner, I don’t want any awkwardness between our friendship with these kinds of topics.” Looking down, I twirled my bracelet.

He nodded, flashing me a sad smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful from now on.”

I felt guilty. But it was what it was. Just because I’d an argument with

Ace didn't mean I'd reconsider my relationship with Warner. I didn't love him. I hurt him enough. I couldn't do it more by pretending something that wasn't real.

"Thank you for understanding." The corner of my mouth turned up into a tight-lipped smile.

He cleared his throat. "Anyway, what are you gonna do now? You'll go to his office tomorrow just like he said? Even after what happened?"

I let out a sigh. I had the same question, but I didn't have an answer.

* * *

I SCOWLED at the huge building before me. The name OC Textiles was hung up there, as if mocking me. I wanted to break this building along with its owner's head!

I spit some more curses at myself for doing this. But I had to do it. Keeping my anger aside, I straightened and walked inside the skyscraper.

No, I definitely didn't come here for his threat. There were two reasons behind my taking this decision. One, I didn't want to look unprofessional and let my personal reasons come between me and my work. I wouldn't give him that much power over me. I didn't care if he was here or not. And two, I'd try my best to get out of that contract of three months I had to spend here.

Yes, my reasons contradicted each other. But it was what it was. I'd come here for work, as it was my duty. But I didn't want to work here for another month and a half. I'd ask him to terminate the freaking contract. And he'll have to do it. I'll make him.

At the lobby, the secretary flashed me her usual too friendly smile, which I didn't reciprocate. I wasn't in the mood. And the nervous flutters in my tummy and pounding heart in my chest spoiled it more.

Getting out of the elevator, as I approached my office, I halted in my tracks.

God! What was he doing here? Waiting for me outside my office? But wait, I didn't think Tobias would wait for me, too.

They seemed to be in a serious discussion. Tobias had a hand on his shoulder while he stood there with his hands in his pockets, jaw ticking. Something tugged inside my chest at his appearance. He looked... exhausted. Dark circles under his eyes, dense stubble across his jaw, hair disheveled.

When his eyes flickered to me, surprise and relief flashed across them as he let out a breath.

"Rosebud." He pulled his hands out from his pocket and walked towards me with his long strides. Before I could warn him to stay away, he pulled me into him and nuzzled his nose against the crook of my neck. My skin tingled against his rough stubble. "You came," he whispered in my neck, taking a sharp inhale.

My heart palpitated as I stood there for a moment, unable to say anything. His voice, arms, and scent were tampering with my head. But then my lips pressed together.

"Let go of me!" I wiggled in his hold.

"Never." He kissed my jaw.

My eyes widened. The nerve of this man! When my gaze met with my brother, he just scratched the back of his head awkwardly, not doing anything to help me.

What?

Traitor!

“Let me go this instance, Ace! Or else—”

“Or else what?” Pulling his head away from my neck, he challenged me. His slightly red eyes stared at me hard. “You already punished me enough. Now I can’t even hug you?”

“It’s nothing compared to the seven years you punished me!” I snapped.

Remorse flashed across his eyes. Slowly stepping back from me, he sighed. “Rosebud, let’s talk inside my office. I’ll explain everything to you.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I know what I needed to know. You had no choice, you had to use Tess to hurt me, you were looking out for my well-being. I know enough. I don’t need to learn anything new.” My eyes burned with tears, but I tried my best not to let them fall. His proximity not only affected my brain but also my emotions.

He grimaced as if in torture, as he tried to reach out for me again. But before he could, I turned around and walked away.

“Rosebud, wait!”

“Em!” Tobias’s voice rang.

Ignoring their calls, I climbed down the stairs. I didn’t want to wait for the elevator right now. I needed to make some distance from them. The worst thing was, even my brother was on his side. Did he not know anything?

Reaching the finance department, I went to Sierra’s desk. She was the only one I was close to in this office after Liza. And I also had to discuss Arthur with her.

I hope her leave is over.

To my surprise, another girl sat in her place. No Sierra there. Once trying to know what she was doing there, the newcomer told me she joined

yesterday after the previous girl resigned. Means Sierra.

I just stared at her, dumbfounded. Why did she resign?

Now it was extremely important for me to meet her.

I needed to talk to Matt first.

“Ms. Hutton?”

Turning around, I found Carter grinning at me. The devil’s secretary. Even he seemed relieved seeing me.

“I’m glad you’re here today.” He glanced around. The devil arrived from around the corner, with my brother trailing behind. Glancing at his boss, the secretary mumbled, “I hope I won’t have to face another of his wrath today.”

Frowning, I turned to the devil approaching me. Couldn’t this man leave me alone for even a minute? I really didn’t want to create a scene before everyone. But I didn’t think he cared.

Just as I was about to tell him to leave me alone for the umpteenth time, a voice stopped me.

“Guys, look! Isn’t that Antonio Raymond?” James, the head of finance department, asked. His eyes were glued to the huge TV on the wall. The TV they used to get themselves updated with the business world.

But the name he said caught my attention as all pairs of eyes around me flickered to the television.

Among the swarm of paparazzi, some cops dragged a man out of a building. The media was crazy, casting question after question at that man in a blue suit. But he avoided them. Some of his bodyguards put a security circle around him, saving him from the hungry reporters.

I couldn’t see his face properly as he had his hand before his face to avoid

the flashing cameras.

My brows creased. Antonio Raymond? So, this was the man who was after the Valencians. He trapped Caleb.

Then I read on the headline.

'Infamous businessman, Antonio Raymond, arrested due to the allegation his current date charged on him for getting her pregnant and threatening her to abort the baby.'

My eyes widened. Such a prick!

Gasps resounded around me. The curses for him followed behind from OC Textiles' loyal employees.

Though he deserved what he was getting, from whatever I heard, he was a powerful man. Not to forget dangerous. How come the girl so easily went against him and the cops were brave enough to arrest him before the whole world?

I had to admit. Whoever the girl was, she had some guts.

My gaze fell on the devil standing there with an unreadable mask on his face. His steely eyes fixed on the television.

What's with him now?

And then I saw it.

The triumph in Carter's eyes as he sent a discreet look to his boss's way, as if...

A silent gasp slipped through my lips.

Was I thinking right?

Did he have a hand behind Antonio Raymond's arrest?

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FORTY: TRAPPED BY HIM



*H*uffing, I slammed the files on the desk. I've been brainstorming since the breaking news, but I couldn't come up with anything.

Achilles Valencian literally destroyed Antonio Raymond's image before the whole world. From the gossip I heard from others around the office, after this blow, Antonio's company's shares dropped in the market drastically. Apparently, he was doomed.

I even heard police had some proof against him doing illegal businesses in small towns. I was sure Ace had a hand behind it. Otherwise, how did the cops get proof strong enough to destroy a powerful businessman just in a day?

Only Achilles Valencian could do it.

After what that man did to Caleb, I should've seen it coming. But this was a big blow. How did he manage it?

My legs itched to go to his office and ask him directly. I wanted to know what was running through his head. What was his next plan? Because I was sure, after this, Antonio wouldn't keep quiet.

A groan left my mouth.

The knock on the door didn't have my heart leaping. Because I knew it

wasn't him. He wouldn't knock at all. He'd have just barged in like the caveman he was!

Tobias poked his head through the door before strolling in. I scowled.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Tone gentle.

"No!" My answer was sharp, arms crossed over my chest.

"Em, please. This is important." His eyes were pleading.

I cocked my head. "Are you here for your friend?"

He let out a sigh. "I'm here to make my sister see the truth."

My lips pursed. So, I was right. He was here for him, not me. Then realization hit me. He also knew everything. What happened that night. Of course he knew! Being his best friend and Tess's twin, there was no way they didn't tell him about their plan. How could he let them do that?

"You knew." It wasn't a question. It was a statement. The crack of my voice was clear. A look of sorrow surrounded his features.

"It was too late for me to do anything when I found out. I'm sorry. I couldn't do anything to stop them." He took a step closer. "I know what they did was extremely wrong. I'd stopped talking to them for months after I knew how cruelly they broke your heart. But trust me, Em. With time, I realized maybe his way to push you away was wrong, but it only did good to you. Now look at you, you're doing so good with your dream career. You were a topper. If you'd stayed, you wouldn't be able to do it."

"What do you mean? How does his decision have any connection to my studies?" my voice rose as I spoke. Apparently, everyone knew what happened that night, but no one even once tried to tell me anything in those years. Now I wondered if Mom and Dad knew too.

“Do you remember when you failed in the exams for the first time?” he asked.

I frowned, confused about his question.

Shrugging, I answered, “At ninth grade.”

“And why?”

“What’re you trying to say? I didn’t study well!” I snapped, getting irritated.

He slowly shook his head. “Because you were too lost in Achilles to concentrate on your studies. You were too busy changing yourself, concerned about your weight, looks, and get up to impress him all the time you didn’t have interest in your studies anymore. You were getting lost in him so much you almost forgot who you really were. You’d become a totally different person back then, Em. And that’s because your life danced around him. You didn’t see anything beyond him. Not even your own career.”

I remained quiet. How could I argue when his every word screamed truth?

“And after that, your grades only decreased. From a bright student, you ended up staying in ninth grade twice. We were all concerned about your future, Em. And Achilles noticed it all,” he said, making my eyes snap to him. “You were already so lost in him, ruining your future. What do you think would have happened to a naïve fifteenth-year-old if she was thrown into a world filled with drugs and addiction by a boy she loved? Would you be able to handle the shock and pain to see him writhe in agony when he needed drugs? Would you be able to handle him when he was drunk out of his mind at some corner of a street? Would you? Would you be able to handle any of it?”

My throat dried up as his questions swirled inside my head. “I would have been there for him. I would have definitely given him some support.” I meant what I said. I meant every word.

He again shook his head. “Maybe you would. But it would be too traumatic for a fifteen-year-old to witness it. You were too young. Your whole future would be at risk.” A sigh left him. “He didn’t know where life was taking him, Em. And after knowing your plan to confess, he knew it was time to separate you from him. From his life. And after getting away from him, you finally focused on yourself once you moved to New York. You found your path back again and shone in your life. Look at where you are now. Seeing you now, I don’t have any complaints about him anymore. It was necessary for your own good.”

His words stung. But deep down, I knew he was right. I would have been broken seeing Ace like that. My heart was too fragile back then to watch him suffer that much. Still, my heart argued with all these facts. It didn’t want to come to peace with how easily he pushed me away.

“I understand your point. But everything has a way to do it. He could’ve just rejected my proposal! He didn’t have to do that with Tess! He’d no right to hurt me like that! Do you have any idea how I felt when I saw him with my own sister?” A tear rolled down my cheek.

“It was harsh, but it was necessary.”

I gaped at his words. Was he even hearing himself?

“Tell me, if he’d rejected you after your confession, would you give up?” He raised a brow. “Would you stop going after him?”

I opened my mouth and then shut it.

Never. I’d never give up.

“Your silence is your answer, Em. You’d never give up on him if he’d chosen the easy way. He could’ve used any girl other than taking Tess’s help to do that. Yes, you would be hurt, but after some time, you would again start fantasizing about him. But when you saw him with your own sister, it shook you. It made a big difference, Em. And you, being always insecure of Tess, made it even harder for you to take it.”

Averting my eyes, I turned away from him.

“If it wasn’t Tess, you’d never give up on him, Em,” he spoke in a soft voice.

“I didn’t want to give up,” I whispered, my throat tightening.

I felt his hand on my shoulder. “Nor did he.”

My gaze met his soft blue ones.

He nodded. “He adored you too much to let you go. But he had to. He didn’t want you to ruin your precious future on him when all he could think about was drugs and alcohol most of the time.” A sad chuckle slipped from his lips. “Though he kept himself totally sober, the days he used to go to see you and play chess with you. He tried his best to be better, Em. But he was in too deep.”

My heart tugged at his words. I still remembered those one or two visits a month when he’d spend the whole day at our place and stay with me. It was after his father’s death. He used to be always tired. And I was too always too excited and over the moon I never gave any attention to that. I used to think his tiredness, his losing weight, was because he was sad about his father’s demise.

Even in that situation, when he couldn’t even go a day without his addiction, he didn’t forget the promises he used to make me, to meet me once

or twice a month. He never missed the dates.

Looking down, I pinched the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes.

“Now that you know and understand his reasons, you will forgive him?” Tobias queried, his voice expectant.

I didn't answer.

“Em, please. Don't torture him anymore. He'd already suffered enough.”

I cleared my throat. “Is he in his office now?”

His eyes lit up. “Yes, it was so difficult to keep him in his office away from you for some time so I can talk to you alone. Why? You're gonna sort everything out with him?”

“Yes. I'm gonna sort out everything by asking him to free me from the three months contract. So I can go back to New York.” I turned around and walked out of my office.

He called out my name, but I didn't stop.

Even though I accepted the good intentions of Ace's reasons, it didn't hurt any less. It wasn't easy for me to forget everything.

Without knocking, I barged into his office. Halting his impatient pacing around the room, he turned to me. The disheveled hair of his indicated to the numerous times those long, lean fingers ran through them.

“Rosebud,” he uttered my name in a breathless whisper, casting my heartbeat go haywire.

Taking two steps ahead, I crossed my arms over my chest. “I need to talk to you about something.”

He straightened. A determined look flashed into his gray pools. The look of despair was gone. Nodding, he walked past me and went to the door.

“Sure, I’ll listen to everything you have to say. But first, you’ll have to listen to me.” He locked the door with a click.

My eyes widened. “What’re you doing? You don’t have to lock the door to talk!”

“I need to make sure you don’t run away again, sweetheart.”

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FORTY-ONE: ALWAYS THERE WITH ME



Fuming, I strode to the door and tried to open it. But his pair of strong arms snaked around my midriff and hauled me to the middle of the office.

A shriek left my mouth. “What the hell, Valencian! Put me down right now!”

“I will. Once you hear everything I have to say.”

His calm tone made me boil. I didn’t let him explain things, so he would keep me captive in his office, in his arms?

I can’t believe this man!

“No! I won’t hear anything! You’ll do what I want, and then let me go!” I said, putting on the scariest face I could manage on my face with a stern voice.

But he ignored me. He was too busy roaming his gray eyes across my every feature. As if he hadn’t seen me in years. Not tolerating being disregarded like that, I stomped on his feet with my five inches heel.

A hiss left his mouth. His orbs that were filled with adoration a moment ago, now watched me in shock and confusion. But I didn’t see any anger in there. Nor did his arms loosen around me.

“Do not ignore me when I’m talking!”

His rough palm caressed my cheek with the gentlest touch. “I could never ignore my Rosebud. But I won’t let you go anywhere until you hear everything and forgive me.”

“That would never happen!” My eyes narrowed. I wiggled in his hold, but as always, I failed to escape. My gaze flickered to those stupid bulging muscles underneath his sleeves.

“It will. I’ll make it happen. Now what did my Rosebud want from me?” Leaning in, he took a desperate sniff of my hair. His heady scent was messing with my senses.

Leaning back from him, I said, “I want you to terminate the contract. I want to leave.”

The mention of leaving had him tense. His arms tightened around my waist and jaw clenched. The old Achilles Valencian was back in full force as his features hardened. I saw the storm swirling inside him through the windows of his soul. Those stormy gray orbs.

“You’ll never leave me, Rosebud. Never again. I won’t let you.” The coolness of his voice sent shivers down my spine.

“Well, it was you who let me go. I didn’t leave on my own. I was pushed away,” I said, holding his gaze.

His stony features softened. “I didn’t want to, Rosebud. No sane person would push the only light away from their life. But—”

“But you had to.” I completed for him, gulping the thickness of my throat. “Tobias told me everything.”

Surprise etched on his face. “I had no choice, Rosebud. Trust me, I kept

meeting you and spending time with you even after knowing how I would affect your life in a bad way. I was too selfish to let you go.” Pain flashed across his eyes.

“But you did,” I whispered. My heart clenched. “You left me.”

Shaking his head, he pressed his forehead against mine, letting out a trembling breath. “I never left you, Rosebud. I could never.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yes, I separated you from me. But I was always around. Though I couldn’t touch you, my eyes always did from afar,” he said, stopping my heart. Raising my left hand, he kissed my wrist, gazing at my bracelet. A soft smile tugged at the edge of his lips. “This looks more beautiful on you than I imagined.”

A gasp slipped through my lips. My eyes widened.

The anonymous person who gifted it to me was... him?

“It was you?”

He nodded, kissing my forehead.

“But... how?” I was shocked. All the time I wore it on my wrist, and I didn’t have any idea it was him who left the box that day outside of my door.

“How could I not give a congratulation gift to my Rosebud on her graduation day?”

“You were there? Y-you saw my graduation?” My voice came out like a meek child.

“Yes, I was there. I was always there for my rose.” He cupped my cheeks. “I always had my eyes on you, even if I was far away from you here in LA most of the time. But I was there on your every special day. I was there

whenever I thought you needed me. And trust me, it wasn't for you. It was for my own sanity."

"That means, that means... you were there all these years?" I asked, tears rolling down my cheeks. He didn't abandon me. He was there all this time when I thought he didn't even care to call once.

He nodded, wiping my tears. "Yes, I never left you alone. I could never leave my Rosebud alone."

A flare of fire again lit inside me. "Then you saw how much I suffered! You didn't consider confronting me. Didn't once come before me. Why did you do that? Why?"

My struggle began again, but he held me firm against him.

"I know you suffered. And I'm extremely sorry. But you have no idea how much agony I went through staying away from you, Rosebud. Especially when..." A muscle of his jaw ticked as his nostrils flared. "Especially when I had to see my girl dating other men. I had to endure it all. Trust me, they were lucky I took it as my punishment for pushing you away from me. Otherwise, they'd be dead right now."

Surprised, subconsciously a blush crept up my neck remembering those guys I dated back then only for some days. I couldn't even stretch them for a week. Because all I felt towards them was nothing. Not even a bit of attraction.

And then my temper rose. Jabbing a finger in his chest, I gritted out. "Do you know how guilty I felt to date them? Even after I thought you wanted nothing to do with me, even after I was single, do you know how much it hurt me to feel like I was playing with others? Just to get a little distraction. Just to forget my heartache for some time! And all because you were being too great

by keeping me away from you! And now that I'm finally with a guy who is great, you appeared all of a sudden declaring me as yours? The nerve of you!"

His lips pressed. "I know you were hurt. And seeing you in pain only doubled my agony. But it was for your own good. And I didn't just appear out of nowhere." Greek accent was dense. "You were always mine. I was waiting for you to finish college and for me to be stable enough to be worthy of you. Though I was stable for a long time before you finally graduated."

To be worthy of me?

Something tugged inside my chest at his words.

"It wasn't your life to decide what I would do or not. How did you know I wouldn't fall for anyone else and accept you back into my life just like that?" My tone was hard.

"I didn't need to know you wouldn't fall for anyone else. Because my Rosebud loved me enough to keep me in her heart forever."

That was ridiculous. But my eyes burned as waves of emotions slammed into my chest. I let out a shaky breath, not denying him.

"I also knew how stubborn my little Rosebud was. I knew you wouldn't forgive me so easily. But I couldn't give up. After all, I'd waited seven fucking years to have you back in my arms." His thumb brushed my lower lip.

I shook my head. Some more shameless tears slipped from my eyes. "No matter what you say, I can't forget what you did. You hurt me. You..." I bit my lip. "You didn't let me stay with you. You pushed me away when you needed me the most. I... hate you! I hate you for that, Achilles Valencian! I hate you!" Pushing at his chest, I tried to get away from him again.

Even if it wasn't my fault, even if I knew nothing about his condition, I felt guilty. For not being there for him when he needed me. It tormented my soul to even think of that.

He pulled me closer. With raw emotions flashing across those stormy grays, he whispered, "And I love you, Emerald Hutton. I love you so fucking much!"

My breathing stopped as I stared at him. And then slowly my heart started racing, a tingling sensation spread across my veins. My knees wobbled at his declaration. The intense emotions searing through my chest made me let out a shaky breath.

He'd said those words again. The words that haunted my dreams. The words that ran in my head twenty-four hours.

I love you...

I wanted to hear those words again. My ears yearned to hear them again. My lower lip trembled. I had no words. I was speechless.

"I loved you from the day those turquoise eyes met mine, my precious rose. I loved you every time you smiled at me with those big doe eyes. I loved you whenever that little nose crinkled every time you thought you'd lose in the chess matches." He kissed my nose, followed by my eyelids. "I loved you when you were away from me. I loved even your annoying habit of eating garlic prawns using your hand. And I love you when I have you in my arms right now. The place where I want to keep you for the rest of my life."

Leaning in, he captured my trembling lips into a scorching kiss. A whimper left me as I melted against him. My heart soared.

"I love you so much, my rose. So much that without you, I deny to even breath," he murmured against my lips, claiming my mouth again. With the

intoxicating strokes of his tongue, the warmth of his arms, I found myself letting out a sign of content.

Clutching his coat tight in my fists, I kissed him back with equal urgency. I missed those lips. I missed his arms, his voice, his everything.

Slowly pulling away, he stared deep into my eyes. With both of our breathing harsh, we couldn't move our gazes away from each other. It was like an invisible magnet pulling us towards each other.

“Are you still mad at me, Rosebud?” he asked, gray pools filling with hope. “Will you give me—give us a chance?”

Would I?

Just as I opened my mouth to give him my answer, a knock landed on the door. I tried to pull away from him, but he didn't let me.

“No need. Whoever it is will go away.”

Shaking my head, I wiggled out and opened the door, much to his dismay. It could be something important. But the actual reason behind my eagerness to open it was to escape his question.

Before I could even pull the door wide, it flew open, making me stumble back.

“Mr. Valencian! It's so great to see—” Her ear-splitting grin threatened to fall when her eyes landed on me.

My jaw clenched.

Red freaking witch!

What the hell was she doing here?

My eyes immediately formed into a glare.

“Uh, hello, Ms. Hutton, Mr. Valencian! I'm sorry if I interrupted

anything,” she said, planting an extra sweet mask on her face. The once over she gave him didn’t go missed by me.

“Rosebud, you didn’t answer me.”

Not even acknowledging her, he took long strides towards me. But I stepped away. My twisting facial expression must’ve told him to keep his distance.

“Don’t you dare!” My voice came out as a snap. He called her here? Why? “You’ve got a guest to attend! Why don’t you concentrate on her instead?”

“Baby...”

I stepped back again from his approaching form.

Clenching his fists, he let out a curse, murmuring something incoherent under his breath. His eyes were desperate... wild. Then his flashing stormy gaze flickered to the red witch who wore a maroon dress today.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he roared, making both me and her flinch. His shoulders were rigid, his nostrils flared.

With eyes wide open, she opened her mouth and closed like a gaping fish. Her little outfit and excessive makeup spoiled my mood further. Not wanting to be there anymore, I pushed my legs to move. My heart still thudded from his words. Warmth, anger, and jealousy were messing with my head. And I definitely didn’t want to see her face any longer. What she did last time still burned me like a hot knife.

“Rosebud, wait!”

“Don’t!” Giving him a warning look, I stormed out of his office. And to my dismay, the door automatically closed behind me.

“Mr. Valencian, I’m so sorry...” Her meek words faded away along the gap of the door. My lips pressed tight as I glared at it. Her slutty dress pricked my insides. Did she wear it for him?

My nails dug into my palms. He definitely didn’t call her. The way he behaved proved it. Then why the heck she was here?

I stood there like a psycho, staring at a closed door with venom. And why the hell did I come out like that? I shouldn’t have left her alone with him.

Shaking my head at my ridiculous thoughts, I decided to leave. But still somehow lingered around the corner. Several ominous thoughts were nagging in my head.

Though his booming voice that flew out of the closed door soothed my burning heart a little. They weren’t doing anything I wouldn’t like. The door opened again, and that witch came out with tears in her eyes. I hid myself from her sight.

Throwing another glance at his office, with her pale face, she turned around and rushed down the hallway without looking back. And I just kept glaring at her until she was out of sight.

A thud came out of his office, followed by another. I took a few steps towards the door, ready to barge in again. But then I stopped myself.

If I go in there right now, he won’t let me leave until I answer him.

I shook my head. He must be angry and throwing a tantrum right now.

But... what if he was hurt?

I bit my lip.

And then I heard him shouting something. Seconds later, a huffing and puffing Carter appeared and rushed inside the devil’s den.

I heaved a sigh. He was okay. It was just another bad day for Carter, I guessed.

Poor guy.

Just as I turned around to leave, my phone buzzed.

Opening the message, I read it.

Great! He sent the information I needed.

Now all I have to do is to drive there and sort things out myself.

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FORTY-TWO: MEETING SIERRA



*P*ressing the bell, I waited.

The elevator opened, and a lanky middle-aged man stepped out in a floral shirt. Stopping, he eyed me up and down with his slightly red eyes. I faced away from him and tapped the bell again.

What's taking her so long to open the door?

Once the creepy man unlocked his apartment next to the one I was standing before and went inside, casting me one last lingering glance before closing the door, I sighed in relief.

God knew how she stayed here with this creep on the other side of the wall.

With a click, the door opened, and her blonde head peeked through it. Surprise flashed across her brown eyes.

“Emerald? What're you doing here?”

“Hi, Sierra!” I smiled. “Sorry, I tried to call you, but it went unreachable every time. I heard from Matt you weren't well, so I thought I'd pay you a visit.”

“Uh, thank you for your concern. I'm much better now.” Her wary gaze flickered around. She still talked to me through the small gap.

I cleared my throat. “You won’t invite me in?”

She hesitated, but then nodded and held the door wide for me.

Flashing another smile, I walked into the living room of her small apartment. With an adjoined kitchen, there were two more doors attached to the room. An old couch, two chairs, and a small bookshelf filled the small area. Not anything fancy, but it was cozy.

“Would you like to have anything? Coffee?” she asked, stance awkward.

What’s with the weird behavior?

I shook my head. “No thanks. I just came to see if you were all right. Umm, why did you resign all of a sudden? I mean, if you needed more time to recover completely, then you could just ask Matt. He’d have helped you out with this.” I came to the point without beating around the bush. Her meetings with Arthur, taking leave and then resigning, I had a hunch it could be somehow related to him.

She shrugged, wringing her knuckles. “As you know, I wasn’t well. I needed some time to get better completely. I couldn’t just expand my leave like that. And I decided to give myself a break, to spend some time with my family, you know? So…”

“So, you quit your job?”

“Yeah,” she answered, licking her dry lips. The swell around her eyes and dark circles under them caught my attention.

“With your stack of bills pending?” I pointed at the papers on her small table beside the door. Clearly, she hasn’t been able to pay them on time.

She averted her eyes. “I-I was just about to pay the bills. I was just a bit late, and they sent notices.”

“You don’t need to explain anything, Sierra. I just want to know why you quit if you were facing financial problems?” I asked. “Is it—is it because of Arthur?”

Her eyes snapped to mine, they widened. So, I was right. He had something to do with it.

“W-what are you talking about? Why would he be the reason behind my quitting?”

“Because I saw you with him twice, Sierra. And both times, you were pretty shaken.”

All color drained from her already pale face. Fear flashed across her eyes.

“H-how? W-where? Listen, it’s not what you think it is—”

“What’s going on, Sierra? You’re definitely hiding something.” I cut her off. “Is Arthur threatening you? Or is there something else that you had to leave your job? Tell me, Sierra. Trust me, if there’s anything like that, I can help you. I’ll talk to Ace myself.” Placing a hand on her shoulder, I tried to assure her.

Shaking her head, she gulped. “You’re mistaken. He didn’t do anything. I left the job because of my personal reasons, which I already told you.”

“Don’t lie to me, Sierra. It’s in your eyes. I can see it. He’s done something that you had to take this step. I saw you with him. You were crying. Please tell me the truth. I can help you,” I probed, my voice was desperate.

I had been suspicious about this man from the start. At Tess’s engagement party he denied before everyone he hadn’t met me before. Which was a complete lie. And at our first meeting, the words he said, no sane person would say those things to a stranger just like that. So, assuming he

may have forgotten wouldn't be right either.

He's always given me a negative vibe. And now that I was close to discovering the real face behind his polite mask, I didn't want to lose the chance.

Taking a step back from me, she wrapped her arms around herself. "You can't help me, Emerald. No one can. Don't think too much of what you saw. It was nothing. Just forget it."

"Of course I can. If I talk to Ace, he'll definitely hear me out and believe me." I knew he would. But... against his own uncle? Would he go to the extent of me to distrust his uncle who had always supported him in every phase of life?

Shaking her head, she took a glance at the door. "You shouldn't have come here, Emerald. I think you should go now."

"But—"

"Please, I'm begging you. I can't tell you anything! Don't drag us both into danger by digging something that isn't related to you." Though her voice was stern, there was moisture in her eyes.

Danger? Something churned in my stomach.

"What danger?"

"Emerald, please. Just leave. I'm telling this for your own good."

I sighed. "At least tell me why you quit."

She stayed silent for a moment, and then said, "I had to. I didn't want to do things against my morals."

* * *

TAKING A SIP ON MY TEA, I watched the steam vanishing into the thin air

slowly.

Why did she mean by that? She didn't want to do things against her morals?

Though she didn't give me a direct answer, I was sure now that Arthur was definitely not a man to trust. He was up to something. But what? I wish Sierra would've told me everything. But clearly, she was scared. How dangerous Arthur could be that if she opened her mouth, she feared he'd harm her?

A shudder ran through my spine.

"Em? Are you listening?" A hand waved before my face, pulling me out of my thoughts. Warner had a tiny frown between his brows as he watched me.

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if you're doing well now. I mean, when I met you yesterday, you were a mess."

After getting out of Sierra's building, I got a message from him asking if I wanted to grab some drinks together. So here we were, sitting at a small buzzing cafe, sipping on our hot beverages.

"Yeah, I'm fine now. Even went to the office today." Ace's confession echoed in my head. A blush rose to my neck as I twirled the bracelet. The bracelet he gave to me.

He... loved me.

Warmth surged through my chest, along with the flutters in my tummy. I wanted to close my eyes and relive the moment when he said those words to me again and again.

After talking to Tobias and then him, it felt like a huge burden had been lifted off my chest. Though it still hurt thinking of everything, I felt somewhat lighter now. I could see the reasons. After all, we all were young back then.

“You went to the office again? I thought after what he did, you wouldn’t even see his face ever again!” he stated in disbelief.

I heaved a sigh. “It was the original plan. But I’m bound by a contract, remember? I had to go.”

“You could make him terminate the contract if you wanted. But clearly, you already forgave him, didn’t you? You forgot how he used your sister to break your heart!” he snapped.

My eyes narrowed at his tone. “I didn’t forgive him yet. And he didn’t use my sister to break my heart. Tess volunteered. And... he had a reason to do that. Not that I support his way, but he was only looking out for my well-being. Even if nothing much good happened in my life after his stunt.”

Irritation flared inside me again, recalling everything that happened since the last seven years. I couldn’t say he was totally wrong for his reasons, because they were valid. He truly wanted what was good for me. But in the process, he hurt us both.

“Yet? That means you’re considering forgiving him? You’re so lost in him to see he isn’t the right guy for you. Don’t you see how he behaves with you? He wants to control your life, Em. And you’re letting him!”

“I know what I’m doing, Warner. You don’t need to tell me what I should or shouldn’t do. And about him being controlling, yes, he’s a control freak. But he doesn’t cross any lines if I tell him not to. He respects my decisions.” My voice came out firm.

He proved it many times. If I needed time, he's given it to me without letting his dominating self in the way. Though his patience lived short.

"So, you'll let him cross the line?" His jaw ticked.

"Honestly, I don't know. And I really don't think I need to answer you about my personal life."

Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose before meeting my gaze again. "I'm sorry, Em. I was just looking out for you. I just don't want you to make wrong decisions in your life in a rush."

"You don't need to worry." I shook my head, leaning back into the chair. "I'm sorry too. I was a little harsh."

He smiled. "It's all right. I pushed you too much. Anyway, forget about it. You were looking tense a while ago. Is everything all right?"

Should I tell him? I knew I could trust him. He was my best friend, after all. Maybe he could give me some suggestions?

After I told him everything, my suspicion about Arthur and Sierra, he pondered for a moment, taking in all the information.

"You think he's doing something at Achilles's back?"

I nodded. "He definitely is. He threatened Sierra to do something she wasn't comfortable with, so she left the job. I'm sure she didn't want to deal with him anymore."

"So why don't you tell this to Achilles?"

A breath left my lips. "I can't. I don't have any solid proof against him. Nor did I witness him doing anything wrong. Ace and Caleb trust him blindly. They won't believe me if I tell them about my doubt."

"Then I think you should wait and see if you find anything against him."

But honestly, after hearing what Sierra said, he seems like a dangerous man. I'd suggest you stay away from him, Em. Don't drag yourself in any kind of danger," he cautioned.

"But I can't just sit and do nothing. He's up to something, I can sense it. I want to stop him before he does some real damage." Especially to Valencian Corp or Ace. But I doubted he would harm his own nephew.

Something lit up in his eyes. "I think I can help you. My cousin here in LA, he's a detective. A genius. Though we don't get along much, I think he will help you if I talk to him."

"That's great! Please, do that! And I'll also try to provide him with as much information about Arthur as possible. Thank you, Warner. It'll be a great help!" Grabbing his hands, I flashed him a grateful smile.

He squeezed my hands. "Anything for you."

* * *

ONCE I WAS at OC Textiles, I headed directly to my office. I needed to call Tobias and ask him about Arthur. The more I knew about him, the better. And at that moment, only Tobias could help me without asking much.

"Emerald!"

Matt's voice halted me in my tracks. Turning around, I found him jogging to me.

"Hey! What's up?" I asked.

"A sudden board meeting came up. You need to be there. I've already informed the boss," he said, huffing.

"Even though I attended every board meeting, I can't today. I'm busy right now. Go, tell your boss." I turned to leave.

“Wait!” He stopped me again. “You can’t miss the meeting, Em. As a board member, you have to attend.”

I frowned. “I joined the previous meetings just because your boss ordered me. I’m not a board member, just an ordinary employee like you, Matt. I think you’re mistaken.”

“What are you talking—” His eyes widened. “Oh, you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

He scratched the back of his head, averting his eyes. “Uh, nothing. My mistake. I thought you were really a board member since you attended each one in the previous month.”

A warning bell rang in my head.

“Don’t lie to me. You’re the CEO’s PA now. You should know who’s an actual member of the board and who’s not. What is it? What are you not telling me, Matt?” My gaze on him was hard.

His eyes flickered around as if looking for an escape.

“Matt! Out with it!”

“H-he will fire me. I swear, I didn’t know you weren’t aware of it.”

“Don’t worry, he won’t know anything. I won’t expose you,” I said, probing him to spill.

He shifted on his feet, looking at his right and left.

“Matt?”

“You promise you won’t tell anyone I told you this?”

“I promise. Now tell me.”

He sighed, his shoulders slumped. “You’re not just an ordinary employee,

Emerald. You're a member of the board."

I tilted my head in confusion. "But someone only becomes a board member when..."

He nodded. "When they have a share in the company. And..."

"And?"

"And you own most of the shares of this company. The boss made you the equal owner with him in the business. Everything Achilles Valencian owns also belongs to you now."

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FORTY-THREE: TWO CONDITIONS



*Y*ou got to be kidding me! An equal owner of everything he owned? That's ridiculous! Why the hell would he do that?

Only Achilles insane Valencian would be able to answer that.

With eyes formed into a scowl, lips pressed into displeasure and rage running hot through my veins, I stormed into his office. His eyes snapped up from his mobile. Standing in the middle of his office, his features matched my emotions right now. He was glaring holes at his phone when I barged in.

I knew what ran in his head. Of course he would be mad if I wouldn't respond to his non-stop calls and messages. My phone stopped vibrating as he cut the call.

"Where the hell were you?" he fired, throwing the phone on his desk.

"And what the hell did you do?" I countered, glaring at him.

The place between his thick brows crinkled. "What did I do? Shouldn't I be the one asking you questions right now?" Sharp jaw ticked. "You went to meet him again!"

Now that took my attention off the previous matter.

Warner? How did he know I was with him a while ago?

Then realization hit me.

“You!” Striding closer, I jabbed a finger in his chest. “You still have your men after me? Didn’t I tell you I don’t want them to follow me around? How dare you!”

“You were holding his hand.” He ignored my question. His tone came out hard. Pure jealousy and rage flashed across his eyes.

“Yes, I was. And that shouldn’t have anything to do with you! He’s my friend. I’ll hold his hand, hug him, cuddle with him. I’ll do whatever the hell I want with him. You don’t have a say in this!”

“No, you can’t!” Pulling me against his hard chest, he wrapped one of his strong arms around my waist and grabbed the back of my neck with the other. His dark gray eyes held me captive. “No matter what he is to you, no men can touch you other than me! Did you forget that you’re only mine, my little rose? That you belong to me?”

Gulping, I tried to tame my wild heart beating in my chest. Weirdly, this side of him did something to me. His possessiveness and dominant behavior produced a fire inside me. No matter how absurd it was, my treacherous body reacted to it.

“T-that is ridiculous! I’m not yours.” I cringed at my own voice. It sounded croaky and meek.

“Yes, you are,” he whispered, inches away from my face. “Are you doing this to punish me, Rosebud? If you are, then I’d take anything as my punishment, but not this. I can’t see you with him. Not with any other men.”

“What will you do if I say this is your punishment and I’ll meet him again and again?” I challenged.

His lips curled into a sneer, grip tightening on me. But not even a flicker of fear raised in me. Because I knew he could do anything but hurt me. At

least not physically.

“Don’t make me do something you won’t like, Rosebud. Do not play with my jealousy, because a jealous Achilles Valencian is anything but good. I don’t play fair in love and war. And here we’re talking about both.”

My lips parted in surprise. What would he do if I didn’t listen to him? Whatever it was, it wouldn’t be in Warner’s favor.

“He’s just my friend! You don’t need to go all crazy over it! We’re not together anymore. So just calm your ass down!” Narrowing my eyes, I tilted my head, ignoring the fact his shoulders relaxed visibly. “You’d take any punishment for me to forgive you?”

He straightened, eyeing me with suspicion. “Yes. Anything. And I know you’re not together anymore. I talked to Cassie. But that doesn’t mean you’ll let him fly around you. That guy still has feelings for you. I don’t want him to look at you the way only I have the right to.”

I gritted my teeth. I couldn’t believe this man! And Cassie? That traitor! She talked to him about me behind my back, didn’t she? I knew she was always on his side!

I’d talk to her later. I needed to take care of this man first.

Not commenting on his insane demands, I came to the point. “You want my forgiveness or not?”

Gray eyes widened a bit. “Of course, baby. What should I do? Tell me and I’ll do it. Do you need anything? Jewelries? Or you need a car? You love puppies, right? Should I bring you one? Or dozens? What do you want, baby?”

I shook my head. Men! He thought gifts could melt my mind?

“You’ll have to do just two things. And then I’ll consider whether to forgive you or not.”

“Consider?” He scowled.

“Take it or leave it!”

He stayed silent for a moment and then nodded. “What are those?”

“The first one is you need to stop having your men follow me around. I don’t want them to keep an eye on me like hawks everywhere I go.”

“What?” His displeasure was back. “I won’t do such a thing! They’re there for your safety, Rosebud. They aren’t going anywhere.”

“I’m not a child that they need to protect. I’m a big and independent girl. I can protect myself very well. And what about your declaration you’ll do anything to make me forgive you?” I raised my brow.

A muscle of his jaw ticked. “I’d do anything. But not compromise with your safety.”

“You have to!” My fists clenched. I’d make him agree with my decision. “Remove the guards, or no forgiveness.”

“Rosebud,” he warned, trying his infamous, intimidating tone on me. But alas, I wasn’t any of his employees. And he knew it.

When I continued to hold his hard gaze with my defiant one, he let out a sigh. “All right.”

“All right?” Shocked, I watched him. I wanted him to agree, but I didn’t know he’d agree that soon.

“Yes. I’ll pull my men off your back. Happy now?” His facial expression was too blank to read.

“Promise me.”

He nodded. "I promise not to send my men after you." He promised. That meant he wouldn't break it. He never broke his promises to me.

A smile broke out on my face.

"Now, what's the other one?"

My smile faltered, remembering his audacity. "You made me the equal owner of everything you belong. Undo it. I don't want your money. Who did you ask before taking this decision? Did you really think I'd be interested in your property?"

The astonishment and shock in his eyes were clear. But he masked them soon, clearing his throat. "How did you know? And of course not, Rosebud. I'll never think of you like that."

"It doesn't matter how did I know. And if not that, then why the hell did you do it? I don't have any interest in your business. Change it!"

"I'm sorry, Rosebud. I can't agree to this condition of yours."

"Why?" I snapped. "I said I don't need them. Why does everything that belongs to you would belong to me too? I've no right on them!"

Leaning in, he pressed his forehead against mine. "Because I belong to you, my Rosebud. Just like you belong to me. So, everything that I own automatically becomes yours. It's the truth. And I just made it official. Nothing unexpected."

My breath hitched, heart fluttered inside my chest. A blush rose in my cheeks.

"T-that doesn't make any sense. I don't need anything from you." Why did his words have such an effect on me all the time?

"I know. But I need you to accept it. Everywhere my name will be, I want

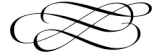
yours beside mine,” he said, peering down my soul. “And if something happens to me, I’ll rest in peace knowing that everything I worked hard for will be in my Rosebud’s hands.”

A chill ran through my veins as something squeezed my chest at the thought of losing him. “What do you mean? What will happen to you? Don’t talk rubbish!” my voice rose as I spoke, hands fisting on his shirt.

Why would he say something like that?

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FORTY-FOUR: PERVERT



A soft chuckle left him. “Of course, Rosebud. Nothing will happen to me. I’m just stating facts.”

“Then it’s a really absurd one! And you’ll emotionally blackmail me to get me into your court now? Because that’s not happening!”

“I’m not blackmailing you. And what’s done is done. It’s not negotiable anymore.”

My lips pressed tight. “What if I run away with all your money?”

Another laugh. “You can take anything you want, baby. Everything is yours. Just make sure you also take me along. Because I can’t live without you.”

I could feel my cheeks and neck heating up again at his cheeky response. Now he was flirting with me?

Unbelievable man!

I wiggled out of his arms. “Whatever you say, I’ll make you take everything back from me. Or I will give it back to you!”

He quirked a brow. “It’s non reversal, Rosebud.”

“We’ll see!” Huffing, I turned around and walked away.

“Where are you going?”

His footsteps behind me reached my ears.

“To the meeting. With the responsibility you gave me, do I have any other choice?” I replied, without stopping.

“Right. But what about my forgiveness? You didn’t forgive me yet.”

“I said I’d consider. And you didn’t agree to my second condition.”

He groaned.

“Now that’s not fair, Rosebud. I agreed to one, even though it was too much for me to do. And the second one wasn’t negotiable.” He continued to walk after me down the hallway outside of his office.

“It’s absolutely fair. The deal was for two conditions, and you only agreed to one.”

“I can still keep my men after you, you know.”

“You can’t. You promised.” I wasn’t bothered by his threat. He was bound by his promise here.

He stayed quiet.

Huh? Accepted defeat so soon?

An involuntary smile tugged at my lips as I walked ahead of him. I wasn’t letting the equal owner thing go so easily. I’d give it back to him today or tomorrow. At least I got his men off my back.

A masculine groan reached my ears.

What was that?

Turning over my shoulder, I looked at him.

His heated gaze set on my butt. With wide eyes and flushed cheeks, I turned back my head and walked as fast as I could.

Pervert!

* * *

AFTER THE MEETING, when I strolled out from the conference room, leaving Ace behind to discuss something with some of the board members, I spotted Tobias.

“Hey! You’re here at this time?” It was almost lunch hour.

“Yeah, remember the project Achilles invested in my startup company? I needed to discuss something with him.”

Oh, I almost forgot about that. And thanking him for helping Tobias also slipped my mind. But I couldn’t let one thing slip at that moment, the one that was nagging me in the back of my head since the meeting with Warner.

“Ace is still busy with some board members. Why don’t we hang out at my office until he is free?” I needed to dig out information about Arthur from him.

He nodded. “Sure!”

Once we were in the safety of my office, out of anyone’s earshot, I didn’t waste anymore time.

“What do you know about Arthur?”

He halted his movement in the air from settling his ass on the chair to look at me. Then taking a seat, he raised a brow. “That he’s Achilles and Caleb’s uncle and is a good man? Why do you ask?”

I rolled my eyes. How informative! “I didn’t ask you his identity. I asked if you know more about him. Like his background and past.”

“Wait. Does Achilles know his Rosebud’s interest is shifting from him to his uncle? I know even at this age, he is quite fit. But c’mon Em! Isn’t it

going out of the line?” he teased.

My mouth twisted in disgust. “Shut the hell up! I need some information about him to clear up some doubt of mine. So, speak up now. Don’t waste my time!”

His posture straightened. “Doubt? What’s happening here, Em?”

I sighed. “I can’t tell you anything right now, Tobi. Once I sort everything out, I’ll let you know. So please, help me here.”

He slowly nodded. “All right. I don’t know what doubt you have about him. He’s a trustworthy man. And really close to Achilles and Caleb.” Unbuttoning his coat, he leaned against the chair. “Anyway, as far as I know, he spent a big chunk of years of his life in the UK. His relationship with Achilles’s father wasn’t good. Due to some conflict, his father sent him away to the UK when he was quite young. He only returned some years after Achilles’s father’s demise.”

Yes, I heard his relationship with Ace’s father wasn’t good, and he was in the UK before he came back. But I didn’t know it was Ace’s dad who sent him away. And over the years, they didn’t have any contact among each other.

“What did he do back then in the UK? A job or anything?”

“He had a small business there. It’s quite big now with Achilles’s help. You can say he’s a millionaire now with farmhouses and some hotels,” he replied.

“Ace went to the UK for two years to get his degree after I left for New York, right? Did he stay at one of Arthur’s places?”

At my question, he shifted in the chair, scratching his jaw. “Umm, sometimes. It was Arthur who sent him there. Though we all thought he was

going to need a lot of time to finish his... course, regarding his state. But he returned after two years and handled his company on his own.” Pride shone in his eyes.

Why did I feel like something was hidden behind his words?

“After sending Achilles there, Arthur took care of the company until he returned. He kept everything stable. That’s why Achilles and Caleb respect him so much. When no one was there for them, Arthur was.”

That’s why I didn’t want to think anything bad about him. But after Sierra’s incident, I couldn’t help it. Maybe the kindness and honesty were a façade?

“Do you know where exactly his business is located out there?” Warner’s cousin could find out more about him from the locals and people that associated with him in the past.

“Yeah, in Wales. I’ll send you the address.”

“What about his own family? Doesn’t he have a wife or kids?”

He shook his head. “No. He never married. I never heard anything about him having any children.”

A question off-topic raised in my head. “Do you know where Ace’s mom is? Or the reason behind his dad’s suicide?”

I would ask Ace myself all these questions about his past on our date, but after his revelation, I couldn’t think of anything else other than what he did seven years ago.

“The only thing I can tell you is she’s not here. And not really in touch with anyone. The rest you have to ask Ace himself. About his father committing suicide, I really don’t have any idea. He never told me. The only

thing I know is things were never good between his parents.” He shrugged.

My heart tugged for him. It must have been really difficult for him to live in a place where he had to watch his parents fight everyday. Even I heard of them arguing sometimes during my visits to his place. And now he didn't have his father beside him. His mother was alive, but still far from him. I wondered what was the reason she left him and Caleb behind?

I heaved a sigh. “All right, thank you, Tobi. I really needed some insight.” Though it wasn't much, at least I got something about Arthur.

“I don't know what you're up to, but think twice before doing something rash. Achilles is quite close to his uncle, so be careful.” He stood, buttoning his coat. “Oh, before I forget, tomorrow is Tess's rehearsal. You're coming, right?”

I rubbed my neck. I decided not to attend, but then I couldn't just miss an event that meant so much to her. Nor did I want my parents to be upset.

“I'll be there. Don't worry.”

He smiled. “Tess will be relieved. She's been nagging me to convince you to come if you had decided otherwise. I'm glad you're letting things go, Em. It's for everyone's good.”

I nodded. “I know. See you tomorrow.”

Placing a kiss on my forehead, he walked out of my office.

Letting out a sigh, I plopped on the chair he occupied seconds ago.

With everything going on, I totally forgot about her marriage. And Warner was invited by Mom. Though it was when we were still dating each other. She couldn't uninvite him just like that. My biggest concern was, Ace would be there too.

A groan left my mouth.

They were going to come face to face again. The thing I didn't want.

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FORTY-FIVE: EERIE CORRIDORS



“*I* didn’t know you were so eager to ruin your sister’s rehearsal dinner. Inviting your ex and present lover at the same time? When the lover is a fiercely possessive one?” Cassie asked, glancing behind me.

My heart skipped a beat. Turning around, I found Warner strolling in the backyard. Noticing him, Tess and Caleb walked up to him, giving him welcoming hugs.

Sighing, I turned back.

“What’s with the sullen face?” The side of her lips turned up into a devilish smirk. “Expected someone else?”

Glaring at her, I took a sip of my lemonade.

It’s been an hour since we arrived for Tess’s rehearsal dinner at Valencian Mansion. A BBQ party was held in the vast backyard of the mansion before the dinner. The trees were lit with fairy lights and a small bonfire was set in the middle of the place. While Mom, Dad and some of our relatives sat around the fire to keep themselves warm in the early winter night, Tess, Tobias, Caleb, and their friends took care of the BBQ meats.

It was more like a small get-together with close family and friends than a rehearsal dinner. Tess didn’t want it to be a formal event. She wanted to have

some cozy time with everyone.

Though I was happy with her decision and had a polite conversation with her, I couldn't help but feel bored.

Well, worried, to be exact.

There was no sight of him yet. And I could understand why. Coming to the house he'd faced so many hurdles in his childhood wasn't an easy thing to do.

Tess and Caleb had their new home ready to move in after their wedding for a new beginning. The main reason for them to keep this dinner over here, they wanted to spend some quality time before they left this place. And I couldn't be mad at them for that.

But that didn't make his pain any less. He's already been here twice for me, but I didn't know if he could do it again and again. Even if I dreaded of the outcome once Ace would find Warner here, I was more concerned with his state of mind right now. My hands itched to call him, but I kept them in control.

I was mad at him, right? I couldn't just call him to ask if he was all right. He'd think I forgot everything and forgave him. Which I didn't.

Well, not yet...

"Can you stop getting lost in your thoughts? Just call him and get over with it." She rolled her smoky amber eyes, which went well with her black cocktail dress and high heels. "You're not even talking to me properly. Are you ignoring me?"

I leaned against the small bar situated not far from the bonfire. "Yes, I'm ignoring you. You just realized that? Why would I talk to a friend who joins hands with the enemy?"

“Enemy?” Her brows crinkled.

“Uh-huh. Enemy.” I threw her a look. “You told Ace about mine and Warner’s break-up. And I had no idea about it. You should be in my gang to kick his ass with me, but here you are, passing information to him about my life?”

With wide eyes, she flashed me a sheepish grin. “Oh, so you’re mad about that.” She cleared her throat. “It’s not my fault. When you weren’t responding to his calls or messages, he ruined my peace to know what was going on in your mind because he thought you shared everything with me as your best friend. So, to have a good night’s sleep, I had to pass him something to calm the beast, you know?”

I shook my head at her.

“And I didn’t say anything wrong. He’d know sooner or later,” she added. “Now stop being a grumbling ass and call him. Don’t make any excuses. Even among so many people, your mind is somewhere else. I can see it. It’s on your face.”

Was it that obvious?

“By the way, does he still send you roses every morning?” she asked out of the blue.

“Yes?” Why’d she ask that? She knew they were an everyday thing now.

“Save the day after tomorrow’s bouquet for me. I’ll drop by your place at eleven.”

My eyes narrowed. “Why’d I give you my flowers?”

“Jeez, relax. Don’t need to get all green now. You can keep all of them. I just need one bouquet.” Taking a last swig of her drink, she wiped her mouth

with the back of her hand. “That day is my current date’s bitch elder sister’s birthday. I have to attend her formal family brunch with something in my hands. Why’d I waste my money to buy something for her when I can just take your bouquet?”

I let out a chuckle, not surprised at all. Typical Cassandra Brooks. When it came to the people she disliked, she wouldn’t even throw a penny for them.

“Kids, the lambs are ready!” Mom beckoned us with her hand, serving the smoky grilled lambs on plates for everyone.

“Don’t forget the flowers!” Cassie skipped off to the group.

Placing the glass on the bar counter, I heaved a sigh. Cool air kissed my arms, raising goosebumps across my skin. While rubbing my arms to provide some warmth, my eyes fell on the bracelet on my wrist. Those tiny emeralds and diamonds sparkled under the light.

An involuntary smile touched my lips as I ran my thumb softly over it. After acknowledging he was the one who gave it to me, it felt closer to my heart than ever. As if it was one of my limbs I couldn’t even imagine losing. I didn’t even put it off while taking showers.

Where is he, anyway?

My eyes went to my left when I heard footsteps approaching. And to my great displeasure, it was Arthur.

Approaching the group, he flashed everyone with one of his fake polite smiles and shared hugs with Tess and Caleb. Both seemed quite happy with his presence.

“I’m glad you could make out some time for the dinner, Arthur. I hope you didn’t have to cancel too many of your meetings?” Tess asked, grinning ear to ear.

Unfortunately, he handled most of the important deals of Valencian Corp. Due to Ace's trust in him, he saw if everything was going smoothly for those projects to get them completed on time and without any hurdles. Not to forget, he managed Ace's many side businesses.

"Oh, no! Not at all. Nothing is more important than family," he said, fishing a small rectangular velvety box out from his pants pocket. "Here, I got something for you. I hope you like it."

Tess's eyes shone with excitement as she took the box from his hand and opened it. The perfectly arched brows of her rose to her hairline. A pair of sparkling diamond earrings sat inside.

"Oh my! This is beautiful, Arthur! Thank you so much! You really didn't have to buy me such an expensive gift, though." She wrapped her arms around him once again, which he returned with a pat on her back.

Pulling away, he shook his head. "Nothing is as expensive as the smile I got to see on my future daughter-in-law's face."

Her eyes filled with moisture as Caleb pulled her into his arms, starting a conversation with Arthur.

"Who can say this man could be dangerous for someone?" Warner's voice spoke beside me.

"This mask of his will be revealed soon." My eyes didn't move away from him. Something glowed inside his pocket. His phone. Moments later, it went off as he ignored it.

"By the way, did you talk to your cousin?" I turned to look at him. With a formal white button-down shirt and dark slacks, he had a glass of orange juice in his hand.

He nodded. "Yes. I gave him the information you messaged me about

Arthur's businesses in the UK. He already started to look into it. I'll update you as soon as he gets back to me with anything."

"Good. Tell him to do his best. Money isn't the matter of concern here. I want his truth." So I could disclose him before Ace and throw him out of his and my family's life.

"I will. But... are you sure you want to do this, Em? If he somehow gets even a sniff on this..." He trailed off.

I shrugged. "I'm not scared of him. And don't worry, your cousin is a detective. He knows how to be discreet."

Nodding, his gaze went around. "Where is Achilles, anyway? I thought he wouldn't leave another chance to convince you to forgive him."

The bitterness of his voice didn't sit well with me. I could understand his concern for me, but I didn't like that he thought I'd do anything Ace would tell me. I had a mind of my own. I knew what to do in my life without anyone's influence.

But I kept quiet. Though unintentionally, I'd hurt him. I knew he wasn't over our past yet, and it was leading him to grow bitterness for Ace. I just hoped he'd move on soon. He had every right to be happy in his life with someone who'd love him truly.

"Maybe he won't join the dinner tonight. Must be busy somewhere."

"Busy with who?" he taunted.

I threw him a sharp glance. His indication pricked my skin. "Warner, please. We already talked about it, didn't we? I don't want a scene at Tess's rehearsal dinner. So even if he comes, please be civil with him. Tonight and tomorrow are very special for my sister, don't ruin it."

Sighing, he nodded. "Sorry, I got a little carried away."

"Just remember what I said." My eyes went back to Arthur.

Finally pulling his phone out, he watched the caller ID. As soon as he did it, his whole demeanor changed. Casting a discreet glance at Tess and Caleb, who were busy talking to each other, he excused himself and walked inside the house.

"Where are you going?" Warner's voice called out, but I was already following Arthur's path inside the mansion. It must be an important call. Maybe I could find something out?

Halting in a hallway, I moved my head to my right and then left. Endless eerie corridors welcomed me with its silence. Distant music ringing outside was the only sound I could hear. Where did he go? He was just here a moment ago.

Ella, a house help who worked for Tess, emerged from around the corner of the corridor at my right with a tray of drinks in her hands.

"Miss? What are you doing here alone? You need anything?" she asked as soon as she noticed me.

"No, Ella. I don't need anything. Thank you. Uh, did you see anyone going that way?" I pointed to where she just came from.

She shook her head. "No, miss. I didn't see anyone. Why? Is everything all right?"

Nodding, I smiled. "Yeah, don't worry. Everything is fine."

Once she was gone, I took the left corridor, making sure not to make any noises. If he didn't take the corridor Ella just came from, he must've taken this way. Ella would've seen him if he took right.

After walking aimlessly through the empty corridors for awhile, I finally heard something. His voice. I stopped right before the door of the balcony. Through the gap of the door, I peeked outside. And there he was, standing beside the railings, he had his phone against his ear. His hand was in a tight fist as he heard the person on the other side of the phone. The veins of his temple stood out as he gritted his teeth.

“And you’re telling me this right now?” he hissed, tone low. “That bitch!” he cursed under his breath. “Did she spill anything?”

A muscle of his jaw ticked.

“Are you sure?”

Then he nodded. “Keep an eye on her. Inform me if she tries to do anything against me.” His features turned blank as he straightened his collar with one hand. “If she doesn’t stay in her limits, make sure she loses her life just like she lost her job.”

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FORTY-SIX: A CHANCE



*M*y breath hitched in my throat. My heart hammered in my chest.

He was talking about Sierra. He must be. Did he find out I went to see her? To get information about him?

No, no. Even if he did know of my visit, how could he know I had any kind of suspicion of him? I could visit her for any reason, right? She was my friend, after all.

But that wasn't the matter of concern right now. Sierra was in danger. He could harm her at any moment. And I couldn't let this happen. I had to do something for her.

What secret of his did she know for him to want her dead?

When he put the phone down and put it into his pocket, I whirled around and left as fast as I could without making any noise. Thank God for the thick handcrafted carpet that covered the floor. Otherwise, my heels would announce my presence even if I took a single step.

With my heart in my throat, I ran down the empty corridor and turned to a hallway that didn't lead outside.

Glancing over my shoulder as I took another turn, I slammed against a hard chest and the blow threw me backwards. But a pair of strong arms shot

out to me and pulled me back, securing me in their hold.

For a second I almost stopped breathing, assuming I got caught, but then I looked up. Narrowed stormy grays met my eyes, they held concern.

“What’s wrong with you? You could get hurt if I wasn’t here to hold you!”

Yes, I could. But you saved me.

I took a deep breath. Relief washed over me. I subconsciously stepped closer to him, casting a glance at my back. No matter what I said, I wasn’t brave enough to be alone with that man in those eerie hallways. Not when there was a whisper at the back of my mind that he knew what I was up to. Though it didn’t make any sense, he couldn’t have known about my suspicion. Still, after hearing his phone conversation, fear etched in my mind.

But that wouldn’t stop me from exposing him.

“Rosebud?” Cupping my face, he made me look into his hard eyes. My fists were now clenched around his black shirt. “What happened? You look scared. Is everything all right?” He looked behind me. “Did anyone do or say anything to you?”

Gulping, I shook my head. “Nobody said or did anything. I’m fine, don’t worry. I kind of got lost. I was just looking for the exit.”

He didn’t look convinced. “You know this house quite well, Rosebud. You can’t just get lost here so easily. What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything.” Now that I had his arms around me, I felt safe. His mere presence gave me security. “I was just looking around out of boredom and got a bit lost. There are so many hallways, after all. Anyway, you came? I thought you weren’t going to join tonight’s dinner.”

Even if he was aware of my subtle way of changing the subject, he let me. His tight jaw and steely glances over my shoulder were the evidence.

“Ace?”

His head snapped to me. “Yeah. I was busy with a meeting.”

What Caleb said back at their engagement party floated into my mind. My heart clenched in my chest.

“It must be difficult, isn’t it?” I whispered.

“What?” His head tilted to the side.

“Coming here,” I said. “It must be difficult for you to come to his house. The house that only brings you hurtful memories.”

His shoulders tensed as an unknown emotion flashed across his eyes.

I placed my palm against his cheek, feeling his dense stubble. “I’d say you shouldn’t have come here. But I won’t. Because you’ve to move on, Ace. Besides those ugly memories, you also have one of the most beautiful memories of your life here. So don’t let the negativity overcome the positive sides. Until you let go of the past, you won’t be able to be happy in your present.”

I didn’t want him getting hurt like this. Though he didn’t say anything, I could see it in his eyes. The emptiness, the pain. Something was eating him alive, and he couldn’t express it. And there was a fear in there. Behind those gray pools. Fear of something I couldn’t figure out.

“Let go of it, Ace. It’s time to move on. Don’t let the past hold your happiness and peace,” I murmured, stroking his jaw.

Heaving a breath, he pressed his forehead against mine. “Shouldn’t it be applied to everyone, Rosebud?”

I frowned. “Everyone who?”

Then it hit me. He was talking about me.

I averted my eyes.

He sighed. Taking my hands in his, he kissed each of my knuckles.
“Come with me.”

“Where?”

Not answering, he led me down the hallway. Once we were on the terrace, he turned to me.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“What?”

Taking his phone out, he typed something and then put it back inside his pocket.

“You’ll see.”

Hugging myself, I rubbed my arms from the chilly night. “We should go downstairs. Everyone must be looking for me.”

I should be angry with him, right? After our argument in his office, I should give him a cold shoulder. But here I am, standing on the terrace with him alone.

Shrugging off his jacket, he secured it around me. “Here, it’ll keep you warm. Though I was enjoying looking at you in that dress.”

Heat crept up my cheeks as I tucked a strayed strand behind my ear. I didn’t wear anything fancy. Just a simple sleeveless blue sundress with a pair of black heels.

Cupping my chin, he made me meet his intense gaze. “Never hide your face from me, Rosebud. I love to see those cheeks turn all red.”

My cheeks were on fire, heart fluttering. Damn! Would his words ever cease to affect me that much?

A cough snatched our attention towards the terrace doors. Carter stood there with an awkward stance at the entrance with a box in his hands.

I took a step back from Ace, pulling the jacket closer to me.

“Uh, boss. Here’s the parcel you told me to get from your car,” Carter said.

After taking the box from him, Ace nodded. “You can go now.”

Flashing me a smile, he walked away.

“What’s in that?” I eyed the box curiously.

Standing before me, he opened it, putting the contents inside on display.

“Chocolate cupcakes?” With wide eyes, I looked up at him. A wide grin spread across my face.

A soft smile tugged at his lips as he nodded, watching me intently. “You like them, don’t you?”

“I like them? I freaking love them!” Taking the box from him, I took a sniff. Sweet aroma wafted to my nostrils, making my mouth water.

“Come here.” Taking my hand, he took me near the railings.

A squeal left my mouth as he gripped my waist and placed me on the wide surface of the railing. I didn’t dare look down. I was sure I would have a heart attack.

“What are you doing?” I tried to get off, but he only parted my knees and stepped between them, wrapping his arms around me.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you fall.” Placing the box beside me, he took out one cupcake and held it against my lips. “Now you can eat comfortably.”

When his grip tightened around me, I relaxed and took the cupcake from his hand, biting into it. A moan slipped from my mouth as soon as it melted in my mouth. There was chocolate cream inside it. It was so damn delicious!

“It’s so good! Where did you get them?” I put my phone beside the box and occupied my other hand with another one. While I devoured them like a woman hungry for years, he just watched me silently. Those stormy gray orbs held serenity. And that did serious damage to my heart.

“I didn’t buy them from anywhere. I made them myself.” He wiped the corner of my lips with his thumb before slowly putting it inside his mouth.

A shiver ran down my body.

Ignoring his act, I focused on his words. “You made them? For me?”

He chuckled. “Who else would I spend my precious time to do these efforts for?”

I just stared at him.

Leaning in, he grabbed my hand and made himself have a bite of the half-eaten cupcake. “Only for my Rosebud.” Eyes didn’t move from mine.

My breath hitched in my throat when he took my thumb into his mouth and sucked the chocolate cream off it. His hot tongue circled my thumb while his teeth bit into my skin gently.

“Delicious,” he rasped. Letting it go, he took my index finger next in between his lips. Somehow, he was closer than before, inches away from me. One of his hands brushed the side of my knee, gradually rising high, inching closer to my inner thigh.

I tried to close my legs, but his form didn’t let me. Something tugged at my lower region with his heady scent around me, his mouth around my finger

and his burning touch against my skin.

“W-what are you doing?” I somehow managed to stutter out, breathing heavily. Pulling my finger from his lips, I removed his hand from my thigh. But his other hand squeezed my hip on the other side.

“Touching my Rosebud.” Moving my hair away from my shoulder, he put his head in the crook of my neck and took a deep inhale.

Forgetting the cupcakes, I now squirmed in his hold as his big, callused hand squeezed one of my thighs. Another heat shot through me.

“S-stop,” I whispered, biting my lip.

Letting out a groan, he palmed my inner thigh and my treacherous body let him.

“I can’t.” He slammed his mouth against me, capturing my lips into his scorching ones.

Not caring about my ruined hands, I clutched his collar and pulled him closer, wrapping my legs around him.

He didn’t waste any time to thrust his tongue inside my mouth and nor did I hesitate to join him in the battle. He explored every corner of my mouth and I let him, shivering in ecstasy. Suddenly I felt hot in the cool weather. Too hot to be normal. I could feel my dress riding up my mid thighs, and his hands roaming and feeling them. A desperate moan left my mouth. I needed more. I wanted more of his touch. I wanted to feel his skin against mine. Slipping my hands under his shirt, I ran my hands over his taut abs and hard, sculpted chest.

Letting out a rough groan, he pulled me to the edge of the railing, and I tightened my legs around him. And then I felt it. Him. Right against me. Hard and hot.

A gasp slipped through my lips as he pushed his hips against mine, emitting a loud moan from me.

“My rose,” his husky voice murmured against my neck as he sucked on my sensitive skin. “I need you. I need you so fucking much!”

I let out a shaky breath, my hands tugging at his hair. My lips parted when he left some more marks on my throat. They would definitely leave hickeys. But I didn’t care at that moment. I was too lost in his touches and kisses.

Until my gaze fell on his knuckles.

I tried to push him away, but he ignored me. So I used more strength. And this time, he did pull away. With a confusion etched into his darkened eyes, he watched me.

“What is that?” I pointed at his knuckles. There weren’t any cuts like the other day, but they were bruised. “You hurt yourself again?”

His gaze hardened. “I didn’t realize.”

My jaw clenched. “You didn’t realize? Are you even hearing yourself? You hurt yourself again and again and you don’t even realize? What’s wrong with you?”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Don’t worry, these are nothing. It happens sometimes when people do too many workouts.”

I shook my head. My blood ran hot through my veins. Not because of his touch, but because of his careless behavior towards himself. “They aren’t there because you workout too much. They’re there because you’re careless! Because you don’t even care if you’re hurt! You do this on purpose, don’t you, Ace? I told you to stop this, but you didn’t listen. Why do you do that? Why do you hurt yourself like that?”

His gray pools were intense. “Once you’re in my arms forever, it won’t happen again.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll be always there to keep me sane and in check.”

I didn’t understand it. Why would he hurt himself to keep himself sane?

He loses himself so much into his work out that he doesn’t even care if he’s hurt or not. And only I can keep him sane?

He cupped my cheeks. His eyes now held desperation. “Give us a chance, Rosebud. Give me a chance to be a part of your life. Give me a chance to hold you in my arms for the rest of my life. Just one chance, baby. I promise, I’ll make it worth it. I know I hurt you. But I’ll spend my whole life making it up to you. I promise I’ll spend myself whole just to bring a single smile to your lips. I’ll never make you cry again. Just,” he gulped, “give me a chance. I love you so fucking much, my Rosebud. Without you in my arms, I had spent the seven years in living hell. I can’t do this anymore. Please forgive me. I beg you. Just give me a chance, Rosebud. Just one chance.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. With my heart thudding inside my chest, I fisted my hands into balls. Fierce emotions slammed into my chest in hefty waves.

“Will you forgive me, Rosebud? Will you give me a chance?” he asked again, his eyes searching mine for answers.

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FORTY-SEVEN: I LOVE YOU



Running my palm over the smooth fabric one more time, I took a deep breath and opened the door. With every step, the lower part of my gown flared more, providing a feel of a princess ascending the staircase towards the prince charming of hers.

But for me, my annoying best friend stood there, not even looking at me. She was too busy applying her dark red lipstick holding a small mirror before her face. The light blue mermaid gown looked stunning on her. It revealed her perfect curves. With her honey blonde curls resting over her shoulders, she had a natural makeup on.

Her eyes snapped up to me, and her jaw dropped.

“Holy shit!” She glanced up and down my whole structure. “This is the first time I’m ashamed to be straight as a stick. Damn! Achilles is a lucky ass!”

I laughed. “Look who’s talking. See yourself in the mirror first.”

She shrugged. “I just did. Thanks for the indirect compliment, though.”

I shook my head. “Where’s Beth?”

Her lips twisted in displeasure. “She’s gonna meet us directly at the venue. Got caught up with her boyfriend problem again.”

I sighed. "Let's see if Tess is ready yet."

"As ready as her pimple," she said, chuckling.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

And then I heard the chaos inside the bride's room.

Pushing the door open, I walked inside.

In a beautiful white Cinderella wedding gown, with her blonde locks wrapped into a low bun on the back of her neck and slightly heavy makeup on her face, she looked gorgeous. As usual. But she looked anything but pleased at that moment.

Looking upward, she tried her best not to let the tears in her eyes fall. One of her friends kept telling her to take deep breaths and not panic.

"Tess, stop crying! Do you want your eyes to look swollen in the pictures? This thing isn't even visible now. You're looking beautiful, honey!" Mom tried calming her down.

A small, not too visible pimple poked its head through the layers of makeup. It wasn't noticeable unless you looked closely.

Tess shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes. "I'm not! I can see it clearly! Why did it happen to me? All I wanted was for this wedding to go smoothly. Now I'll have to see this in my wedding photos for the rest of my life!"

Mom sighed, defeated. When she saw me, her eyes lit up.

"Oh my! Look at you, you're looking so beautiful!" She pulled me into a brief hug before pulling away. "I didn't even realize when both of my babies grew up so much." Casting a glance at Tess and then me, she sniffled.

"Mom, please. We have Tess to handle now."

I turned to Tess. Her eyes glued to my gown, her lips parted. “You look... wait, why aren’t you wearing the one I got you? Though you look beautiful in this one.”

“Thank you. You’re looking more than just gorgeous today!” I smiled. “And about this dress... I thought it’d look better with your bridesmaids.”

She asked me to be her maid of honor last night and I couldn’t deny. Due to our previous conflicts, she couldn’t ask me earlier. She didn’t let any of her friends be her maid of honor because she wanted it to be me. So I agreed, and I couldn’t be happier.

Her face dropped again. “Yeah, everyone is looking so perfect except me.”

“You’re stunning, Tess! The most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen. Everyone is going to love your look.”

My assurance didn’t affect her at all as a drop of tear slid down her cheek.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “Tess, answer me a question. Why are you getting married today?”

“Huh?” Her brows narrowed.

“Why are you going through all of this?” I asked again.

“For Caleb.”

I nodded. “Exactly. Do you think he would care if you have a little pimple on your cheek on your wedding day? Do you think he can see anything other than the girl who he loves so much walking down the aisle for him?”

Silence.

Finally, she shook her head. “No. He doesn’t care about those things.”

“See? Then why are you being so restless? You’re doing this for him, and if he doesn’t have any problem with your pimple, then shouldn’t you just leave it and enjoy the most important day of your life?”

“You’re right. But... what about the photos?”

Cassie rolled her eyes beside me while Mom pinched the bridge of her nose. If we didn’t leave now, we’d be late.

“We can always edit them, Tess. It won’t be visible in the camera much. And if it does, then we have a solution. Now can you calm down so we can leave?”

* * *

“IT’S YOUR TURN, HON,” Dad said to me, with Tess’s arm around his as they waited for their turn to walk down the aisle.

After all the bridesmaids skipped off ahead, it was the turn for the maid of honor. Me.

Nodding, I took a deep breath and stepped ahead. The entire church was decorated with white and pink roses, bright lights and small chandeliers that hung above the red carpet I walked down. The pace of the slow music around the gleeful ambience didn’t match my pounding heart. As if I was the one here who was getting married, not my sister. The flutters in my tummy went berserk as soon as I stepped into everyone’s sight. But it wasn’t the stares or cheers that made my heart thump, it was the man my eyes searched for.

Returning everyone’s smiles, with my chin held high, I walked down the aisle with poise. Caleb stood there with his usual bright smile as he nodded at me, which I returned with my own. Tobias and some other of his friends stood beside him, all in well-groomed black tuxedos. But there was a certain person I was looking for.

The groom's best man.

And then I saw him.

Flaunting a creased forehead with his eyes on his phone, he walked up to Caleb and stood beside him. And when those gray orbs lifted and caught mine, I stopped breathing for a moment.

As if subconsciously, he took a step ahead. The frown on his forehead disappeared as his gray eyes glided down my body. His lips parted. An emotion that flashed across his face directly hit my already fluttering heart.

Heat rose from my neck to my cheeks under his scorching gaze. I was sure I turned a deep shade of red, matching the color of my gown.

The gown he gifted me.

I was glad I didn't wear it before. It wouldn't have held the importance it did today. My action would speak what my words couldn't say.

Last night he asked me a question, and here was my answer.

When I reached the altar, he gave me his hand, and I took it. His gaze didn't leave my face as he pulled me closer. So many emotions swirled across his stormy grays, but the one that stood out was light, happiness. Though an eagerness fought along.

"Dude, we're here to attend Caleb's wedding. Not yours," one of the groomsmen joked as the crowd cackled with mirth.

Blushing, I stepped away. When he didn't move from his place, continuing to watch me, I pointed toward the aisle. Tess walked down the red carpet with Dad. With a beautiful bouquet in her hand, she wore a blinding smile on her face. Seeing the bride's arrival, he finally stepped back.

Both bride and groom's gaze didn't move from each other as they stood

before the priest after Dad handed her hand to Caleb. Love and adoration shone in their eyes as they took the vows to cherish and care for each for the rest of their lives.

During the ceremony, Ace's eyes didn't move from me. His jaw ticked, fists clenched and unclenched. An annoyance plastered on his handsome face.

"Can you finish it already?" He glared at the priest. At the command of his deep, dark voice, that poor man sped up his lines.

"Man, shouldn't I be the impatient one? Your girl isn't going to run anywhere. Easy there," Caleb murmured to him, making Tess giggle.

Cassie bumped her shoulder with mine, winking at me. I ignored her.

As soon as the priest announced the bride and groom as husband and wife, he didn't wait a second before striding to me. Grabbing my hand, he dragged me away from the altar.

"Ace, what are you doing? I need to be there."

"Trust me, Rosebud. Nobody in the world needs you more than I do right now."

And I let him drag me behind him. His tight grip around my hand told me his impatience. But a figure became a hindrance in his way.

Halting in his tracks, his shoulders tensed. His nostrils flared as his sharp jaw ticked. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to Em," Warner replied, his features stoic.

His grip around my hand tightened. "You didn't answer my question. What are you doing here? Who let you in?"

Damn! At the end it had to happen. The thing I feared. Last night, when I

didn't give Ace any answer, I felt how his mood went to a dark path, though he didn't show it to me. And his meeting Warner didn't seem to be a good idea at all with his darkened mood. So, messaging Cassie, I had her take Warner away with some excuse from the function. I felt guilty, but I didn't want a scene at Tess's rehearsal dinner.

I put a hand on Ace's arm. Warner's gaze followed the act.

"Ace, please. Don't start anything here. He was invited to the wedding," I said softly.

His flashing gray eyes met mine. "I don't care if he's invited or not. He's not staying here." Turning to Warner, he hissed, "Leave!"

"Ace!" I gasped. "He's my friend. You can't talk to him like that."

"It's okay, Em. I don't care what he says. I came here for you. I need to discuss something with you. It's important." Putting on a tight smile, he pushed his hands into his pockets.

"She won't go anywhere with you." The deep Greek accent sent shivers down my spine. His enraged eyes cut through Warner.

But Warner held his gaze. "Let her make the decision, shall we?"

God! This wasn't happening! I totally forgot he'd be here out of my excitement to meet Ace.

Taking a threatening step forward, he spoke in a low voice, "Do not try to cross my path, Mr. Wilson. I'm warning you for the last time. You won't like the outcome, trust me."

Though Warner kept a nonchalant face, he took a step back. The fleeting fear flashing across his eyes for a second didn't go missed by me.

I pulled Ace back and turned to Warner, casting him an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry, Warner. I have to go right now. But I’ll meet you in a bit, all right?”

His jaw clenched, but he didn’t say anything. Nodding, he gave one last glance at Ace, who was still murdering him with his glare, and walked away.

I turned to him. “What was that? You were flat out rude!”

Ignoring my accusation, he grabbed my waist and dragged me with him again. Once in front of an unoccupied room, he pushed the door open and locked us inside.

“What are you doing—” My words caught in my throat as he pinned me against the door. Leaning in, he snuggled his face in the crook of my neck.

“This dress.... Tell me what I’m thinking is true, Rosebud. Tell me you wore this for me,” he groaned out, taking a sharp intake of breath.

With that, all my irritation went out of the window. My heartbeat was fast as a tingling sensation ran across my skin with his hard body pressing against mine. The intoxicating strokes of his hands on my curves sent my nerves haywire.

“Tell me, Rosebud. I’m impatient here. I’ve waited too long. I can’t anymore. Did you wear it for me?” Pulling away, he pressed his forehead against mine.

“Isn’t this dress an answer to your questions already? Do I need to say anything?” I whispered, gazing into his soul.

He shook his head, torment etched into those gray orbs. “I need to hear it from your mouth. Tell me. Did you... did you finally forgive me? Did you decide to give us a chance?”

A smile spread across my face, my eyes burning with the hefty waves of

emotions slamming into my chest.

“Yes!” I gulped down my tears. Happiness bloomed in my heart. “I forgave you—”

And again, I was cut off by him. But this time with his lips. Which I appreciated a lot.

Breathless once he pulled away, I was greeted with a blinding smile on his face. Gray eyes shone with felicity and content as he cupped my face. “You truly forgave me, Rosebud?”

I nodded, lost in his smile. He was breathtaking. How did I get so lucky?

Letting out laugh, he pulled me closer and littered kisses all over my face and neck. “Thank you! Thank you so much, baby! You don’t know what you gave me today!”

Giggles left my lips with his non-stop kisses as I leaned more into him. It took me some time to forgive him completely, to understand his reasons for why he pushed me away. Though it still hurt, I couldn’t stay mad at the decision he took in the worst time of his life. The most important thing was, he was only looking out for my well-being. Even after forgiving him, I held myself back to give myself some time to process everything. But now my patience was over. I couldn’t stay away from him anymore.

From the man my heart beats for.

Placing a lingering kiss on my lips, he peered into my eyes. “So now I can call you mine?”

I raised my brow. “I thought you already declared that.”

A musical chuckle reverberated through his chest. “Well, I declared what’s the truth. You’re mine.” Brushing the pad of his thumb over my lower

lip, he whispered, “Only mine.”

His lips caught my mouth again, his hungry tongue battling against my eager one.

“You don’t know how happy I’m today, Rosebud. You’ve freed me from my years of torment. Thank you so much, baby. I promise I’ll make it up to you for the rest of my life.”

“You better,” I said, breathless from his scorching kisses.

His hands reached behind me to cup my butt. Giving my cheeks a hard squeeze, he scooped me up, making me wrap my legs around his hips. Even though with the heavy gown it was really uncomfortable, I didn’t care. Nor did he. We were more concentrated on our kiss instead.

When his hand slipped under my gown, going up my thigh, I let out a moan. God, I needed more. I needed this man.

Letting out a groan, he ran his hand against my bare skin, deepening the kiss. “I love you, my rose. I love you so fucking much.”

A warmth surged through my chest. Even in the kiss, a serene smile stretched across my lips. And the words I’d been hiding in my heart for years slipped through my lips.

“I love you too.”

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FORTY-EIGHT: THE SURPRISE OF THE VILLAIN



*H*e froze.

Slowly pulling away, he cupped my cheeks. “What did you say?”

I bit my lip. But the shy smile broke out on my face, anyway.

“What did you say, Rosebud? Did you just—” he gulped, his eyes were desperate, “—did you just say you—”

“I love you.”

He let out a shaky breath. The intense emotions swirling in his gray orbs seared my heart.

“Say it again,” he rasped.

Pulling him closer, I brushed my lips against his desirable ones. “I love you, Achilles Valencian. I love you so much that it hurts.”

Heaving a sigh, he engulfed me in his chest. I placed my cheek right above his heart, listening to his fast heartbeat. I didn’t complain about his vice grip around me, as we stayed like that for some moments. Though I didn’t like his silence.

“Ace?” I whispered into his chest.

“Just a minute, Rosebud.” He took a deep breath in my hair. “Say it again.”

I smiled. "I love you."

"Again."

Laughing, I smacked his chest. "No, I already told you three times."

Slightly leaning back from me, enough to look at my face, he placed his palm on my cheek. "Please, baby. Just once more. I want to hear it again. You don't know how long I've waited to hear those words. How many times I've dreamt of you saying those words to me."

Something bloomed into my heart. Blinking away my tears, I placed a kiss on his chest. "I love you, Ace. I love you so freaking much. More than anything in the world."

His eyes closed, as if feeling every word that left my lips.

"Happy now?"

Those stormy gray orbs met my turquoise again. A content smile stretched across his heavenly features as he pulled me into his gentlest kiss. Not a demanding, punishing one.

But to my dissatisfaction, he pulled away, leaving me craving for more.

"Come with me?" he asked, running his hand through my locks.

"Where?"

"Somewhere I can have you all to myself." His heated gaze slid down to my cleavage. "Did I tell you how beautiful you're looking in that dress? More than I'd imagined you'd look."

I blushed.

Alone with him to have him all to myself?

Tingles ran down my body as unholy thoughts flashed across my mind. The idea sounded tempting.

“Thank you. But we can’t. The reception.”

“I don’t care. Now that I finally have you in my arms, I don’t want to let go of you.” He placed a sensual kiss on my neck, arms tightening around me.

A moan threatened to leave my lips.

I had to stop him before I lost my control. We couldn’t do anything right now. At least not until the reception was over.

“You can have me all to yourself after the reception is over. Everyone must be looking for us. We need to go outside.” I tugged at his hair gently.

He groaned, latching his mouth on my throat. “I don’t want to. I need you, Rosebud. I need you right now. I’ve waited so long.” The last sentence came out like a breathy whisper.

I clenched my thighs at his deep voice. No matter how much I wanted to stay locked in that room with him, I couldn’t. As a maid of honor, I had to see if everything was going smoothly for the reception.

Tonight. I could wait till tonight.

“Later, baby. We’re needed outside right now. Caleb and Tess must be looking for us.” The sexual tension that was floating around us from the last few months threatened to burst right now. Now that there was no barrier between us, we both wanted each other like two broken poles of magnet needed the other to be completed.

Pulling away, his eyes held mine. They held dark promises.

“Later?” A mischievous smile tugged at his lips. “I will keep that in mind.”

With my cheeks burning, I looked down.

Grabbing my chin, he tucked a strand behind my ear. “Let’s go outside

and get done with everything as soon as possible. I can't wait any longer."

Neither can I. I wanted to say, but remained silent. It wasn't a wise idea to tease the beast now.

Nodding, I placed one lingering kiss on his lips before opening the door and stepping outside. He followed behind, pulling me into him again. But when his phone rang, he had to leave me.

When I was finally outside, Tess and Caleb were busy chatting with some guests and clicking photos. She didn't seem to be bothered by her pimple anymore.

After making sure everything was good with the reception preparation, I stepped outside again to find Warner approaching me. Instinctively, I glanced around to see if my caveman was anywhere around. I didn't want his horns to come out seeing Warner near me again.

I needed to have a serious talk with him about it.

"You're free now? Come aside for a minute. I have some information about Arthur."

At the mention of him, I looked around the place. I haven't seen him after the wedding. The moments he lingered around, he wasn't focused on the ceremony either. He was too busy on his phone with his tensed old features.

Nodding, I pulled him to a secluded place where guests weren't roaming. "What did you find out? And sorry about earlier. Ace, uh, he gets a little possessive when it comes to me."

He snorted. "A little? Can't you see, Em? That man is obsessed with you. He thinks of you as his property that belongs to him. And trust me, men like him like the chase. You were like a challenge to him, so he came after you suddenly after all these years. And now that you finally gave in, just wait

until he shows you his true colors.”

My fists clenched. Gritting my teeth, I kept myself from saying something that might hurt him. His hatred towards Ace was getting on my nerves now.

“Warner, can we just talk about what’s important right now? We have an issue on our hands, and that’s Arthur. So, let’s stick with that for now. I already told you to not make any assumptions about me and Ace’s relationship. I’d appreciate it if you respect my wish here.”

I could see he wanted to disagree. But the stern look of mine had him shut up. Slumping his shoulders, he let out a sigh.

“All right. Let’s talk about Arthur now.”

I nodded. “Thank you. What did your cousin find out about him?”

“Tobias told you about the small business he had in Wales, right?”

I bobbed my head.

“Well, he used to run cheap hotels. After some research, we found out he did illegal businesses under the cover of those hotels. He was even suspected many times, but due to lack of evidence, the cops couldn’t take any action against him.”

My brows furrowed. “Illegal businesses? What kind of illegal businesses?”

“Not hundred percent sure, but from what pieces of information my cousin got, it seemed like he managed a brothel at night behind the service of hotels. Sources say he forced helpless girls into prostitution.”

I gasped. A brothel? I didn’t know he would be that low of a creature. Did Ace know about this? I was sure he didn’t. He’d never allow such a man to

stay around him if he had even a hint of it.

“How come he never got caught?”

His lips thinned. “He’s a shrewd man, Em. He made sure not to leave a single piece of evidence behind for anyone to use against him. He was doing that until Achilles’s father passed away and he left the UK to come to LA.”

Why did he return after so many years leaving all his businesses behind like this? I didn’t believe he was that kind of man who’d leave everything behind just so he could look after his nephews.

He must have some other agenda. But what?

Then it hit me. Of course! His brother’s property. That passed down to Ace. And he won Ace’s trust to get a hold on the power and money Ace had. With his help, he expanded his business more within the whole UK now.

“Can’t your cousin get any proof? I mean, there must be something.”

He shook his head. “He stopped his illegal businesses a long time ago after he started handling Valencian Corp in Achilles’s absence. Now he only runs legal businesses across the UK. And with the power Ace had given him, I can’t say if he still runs something in the shadows while destroying every evidence he has against him. Though I told my cousin to look more into it. He’ll get back to me as soon as he finds anything out.”

I sighed. He was right. He was quite a powerful man, all thanks to Ace’s trust in him. I wished I could tell him, but without any proof, will he believe me? But he could also hire someone to look through Arthur’s past just like I did, right? He’d find out the truth himself.

A determination etched on me.

I’ll talk to him as soon as possible. But not now. We’ve come into a

relationship just now. I didn't want any tension in it. Maybe after a day or two, when Warner's cousin would find something solid against him? Then I could easily reveal everything before Ace without fearing anything.

"All right. Tell him to do it fast. Before Arthur gets a hint of our quest, we have to get a hold of something strong against him." I looked into his eyes. "And thank you, Warner! I couldn't do this without you."

He put a hand on my shoulder. "No need to thank me. What are friends for, after all? I would do anything for you, you know that, right?"

Nodding, I smiled.

"You just be careful around him, Em. He's a very dangerous man. Don't get yourself into any trouble."

I squeezed his hand. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."

* * *

"YOU DIDN'T TELL me he gave you this dress. Nor did you tell me you guys are together now," Cassie grumbled, holding her cocktail in her hand. "I thought you confided me in with everything."

I chuckled.

The reception was about to begin. After helping Tess with retouching her makeup, Cassie pulled me aside to throw questions about the faint hickey on my throat. Of course nothing went past her eyes. So, I told her everything.

"Don't be overdramatic now. We just sorted things out."

She eyed my gown again, a slow smile stretched across her lips. "Remember when you asked him to make you his princess one day?"

Warmth crept up cheeks as I remembered the day of my ninth birthday.

"Well, you're looking like one today in this gown. And now that you've

finally become his princess, how are you feeling right now?" She held an imaginary mike before me.

I looked down, running my hands on the beautiful gown he chose for me. "Well, I don't want to be his princess anymore."

Her brow raised in confusion.

A smile graced my lips. "I want to be his queen now."

Chuckling, she rolled her eyes. "Now you're getting greedy here, aren't you?"

At my narrowed eyes, she burst into laughter and I joined soon.

Someone cleared their throat behind me.

Turning around, I came face to face with a tall man in his late twenties and a beautiful blonde in his arms. What caught my attention was his pale blue eyes that weirdly lingered on my face for too long for my liking.

"Hi, Emerald. Remember me? I'm Jane from Tess's high school," the blonde said, flashing her pearly white teeth.

Yeah, I remembered her. She used to hang out with Tess sometimes.

I smiled. "Hi, Jane. How are you doing?"

That man still didn't move his gaze from me. His features were too blank to read anything.

"I'm doing great! It's been so long since I last saw you. And look at you, you've turned into such a beautiful woman."

Before I could open my mouth to thank her for the compliment, the man interrupted. Oddly enough, I felt like I saw him before. But I couldn't place a finger on it.

"Indeed. Now I understood why my friend is so smitten by you," he said

in his northern accent.

“Friend?” I frowned.

He nodded. “Achilles Valencian. I’m a really close friend of his.”

How come I’ve never seen him if he was a good friend of Ace?

Then he held his hand out for me to shake. “Hello, my name is Antonio, Antonio Raymond. I feel very blessed to finally meet you, Ms. Hutton.”

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FORTY-NINE: ENEMY INSIDE?



*M*y smile slipped, and my eyes widened.

Antonio Raymond? So that's why he seemed to be so familiar. I'd seen him on the TV the other day but couldn't see his face properly because he had the half of his face covered.

Wasn't he in jail? What the hell was he doing here?

My jaw clenched. "What are you doing here? As far as I know, you're not invited to this wedding."

Did Ace know of his presence here?

If he did, he wouldn't be still parading out here like this.

He placed his hand on his heart. "Ouch! I wasn't expecting that one. You hurt me, Ms. Hutton. I didn't know you behaved that way with your guests."

"I do with uninvited guests."

A humorless chuckle left him. "Feisty, huh?"

"What's happening here?" Jane asked, confusion laced her face. "Antonio, do you know them?"

"Oh, he knows us very well. Unfortunately, he used you to get in here. Because he knew he wasn't invited," I said, holding his gaze.

“Hey, dude! Get your ass out of here before Achilles sees you. I’m sure as a reputable businessman, you wouldn’t want to be thrown out of the here like a stray dog.” Cassie flashed him a sweet smile.

His jaw ticked at her spitting insult at him. But then he reciprocated Cassie’s smile with equal venom. “Oh, I have no bad intentions here. I just wanted to give my best wishes to the bride and groom. That’s all.”

“Mr. Raymond.” My voice snapped his attention back to me. “I’d advise you leave the venue right now before Ace or Caleb notices you. I really don’t want a scene here. And I don’t understand. After what you’ve done to Caleb, how did you think you could come here to give him your best wishes?”

He raised his brow. “Oh, so the little Rosebud of Achilles knows everything then?”

How did he know Ace called me Rosebud? Only close family members and friends knew that.

My patience was running slim now.

“Of course. Everyone should know about the enemy outside. Now leave.” I pointed towards the gate.

A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. “You can make the outside enemy leave you alone. But what about the enemy inside?” His head tilted. “How would you tackle them, Ms. Hutton?”

My eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head, giving me a once over. “My work is done here.” He turned to the blonde. “I’ll see you later, sweetheart.”

Cassie shared a look with me.

“Goodbye, Ms. Hutton.” His eyes flickered over my shoulder. “Hope to

meet you soon.”

He turned around and walked away.

“Wait!” I called out to him, but he didn’t stop. Two more men joined him before they disappeared into the crowd.

Glancing back where his eyes were seconds ago, I saw Ace striding towards me. Hands clenched into fists, nostrils flaring, eyes dark with fury.

He must’ve seen him.

Pulling me into his arms, he cupped my chin. “You all right, Rosebud? Did he do anything? Did he say anything to you?”

Yes, about an enemy inside the house. Who was he indicating?

I shook my head. “He didn’t. In fact, I sent him away. Don’t worry.”

His jaw clenched, flashing gray orbs glared at the exit where Antonio just left through. “How dare he come here! That fucking piece of shit! And he dared to come close to you!”

The last sentence came out as a hiss. Moving away when he tried to storm to the exit, I grabbed his arm. “Ace, no! Stop! Where are you going? It’s all right, he left already. There’s no point in following him now.”

“No!” He snatched his arm. “He shouldn’t have made that mistake today. How dare he come here and talk to you!”

I frowned. Why was he mad that Antonio talked to me?

I wrapped my arms around him. “Ace, please! Don’t do anything rash!”

“Rosebud, leave me.” His beautiful features were now clouded with anger.

I shook my head. “I won’t. No matter what you say.” At his scowl, I cupped his cheeks. “It’s Tess and Caleb’s wedding, baby. Don’t ruin it by

doing anything drastic.”

I ignored the looks some of the passing guests were giving. They must’ve heard his roaring.

“Please? For me?”

Holding my gaze for some long moments, he gave me a tight nod. Though I knew he wasn’t letting it go so easily, a smile spread across my lips. At least the wedding would go smoothly now.

I placed a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you.”

Cassie sent me a look of awe, but I ignored her and focused on calming the fuming man before me.

* * *

I PEEKED from behind the marble pillar.

At the end of the hall, he stood there with just a plain glass of water. His tight grip around it and the hardness of his jaw were evidence of his still smoldering rage inside him.

The reception ran in full swing. People were chattering, dancing, and drinking. The bride and groom were clicking pictures with their friends after the cake cutting. Among the gleeful ambience, his mood remained dark.

And for our first night together as a couple, I didn’t want that.

I bit my lip as I saw the waiter approaching him. Handing him the note I sent, the poor man scurried away from the sharp glare of his.

I shook my head.

Staring down at the note, he glanced around before opening the note with his long, lean fingers. His hard features softened as a smile slowly played on his lips.

I knew what he was smiling at.

If you're done scowling at the corner, care to give this girl some company?

Your Rosebud.

When he looked up from the note, I let myself out from my hiding and his eyes immediately found me. Giving him a wink, I turned around and sauntered away from the crowd to the empty hallway decorated with crafted mirrors and beautiful paintings that hung on its walls.

I knew he was coming. My heart thumped like crazy under my chest. Flutters in my tummy had me inhale deep.

I teased the beast, and now I would have to be ready for him.

I heard his footsteps echoing across the unoccupied corridor. With every step sounded closer, my heart felt like it would explode any moment.

A gasp slipped through my lips as my back was pulled into a hard frame. His strong arms wrapped around me as he put his head in the crook of my neck.

“You’ll become the death of me someday, you know that?” his husky voice rasped. Taking a sharp inhale, he brushed his lips on my bare shoulders. A shiver ran down my whole body.

Closing my eyes, I leaned back into his touch. It felt so right being in his arms. No guilt or barrier was stopping me tonight. It felt like home.

“What did I do?” I asked, feigning innocence.

“Calling me alone here like that when you know I can’t do anything to you right now, no matter how much I want to, you’re saying you didn’t do anything?” His hand brushed beneath my chest.

“What? I just wanted a hug.” I pouted. “I didn’t know your thoughts were still running south.”

“Well, my mind always runs south when you’re around,” he whispered into my ear.

Heat crept up cheeks as I bit my lip.

Suddenly, I felt a cold material gliding up my neck. Glancing down, I found a simple pendant with a diamond cut emerald in the center, the tiny rubies sitting around it glimmered under the light.

I gasped.

It was the same pendant I saw at that jewelry shop when we went to buy gifts for Tess.

I looked at him over my shoulder as he secured the gorgeous pendant around my neck. The emerald rested right above my cleavage.

“When did you get it?” Tone low.

He grazed his lips over my jaw. “The moment you watched it with adoration, it became yours.”

My eyes burned with the love that bloomed in my heart for this man. Not because he got me this pendant, but because of the way he never missed a single detail about me. He always had his eyes on me.

Taking a step aside, I looked at myself in the mirror on the wall. It looked beautiful on me. And the intensity in his eyes told me he appreciated it, too.

His fingers grazed the emerald along the dip of my cleavage.

“Never take it off. Not even when you have nothing on you.” The edge of his voice told me his desire. The way his hand brushed at the side of my breast indicated to his impatience.

Turning half of my body to him in his arms, I pulled his head down and captured his lips, showing him my appreciation. Groaning, he gripped my neck and rewarded me with his hot, punishing kiss.

Sweeping his tongue into my mouth, he sucked on my lower lip. My knees wobbled at the sensations he provided me with his hands and mouth.

Just when I was about to deepen the kiss, I heard footsteps. Pulling away from him abruptly, I ran my hands over my dress and hair to look as presentable as possible.

His frown told me his displeasure. Giggling, I pulled him outside just as an old pair entered the corridor.

I blushed.

Thank God, they didn't catch us in the act.

“What the hell were they doing there?” His lips pressed tight.

“Maybe they also wanted some alone time?” Snickering, I dragged him to where the bride and groom were.

When the bride and groom requested us to join them on the dance floor, we agreed. Well, I did. He was too busy scowling and complaining he had enough of this wedding. He wanted to leave this place with me.

As we started to sway along to the music, well, the dance Achilles Valencian preferred, I put my head against his chest. Where others moved with the beat, he had his arms around me, moving us slowly. I didn't care if everyone was watching. Even answering to Mom and Dad later didn't come into my mind. All I knew was his warmth.

Then my gaze went to Cassie. She was dancing with a blonde. But her eyes were set on somewhere else. I followed her gaze. A man in his late

twenties with dark brown hair and a tall, well-built frame stood near the staircase. His narrowed eyes observed the ambience around him as he sipped his drink. An older man talked to him, but he didn't pay any attention.

My eyes went back to Cassie, but hers didn't move from that man.

A smile twitched at the corner of my lips.

“What are you smiling at?”

I looked up at his stormy grays. One of his brows was raised.

“Who's that man? I've never seen him before.” I jutted my chin at Cassie's sudden interest.

He followed my eyes. A muscle of his jaw ticked as the place between his brows creased. “Why do you want to know?”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax! I'm just curious. Don't need to go all green now. My best friend seems unable to tear her gaze from him, so I thought to ask.”

Casting a very disinterested glance at Cassie, he turned to me again. His jaw softened a bit. “A friend of mine. He's also been my partner in some of my businesses for years now.”

I nodded.

“Anything else?” Annoyance dripped from his voice.

I shook my head. Unbelievable man.

Reaching up, I kissed his nose. “No. Can we get out of here? The dance is over now, and I'm getting bored.”

Now his good mood peeked through his dark clouds. Gray eyes flashed with fire. “Where do you want to go?” His deep voice came out husky.

Leaning closer, I whispered in his ear, “Take me to your home.”

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FIFTY: CLAIMED BY THE BEAST



*I*n the shadow of his car, his hot, calloused hand trailed up under my gown to my thigh. His flaming touch left a scorch behind on my skin, followed by my ragged breath and racing heart.

Wiggling on his lap, I pushed his hand away, glancing over at the driver, who was silently weaving the car through the road.

“Your driver can see us!” I whispered.

A grumble reverberated through his chest, but his mouth didn’t hesitate to fall on my cleavage. Due to our passionate make out and his pervert hand’s trying to pull the neckline of my gown down as much as he could, my neckline was much lower than it’d be appropriate before the public eyes.

But Achilles Valencian seemed to be enjoying the sight very much.

When he tried to lower my neckline more for his lustful gaze, I slapped his hand away again. “Behave!”

Cursing under his breath, he leaned in and did something before his dark smoldering gray eyes met mine. “Now he can’t see us. What excuse do you have now to stop me, my rose?”

Turning back, I found the window that separated the front from the passenger seat closed.

His hand crept up my legs to my thighs again, his hot breath fanning my neck. “So fucking soft. My mouth is craving to taste every inch of your skin.”

A shiver ran down my entire body as heat crept up my cheeks. Biting my lip to stop a moan that threatened to spill, I closed my legs, halting his movement.

“S-stop,” I stuttered out.

Even if every pore of my body screamed for more of his touch, I was suddenly very shy. No one had ever touched me so intimately.

Groaning, he pulled me closer and adjusted my body so I was straddling him.

“I can’t stop tonight, my rose. I’ve waited for this moment for so long,” he rasped, gripping my neck and slamming his mouth on mine. A moan slipped from my lips as his hot tongue massaged my eager one, exploring every inch of my mouth.

I gasped as he cupped my bottom under my gown and pushed my hips against his. I shuddered at the feel of his hardness right under me. A delicious, painful tug in my lower region had me quiver for more.

I found myself moving my hips against his. Letting out an animalistic groan, he pushed me on the expensive wide leather seat and captured my lips once again. With my legs around his hips, I pulled him closer.

“Ace.” His name came out as a whimper with him sucking on my neck, shoulder, and everywhere his greedy mouth could reach.

“Fuck! I need you, baby! I need you so fucking much,” he cursed against my lips.

As his hand trailed to my back and pulled the chain of my gown down, a

knock landed on the window.

“Mr. Valencian, we’re here!”

Only then I noticed the car stopped moving.

Seeing his scowling face and still eager touches, I let out a giggle. Leaning in, I pecked his lips. “Let’s go inside, Mr. Valencian. You can carry on later.”

“Oh, trust me. I’ll do more than just carrying on.”

I clenched my thighs at his dark promise as he got out of the car and helped me out as well. He didn’t even let me bid the driver goodnight. Scooping me up in his arms, he carried me inside.

The moment we were inside of his penthouse, our bodies clashed into each other as two thirsty souls trying to quest their thirst they had for years.

My hands were in his hair when his were everywhere he could reach. And my arching my body into him indicated my eagerness.

But then I pulled away entirely, breathing hard. Flaunting a deep frown when he tried to reach me again, I took another step back.

Biting my lip, I shook my head. “I’ve been walking around like this the entire day. I need a shower.”

“No need to shower. You’re smelling delicious.”

I slapped his hand away as he tried to touch me again, causing a muscle of his jaw to tick.

“Rosebud,” he warned. “I’m in no mood for games. I need you, now.”

My eyes flickered down to his junior. I licked my lips at the marvelous view of his want for me.

“I’m not playing games. I just need a shower.” Winking at him, I walked

into his bedroom, ignoring the groan of his.

A blush rose to my cheeks at the memory of my first visit here. And the second time. This was the room where we kissed for the first time. And this room would be the witness of our becoming one, too.

My heart pounded in my chest as I heard his heavy footsteps behind me. Another tug in my lower region. My insides were quivering for him. Biting my lip, I trudged to the bathroom door and reached for the zipper of my gown that was already half undone. Glancing over my shoulder, my wanting eyes met his dark stormy grays as I let my dress fall on the floor, leaving my half naked body for his sight.

A curse left his lips, his hands curled into balls.

With goosebumps erupting across my skin with his scorching gaze on me, I turned my body to him and slowly unclasped my bra too. And soon it followed my dress on the floor around my feet.

He took a deep breath, his lips parted. Those gray pools of his didn't leave my bare chest for a second. And then went my panties too.

Licking my lips, I turned around and walked into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar. And he knew of my invitation for him to join.

A smile tugged at my lips as the hot water trickled down my body. I didn't know how I got so bold, but I just felt it. Only for him. All shyness flew out the window when he watched me with so much want in his eyes.

I didn't even have time to flinch from the bathroom door slamming shut as I was pinned against the wall with his hard and very naked frame. His mouth captured mine and his hands were everywhere.

"You shouldn't have teased me, sweetheart. You know what's the punishment for teasing the beast?" he whispered, biting my lower lip.

“No...” a moan slipped from my lips. My eyes closed as his hands made their way to my chest.

“It’s a very sweet and torturous punishment, my rose,” his dark, husky voice rasped in my ear, taking my earlobe in between the heat of his lips. “This beast will take his beauty again and again until she goes unconscious from the intense pleasures he will be giving her tonight as her punishment.”

“Ace...” I whimpered at his words.

There was no going back.

I clung to him like my life depended on him as he made his territory on my chest, leaving the marks of his hands and mouth across my skin. Moans and groans echoed throughout the washroom along with the relentless pouring water on the tiled floor as he weaved his way to the places of my body where no one ever reached before.

Our mouths didn’t detach from each other when he carried me to his bed, not caring about our dripping bodies.

Placing a kiss on my forehead, he peered into my soul. “You ready?”

With my body still recovering from the heights he had taken me again and again just moments ago in the shower, I nodded.

“You’re sure, baby? I know it’s your first time. We can wait if you want,” he asked, hovering above me. His fingers stroked my cheek gently.

Warmth surged through my chest at his gesture. Even when he was on the verge of losing control, he was thinking about me. I could feel his tense shoulders, ragged breath, and hard and rigid...

Another blush rose to my cheeks.

Snaking my arms around his neck, I pulled him closer and captured his

lips in a hungry kiss. “I want you, Ace.”

Groaning, he reciprocated my kiss with ferocity. Then I felt him against me. A delicious shudder ran down my spine.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips.

“I love you too.”

And for the rest of the night, the only thing I felt was immense pleasure and undying lust. The rhythm of our bodies and labored breathing were all I knew. Our moans and groans echoing throughout the room were all I could hear.

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FIFTY-ONE: SORE



Turning around, I reached out for a warm body beside me, but all I found was emptiness. Just the crinkled sheet and his lingering scent. Frowning, I opened my eyes and looked around.

There was no sign of him in the dimmed room. Even the bathroom's door was ajar just as we left it last night.

Where was he?

I checked my mobile for the time. Three in the morning. Where could he go this early?

A gust of cool air touched my face, giving me my answer. The glass door of the balcony was open.

Clutching the blanket around me as I went to get up, a hiss left my lips at the pain that shot up in my lower region. Memories of last night flooded my mind, heating my cheeks.

There was even a delicious soreness across my entire body.

Achilles Valencian was true to his word. He punished me sweetly by taking me again and again until I couldn't move any limbs the entire night. He was insatiable. And... perfect.

I bit my lip as another blush rose to my neck.

This time, I took it slow, securing the blanket around me. Padding to the balcony, I found him standing near the railing. Shirtless, his jeans hung low around his hips. His gaze lost in the dazzling light of the city below.

I walked to him and wrapped my arms around him from behind, kissing his ripped back.

“Rosebud?” Turning around with narrowed eyes, he pulled me into his warmth and hugged me closer. “What are you doing here? You should be asleep.”

“Shouldn’t I ask you the same?” Rubbing my hand against his chest, I felt his smooth, yet hard muscles.

Taking my hands, he kissed each of my knuckles. The blanket pooled around to my waist, and his gray eyes didn’t hesitate to stare, making my cheeks hot.

I placed my head on his chest.

“Are you shying away from me, Rosebud?” he teased. But I didn’t miss the huskiness and dark edge in his voice. “If it makes you feel better, I’ve seen everything already. Touched you.” His grip tightened around me, tone dropping to a whisper, “Devoured you. You don’t need to shy away from me, my rose.”

He again changed the nickname. In these last two and a half months, I’ve realized he had three names for me. When he was all affectionate, he called me Rosebud. When he had perverted thoughts, he called me his rose. And when he was all serious and angry, he’d call me by my full name, Emerald. And I loved each one of them.

Snuggling in his chest at his bold words not to show him my bashfulness, I changed the topic. “You didn’t answer my question. What’re you doing

here instead of sleeping?" I looked up at him. "Couldn't sleep?"

Sighing, he brushed his lips across my forehead. "I did sleep, Rosebud. With you in my arms now, I never had such a good sleep in my entire life. It's just... Carter called me a while ago regarding an important meeting. And I didn't get any sleep after that."

He pecked my nose.

"I usually sleep for three hours at night. But I slept more than that tonight. So don't worry."

I felt his days old dense stubble against my palm. "You were lost in deep thought. Something is bothering you. I can see it. What is it, Ace?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just work. Don't worry about it."

"Is it Antonio?"

His shoulders tensed at the mention of his name, sharp jaw ticked. I knew my assumption was right at the sight of his gray orbs turning to slits.

"It's him, isn't it?" I queried. "I know you're bothered that he's out of jail now. I've been wanting to ask you this. Why did you get him arrested? And how did you manage it?"

I've been holding myself back from asking him about Antonio. But after meeting him at the wedding today, after what he said to me, I couldn't get his words out of my head.

"You can make the outside enemy leave you alone. But what about the enemy inside? How would you tackle them, Ms. Hutton?"

Enemy inside. What did he mean by that? Who was he talking about?

"How did you know I was behind his arrest?" One of his brows raised.

I rolled my eyes. "It was all on your face, Mr. Valencian. Anyone with

eyes would have known it if they looked closely. Your eyes were full of smug.”

“Smug?” His brows furrowed. “He got what he deserved. Even though it was nothing compared to the things I have planned for him.” The malice in his voice was clear.

“How did you do it, anyway? Was the girl also your set up?”

Leaning in, he buried his nose into my hair. “She was in the picture even before I made any plan. She was already dating him, and unluckily for him, she aborted his child last month to avoid any unwanted motherhood. Though he didn’t even know about the pregnancy to force her into anything in the first place, he had done it in the past to some of his partners. And I just took advantage of his past and that girl’s greed for money.”

Disappointment filled me thinking of that child that was killed even before he or she could be born in this world. And after aborting her child, she even used it to frame someone for money. Even if the person was filthy.

“I heard the police had evidence of his illegal businesses and I know this was also your doing. How did he get out so easily?” He could be more dangerous for us now. That man was already after him and Caleb, and now that Ace drowned his name in the market, he would definitely take revenge.

“He still has some connections with powerful politicians. He used them to get out,” he spit out the words. “The good thing is he can enjoy the destruction of his company before his own eyes now. And it’s just the beginning. He has a lot more coming his way. But he shouldn’t have come to the wedding and talk to you.”

The tightness of his grip around me and the rage in his eyes had me concerned.

“Why are you so mad that he talked to me? He didn’t do anything except some talking.”

Silence.

“Ace? What is it?”

“Nothing. He is dangerous, Rosebud. I don’t want him anywhere around you,” he said, cupping my cheeks. “I swear I’ll rip him to shreds if he even touches a strand of your hair.”

The uncontrolled fury in his gray orbs and a hidden fear lurking unsettled me.

Though his concern was legit. Antonio tried to frame Caleb with drugs to defame Ace. He could try to harm some of his loved ones again for his revenge. I could be that leech’s target easily now that Ace and I were together.

I kissed his chest, beaming at him. “Nothing will happen to me as long as you’re here with me. So don’t worry about that. Now think of a way to send him back behind the bars. And this time, forever. So he can’t try anything funny again.”

A smile stretched across his lips. Nodding, he pressed his lips against mine. “My queen’s wish is my command.”

Giggling, I kissed him back. His hands traveled across my curves, sneaking up to my chest.

A wince of mine had him frown in concern.

“Are you all right, Rosebud?”

“Yes. Just a little sore everywhere. You took too much liking to this particular area last night.”

No matter what he was doing, his hands didn't budge from my bosoms last night for a second. Not that I complained, but I was now suffering for his adventurous hands. Though it was a delicious soreness.

"I'm so sorry, baby. Did I hurt you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. His fingers brushed at the sides of my breasts softly.

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine. Just a little sore. They'll get better tomorrow, I think."

"I'm sorry. I just," he bit his lip, still eyeing the fingerprints he left on my sensitive skin, "couldn't keep my hands away from them. They're too marvelous and perfect for me to stay away."

Blushing, I slapped his hands away. It seemed he was obsessed with my chest like he was with my hair.

"Can we go sleep now? I'm tired." I pouted.

"As my queen commands." He captured my lips again into a scorching kiss and scooped me into his arms. Naked.

"The blanket," I whispered, already battling with growing desire. I had to resist my urges if I wanted to walk tomorrow. But my hands were already feeling his hard body, ignoring my brain.

"Forget about it. I love you like this," he groaned.

I clenched my thighs while he added additional marks on my neck where I was sure numerous already sat proudly from last night.

"We should sleep," he murmured into my ear, placing me softly on the bed, hovering over me.

"We should," I moaned at his flaming touch at my sides.

Placing a last kiss on my forehead when he tried to pull away, I wrapped

my legs around him, pulling him back.

At his confused face, I pulled him into a kiss, my hips already begging for attention. His rigid not at all junior was very much awake against me, telling me his want as well. But he was holding back not to hurt me anymore.

And at that point, I didn't care. I wanted him again. Another round wouldn't be that bad, right?

“You're sore...”

“Just be gentle.”

* * *

SOFT TOUCHES OVER MY HIPS, warm lips on my jaw and his hot breath fanning my skin woke me up from my beautiful slumber. My eyes fluttered open to the morning light, then fell on the breathtaking pair of gray orbs I was so much in love with.

“Good morning, my beautiful rose.” The huskiness of his morning voice sent a shiver down my body. Even in the morning, with his ruffled bed hair, he looked as perfect as ever, if not more beautiful.

As cliché as it sounded, this was the sight I wanted to wake up to for the rest of my life. The sight I had craved all my life.

A smile touched my lips. My heart was content, just as much as my body was. Though there was still a little pain down there, it wasn't bad. The pain killer he made me gulp earlier in the morning after another session seemed to work.

“Morning.”

With a heart-stopping grin on his face, he brushed his lips against mine. “How did my Rosebud sleep?”

“Tired slumber is always the best.”

A husky chuckle reverberated through his chest as one of his palms massaged my inner thigh. “How’s the pain?”

My cheeks turned hot. “Better.”

Mischievousness twinkled in his gray pools. “Was I gentle enough?”

Rolling my eyes, I hid my face at the crook of his neck. Another chuckle left him at my bashfulness.

“Don’t hide yourself from me. I love when you turn all red because of me.” Pulling away, he grazed his fingers across my cheek. His intense gaze roamed my every feature as a breath left his lips. “I’m still wondering if you’re real. If you’re really here in my arms, in my bed with me.”

My heart tugged at his words. I snaked my arms around his neck. “It’s real. We’re real. And I’m not going anywhere. Never again.”

Placing his forehead on mine, he peered into my soul. “You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting for this moment. I didn’t know if I’d ever be lucky enough to have you in my arms like this. But you fulfilled that dream of mine. And I can’t thank you enough for giving me this chance, baby. Thank you so much for forgiving me. I promise I’ll make it up to you for the rest of our lives.”

Something fluttered into my chest. Rest of our lives?

A happiness bloomed inside me. He wanted a future with me just as much as I did.

“I love you,” I whispered, my eyes burning with emotions slamming into my chest.

He kissed me deep. “I love you more.”

I wanted to argue, but the grumble of my tummy decided to interfere, turning me beetroot.

Pulling away, he laughed. “Come on, let’s get you freshened up. Then I’ll cook something for my Rosebud.”

I didn’t complain when he scooped me into his arms again and took me to the bathroom.

* * *

“PANCAKES?” he asked, once done with the egg scrambles.

I nodded, chewing on the slice of apple he had cut for me to eat until he made some breakfast for me. I offered to help, but he denied and said I shouldn’t move much due to our wild activities last night. Though I wanted to say I was fine, I enjoyed the pampering. So, I let him have his way.

Dangling my feet from the kitchen counter, I watched him move around the kitchen with utmost ease. The way his back muscles flexed along with his movements had my mouth water. Not to forget those delicious abs.

While mixing the batter, his gaze kept flickering to my exposed legs. The T-shirt he made me put on reached my mid thighs. After he gave me a warm shower, surprisingly, he didn’t try anything naughty other than feeling my chest once. And seeing his lingering gazes, I could tell he was enjoying the view very much.

“Eyes on the batter, mister. I want my pancakes to be perfect,” I teased.

He raised a brow. “And what should I tell you? Eyes on the apple?”

He noticed me staring at his abs?

I blushed for the umpteenth time since last night.

Placing his hands on my hips, he stood between my legs and kissed my

lips softly. “Did I tell you I love seeing you in my clothes?”

“Yes. Twice already.”

“Because that’s the truth. It shows that you belong to me.” His fingers grazed my inner thigh.

Rolling my eyes, I pushed him away, but he only snuggled my neck.

“I love my smell on you.”

I shook my head. What would I do with this caveman of mine?

Wrapping my arms around him, I kissed his shoulder just as the doorbell rang.

“Who’s it at this time?” I asked, pulling away.

His brows furrowed. “I don’t know. Let me check. You stay here.”

Nodding, I jumped down the counter as he went to attend the door. Placing the plate of apples aside, I poured the batter on the heated pan, humming one of my favorite songs.

Moments later, I heard footsteps coming closer, then his voice. My humming stopped immediately.

“Well, well. I didn’t know I’d find you here today.”

Turning around, my eyes met with his dark, empty ones. A fake smile plastered across his face.

I reciprocated the gesture with one of mine. “Good morning, Arthur.”

FIFTY-TWO: LIZA AGAIN



With a tight smile, he nodded at me. The fleeting grimace on his face while he glanced at my clothes didn't go missed.

"I heard there were some problems going on between you two. But I'm glad to see you together today," he said, though his eyes didn't match his words.

Ace came back with a shirt on and took the charge of the pancakes from me again. Placing a kiss on my forehead, he said, "I've got some clothes for you in the room. Go, change. Then come out for breakfast."

When did he do that?

But it was good since I didn't want to roam in only a shirt before Arthur.

Nodding, I walked away from the kitchen as I heard their voices.

"What brings you here so early in the morning, Arthur?" Ace asked.

"It was important. I wanted to call you but then thought discussing face to face would be better. It's about the deal with the Russians."

The rest of the conversation was cut off as soon as I closed the bedroom door behind me.

* * *

"ACHILLES, as you set a lot of conditions for the contract there'll be a lot of

paperwork. We're not sure if the Russians will agree to them. They're quite a big fish in the market nowadays." Arthur's gaze set on Ace as he took a bite of his pancakes. "If you want them to work with us, we should consider letting go some of our conditions, don't you think?"

When Ace offered him to have breakfast with us while having the discussion, he agreed. Much to my dismay.

Placing some more scrambled eggs on my plate, Ace's left hand went back to my knee as he shrugged. "I don't mind some paperwork. I won't change my rules for anyone. Don't forget they're also interested in working with us. Yes, they're big, but nothing compared to the Valencians. So, if they want to do business with Valencian Corp, they'll have to do it our way."

They were talking about a Russian company who wanted to expand their business more in the US. Their first choice was to go for the Valencian Corp. As they could bring huge money to the company, Arthur didn't want to let them go. And the project they were interested in collaborating with us would require half a billion dollars of investment. So, a small mistake could lead to a big loss.

And the worst thing was, Arthur was going to handle it.

I didn't have a slight faith in this man.

His jaw ticked, but being wise, he kept quiet before Ace. And my Mr. Valencian was too busy feeding me more fruits to notice his uncle's discreet rebel.

Suddenly, Antonio's words rang into my head.

Why didn't I think of it before?

Who could it be other than him? He was doing illegal businesses behind Ace's back. He threatened Sierra with her life to hide a secret of his. There

could be a vast possibility of him being the enemy inside the house.

But... would he be foolish enough to go against Ace and join hands with Antonio?

I didn't know. The only person who could answer my question was Liza.

Someone forced her to put those drugs in Caleb's car. Maybe it was him. Maybe he threatened Liza, just like he did to Sierra.

I have to find out. And for that, I need to see Liza.

"If that's what you want. I'll talk to them once more about our conversation. Let's see what their opinion is on it." Arthur wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

Ace nodded. "Great. And please make sure you're present at the meeting with the Arabs today. I can't attend since I have a private meeting with De Sylvano."

That had my attention. Meeting with the Arabs? Means that red witch would be at the office again?

When I asked Matt about her visit to the office the other day, he said she had come to complete some paperwork regarding a project. And as we were working together now, the Arabs would be coming for meetings and conferences frequently.

I pressed my lips. I had another problem to solve today.

"Ace, I can't eat more. I'm full!" I complained when he put some more pancakes on my plate.

"You need to eat more, Rosebud. You've lost weight in the last months. Here, open your mouth." He put the fork before my lips. "And after last night, you definitely need some energy," he murmured the last line in my ear.

My eyes widened as heat crept up my cheeks.

Arthur's clearing his throat snatched our eyes to him. "All right, then. I'll meet you at the office. See you later." Getting up, he threw me one last glance before turning around and walking out of the room.

* * *

"PLEASE WAIT HERE. She'll be here in a minute."

I nodded as a female police officer walked out of the office. It was a small room with only a table in the center, with two wooden chairs.

After Ace left for the office for an important meeting, I took my chance to come here. Even though he strictly told me to stay home and rest. He didn't even let me go to the office with him. He said he'd be back in an hour, and I'd to finish my work in the meantime.

After five minutes, the door opened and the familiar figure with a tall frame and blonde hair walked in. The orange jumpsuit was loose on her thin body.

Surprise washed over her dull face. Gone was the usual brightness of her eyes.

Standing, I smiled at her. "Hello, Liza. How are you doing?"

"Em? What are you doing here?" Her brown eyes were confused.

"Let's take a seat first."

Once we were seated opposite of each other, she leaned in. "I know it's not your responsibility to find out if my family is well, especially after what I did. But do you know how they are? My brother? Is he okay?"

My heart hurt for her. Even though I was pretty mad at her when she betrayed us, now thinking of how she was threatened by a dangerous man, I

could understand her situation back then. I had a hunch it was Arthur who threatened her.

I put a hand on hers, squeezing it slightly. “Don’t worry. Your family is fine. Ace has some guards watching over them since you got arrested.”

A gasp slipped from her lips. “B-boss did that?”

Smiling, I nodded.

Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “Even after everything I did, I know I don’t deserve it. It must be your doing, Em. I—I don’t know how to thank you. I’ll be grateful to you forever. I was so worried thinking about my family’s safety. After they found out what happened, they were so disappointed in me. They didn’t even come see me.”

“I didn’t do anything. It was Ace who did all the arrangements.”

She shook her head, sniffing. “I know the boss. He can turn into someone’s nightmare if someone crosses his path. He doesn’t see why they did it or how valid their reasons were. But he did it for me even after I tried to defame his family. And I know it’s because of you.” A soft smile tugged at her lips. “Boss can do anything for his Rosebud.”

I tried my best not to blush and concentrate on the current situation.

“I understood why you did it, Liza. I know you. You’re an honest and kind girl. Seeing you doing what you did was extremely disappointing and shocking. But we couldn’t just leave your family in danger for your deed. After all, you had worked in that company for years with loyalty.”

She looked down, biting her lip. “I don’t deserve your kindness, Em. But... thank you. Thank you so much.”

“We can’t change what you did, but you can help me with something.” I

kept my face neutral.

“How can I help you with anything while staying in here?”

“You can. You can tell me who threatened you to frame Caleb.”

Her eyes widened as her shoulders tensed. Leaning in, I grabbed both of her hands in mine.

“Look, Liza. I know you’re scared that if you tell us their name, your family will be in danger. But trust me, they’re safe. We have people there for their safety. You don’t need to worry about it anymore. So, you can tell me the person’s name so I can find out who they are and expose them.”

She snatched her hands from mine, shaking her head. “I’ve told the cops a thousand times I can’t spill the name, no matter how much they torture me. And I’ll tell you the same, Em. I’m sorry. I can’t tell you anything. Even though my family is safe now. You don’t know him. He’s dangerous. Those guards can’t keep an eye on my family all the time.”

He’s dangerous.

The same thing Sierra said.

“You know Sierra resigned?”

Her brows furrowed. “Resigned? Why?”

They were quite close. So maybe learning about her situation, she would say something?

I nodded. “Even after her financial crisis, she had to leave her job. And guess what, a certain someone threatened her with something too. When she denied them, she had to leave the office.”

She froze in her place. “Y-you know?”

“I have a guess. I tried to talk to her, but she said the same thing you told

me. That he's dangerous. And guess what I heard him say on the phone about some girl?" I tilted my head. "If she crosses her limits, she'll lose her life just like her job."

Horror etched on her features as she stared at me with wide eyes.

"I know you're scared for your family. But if you tell me the name so I can confirm my doubt, I'll be able to stop him. If you continue fearing him, I don't know how many people will suffer because of him, just like you and Sierra." I prayed in my head for her to understand my points. She could be a great help to expose Arthur if she agreed. "Sierra is in danger, and there's no one who can protect her. He needs to be stopped. Please, Liza. Just give me the name."

Tears fell down her face as she shook her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. Sierra must be strong enough not to succumb to his threats. She's my friend and I want to help her. But I can't. I can't put my family at risk."

"He won't know if you say anything. Nobody will tell him!"

She held my gaze. "If he even gets a sniff of you knowing his secret, he'll come after me first, Em. And then... he'll go after you."

A shiver ran down my spine. But I didn't let the fear show on my face and held my ground.

"He won't. I'm Emerald Hutton. He can't threaten me. You don't worry about me. And you're here in jail. He can't harm you, either. Your family is also safe. Why can't you just tell me the name?"

I sighed when she kept quiet.

I had to get something out of her.

"All right. Don't say the name. Just answer me one question." I took a

deep breath. “Is it Arthur?”

Her hands balled into fists, her whole body tensed at the name. With tears shining in her eyes when she averted her gaze, I got my answer.

The enemy of the house was Arthur, indeed.

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FIFTY-THREE: DUNCAN DE SYLVANO



That freaking back stabber! How could he betray his own nephew like that? He joined hands with Antonio for what? To defame his own family? What would he gain if Valencian Corp's reputation ruined in the market? Wouldn't it harm his bank balance, too?

I knew he was not what he showed the world. But today, after talking to Liza, I found out what a snake he was. Winning Ace's trust, he was now trying to stab him in the back while remaining in the shadow.

And Ace had no idea about this. I had to tell him. But I didn't know how to start this conversation. I knew what the truth was, but I didn't have any physical proof to show him. Will he believe my words?

I halted, seeing a certain person I hated with everything in me. Red freaking witch!

Before the conference room, she was talking and giggling with Matt, batting her fake eyelashes. And she wore another red dress today.

I almost forgot the Arabs had a meeting today.

"Ms. Hutton?"

I turned to Carter, who had a surprise etched on his face.

"I thought you weren't coming today. Boss said you were on leave?"

Ignoring his question, I turned to the witch again. “How many meetings will be happening with the Arabs?”

“Umm, I’m not sure, Ms. Hutton. But until the project finishes, it’ll occur several times.”

I glanced at him, pressing my lips together. Several times? No way in hell am I letting that witch roam around this office that many times. And definitely not around my man.

I held his gaze. “I don’t care how many times the Arabs come here for the meetings. But make sure she,” I pointed to that witch, “doesn’t step into this building from now on.”

His forehead creased, confusion was clear in his eyes. “But, Ms. Hutton, she’s Mr. Hakimi’s secretary. She’ll be needed here during the meetings. I don’t think Mr. Hakimi would like this ban on his secretary.”

“I’ll talk to him myself. Don’t worry about him. Just do as I say.”

“But—”

“No buts. I don’t want that girl in this office from now on. Is that clear?” my voice was full of command as I spoke. I didn’t want to take advantage of the position Ace had given me by making me an equal owner of everything he owned, but I didn’t have any other way to get rid of that witch.

With eyes wide, he nodded. “O-of course, Ms. Hutton. You won’t see her here again.”

I smiled. “Good. Now please carry on with your job. Is Ace in his office now?”

“Yes, Ms. Hutton. He is in there.”

Nodding, I turned around and sauntered away.

Not needing the necessity of knocking before entering his office, I pushed the door open and walked inside with a bright smile plastered on my face. I hadn't seen him since the morning. And I was already missing him.

“Ace—”

I halted at the presence of two other people in the room with Ace. Three pairs of eyes fell on me, leaving me dumbfounded.

Shit! Carter didn't inform me Ace was in a meeting in his office. The dense ambience around the room told me about the seriousness of the meeting.

Arthur stood close to the door, as if he was just about to walk out.

My expression immediately turned stoic as soon as my gaze met his already hard ones. Something unreadable swirled around his dark orbs.

Freaking traitor!

My eyes fell on the man around Ace's age sitting opposite him. He was the same man Cassie was staring at Tess's reception.

When I gazed at my man, those gray eyes were narrowed, watching me silently.

“Uh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a meeting going on,” I said, sheepishly.

“It's a general courtesy to knock before you enter someone's office, Emerald. You don't just barge in like that.” Arthur's voice held displeasure.

“She doesn't need to knock to enter her own office, Arthur.” Ace's response was quick. Though his tone was full of authority, he was polite.

Arthur's brows raised. “Her office?”

“Everything that's mine is my Rosebud's. I thought you were aware of

that already.” He tilted his head.

While Arthur’s face tightened as he flashed a smile of understanding at Ace, mine turned red. Even though he had shown his affection towards me before the world so many times, I still managed to blush whenever he did that.

“I’ll see you later.” With that, Arthur threw me another glance and left.

Turning back, I found the stranger’s eyes on me, watching me with raised brows. Standing, he strolled towards me and gave me his hand for a shake.

“Hello. I’m Duncan. It’s very nice to meet you,” he said in his deep Italian accent. Icy blue eyes held curiosity as they watched me.

With six feet something height, strong built structure, sharp jaw, dark brown locks, and an extremely handsome face, he looked like every girl’s dark fantasy.

If I wasn’t already absolutely lost in my Greek god, I’d have a crush on him too. Just like my best friend. I could understand why she couldn’t take her eyes off him that night. But for me, he was just a handsome face. My eyes were only for my Greek caveman.

I could already feel his flaming glare on this Italian.

Smiling, I shook his hand. “Hi! I’m Emerald, Emerald Hutton. Nice to meet you too.”

“I know. I saw you at the reception. Though we couldn’t meet personally. My friend here was too busy dragging his beautiful lady away from the party to introduce her to anyone.” He cast a glance at Ace, whose jaw was tight at our still joined hands.

“Enough of shaking hands, back off now, Sylvano.” Greek accent was

deep.

Smirking, he retracted his hand and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Easy there, *fratello!* Taken women isn’t my thing. No matter how stunning they are.”

Heat crept up my cheeks while my caveman’s nostrils flared.

“Duncan De Sylvano, I’d like you to leave right now if you want our partnership to keep going,” he warned, leaning towards his desk.

Duncan’s smirk stayed intact. Both powerful men held each other’s gaze. “So, what I heard is true, then. Ruthless, cold Achilles Valencian finally got his salvation. I was wondering why fewer people were getting fired around your companies. Because now the beast has someone to tame him.”

Ace cocked his head. “Beast? Look who’s talking. Doesn’t the ruthless word suit you more than me?”

Duncan let out a small chuckle. “Anyway, we’re meeting tomorrow night with the Russians, right?”

“Yes. Hope things go as planned.”

The Italian nodded. “Amen to that. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Turning to me, he flashed a polite smile and walked out of the office.

“You!” My head snapped to the devil behind the huge desk. Stormy grays were hard as he beckoned me to him. “Come here.”

A shiver ran down my spine. But as if my legs had their own mind, they slowly trudged near him. Placing the purse on his desk when I was within his reach, his hand shot out and pulled me onto his lap. A gasp slipped through my lips.

One hand gripped my nape and the other one snaked around my waist.

His scorching gaze held me prisoner. “What were you doing a moment ago, Rosebud?”

“W-what did I do?”

His grip tightened as he brought his face closer to mine. My eyes fell on his plump, firm lips.

“What did you do? You were checking out some other man in front of me and you’re asking, what did you do?” His jaw ticked. “Did you forget last night, my rose? Did you forget what I did to you? Did you forget the marks I left on your body while claiming you as mine?”

Goosebumps crawled up my skin at the memories of last night. Clenching my thighs, I licked my lips. Gray orbs followed the act. I pressed myself against him. “Mind reminding me again, my love?”

A groan left his mouth.

Leaning in, I kissed the corner of his lips. “I wasn’t checking him out. I was just seeing what Cassie saw in him, that she just couldn’t tear her eyes off him. My eyes are only for you, don’t worry.”

Watching me for a moment, his form slowly relaxed. I inwardly shook my head at him. Stubborn, possessive caveman.

Pulling me closer, he snuggled my neck while I slumped into him. His heady cologne filled my lungs. My home.

My eyes fluttered close as he littered butterfly kisses across my neck. His hand massaged the back of my head softly. At the moment, I let go of everything that ran in my head and just listened to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

“I told you to rest. What are you doing here?” he mumbled, tightening his

grip around me as if I'd disappear. "I was just coming back home to you."

Home? Did he—did he mean our home?

A warmth surged through my chest.

"I was missing you." It wasn't a complete lie. I was missing him the moment he left the penthouse.

I wanted to tell him about Liza and Sierra. But I wanted to talk to Warner first. Maybe his cousin managed to get some proof against Arthur by now.

He stayed silent for a moment and then lifted my face up, making me look at him. "I have a surprise for you."

My whole mood brightened at once. "What surprise?"

He chuckled, capturing my lips in a soft kiss. But his kiss lingered for too long for my impatient self.

Pulling away, much to his dismay, I snaked my arms around his neck. "What surprise?"

"Too many things have been going on recently. So, I thought you'd like to get away from this place for a while."

"We're going somewhere? On a vacation?" I squealed like a child getting their Christmas gift.

A breathtaking smile tugged at his lips, gray eyes roaming my features with love and adoration. "Yes. A vacation."

"Where? When are we going?"

"Relax, Rosebud. It's a surprise. Have some patience, will you?" He ran his nose over my jaw. "We're leaving tomorrow night, after the meeting with the Russians."

I pouted. I hated not knowing where he was taking me. "Is it out of the

US?”

Amusement danced in his eyes. “You’ll see once we reach there.”

Huffing, I put my head back on his chest.

Chuckling, he trailed his hand under my dress. A shiver shot through my body as his fingers glided up my thigh.

“Are you still sore, baby?” his hot breath fanned my neck.

Hiding my face more in his chest, I nodded. The slight pinch of discomfort was still there. “A little.”

He let out a groan. “Take another painkiller. I’ll go mad if I don’t have you tonight.”

I bit my lip at the painful tug in my lower region. I could already feel the burning desire running hot through my veins. My hand went to his hair, tugging softly.

He breathed into my neck. “I love you so much, my rose.”

My lips parted at his hot lips against my skin and scorching touch on my thighs. Those pervert hands of his slowly crept up to my butt.

Pulling away, I brought his head down and captured his lips in a hungry kiss. And he responded immediately with his punishing one.

“I love you too.”

* * *

WALKING DOWN THE HALLWAY, I called Warner for the second time, but he didn’t pick up. I left him a message after meeting Liza, but he didn’t even answer that. I wanted to ask him if he found out more about Arthur.

Where was he?

I was getting impatient now. I needed to talk to Ace. But I was too afraid

to ruin the beautiful phase we were going through.

I wish I had gotten Warner's cousin's number from him.

Sighing, when I punched the green button again, a hand grabbed my arm in a harsh grip before pulling me into a dark room I hadn't entered before.

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FIFTY-FOUR: THREAT



*M*y eyes squinted against the bright light as soon as the room lit up. And then I found the person who dragged me into this room.

Dark orbs watched me silently.

My fists clenched. “What the hell is this, Arthur?”

His head cocked to the side. “You don’t even know what hell is. Trust me, I haven’t done anything yet to compare it with hell.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

A muscle of his jaw ticked, and his aged left eye twitched. “I’ll just say five words, Emerald.” Disgust dripped from his voice as he said my name. “Stay out of my path.”

My forehead creased more in confusion.

A shiver ran down my spine at the malice that his dark, soulless eyes held as realization hit me.

“What are you trying to say, Arthur?” I kept my voice even.

He found out. He found out about my quest, but I didn’t know how much he knew.

He let out a humorless chuckle. “You exactly know what I’m talking about. You really thought you could dig into my past and my secrets, and I

wouldn't find out?"

When I didn't say anything, his lips curled into a sneer.

"Surprised?" he mocked. "Well, from the day you saw me with Sierra in the hotel garden, I knew you wouldn't keep quiet. You'd go after her asking about me. And you did, just as I assumed. And then I found out that worthless ex-boyfriend of yours had his cousin after me. Do you think I'm that unaware and foolish?"

I stepped back as he took a threatening step towards me. With my eyes wide, my heart hammered in my chest. Not because I was scared of him, but because he now knew about Warner and his cousin's involvement in this matter.

Shit, I didn't plan this! I didn't want him to hurt them in any way because of me.

Be strong, Em! Don't show him your weakness. Don't let him threaten you like he did to Liza and Sierra.

Holding my chin high, I held his gaze. "I don't need to think you're a fool. You are a fool."

His nostrils flared at my comment.

"Anyone who dares to go against Ace is considered as a fool. Do you really think you can backstab him, and he will let you leave like that? Just because you're his uncle?" I snorted. "It's just a matter of time before I tell him what you do under your respected businessman façade, and he'll throw you out of this company like a fly from sweet."

"You think he'll believe you? What proof do you have against me?"

Nothing. That's why I was stalling to reveal your betraying ass before

him.

I kept a straight face. “Do you think he’ll want any proof when his Rosebud will say something to him?”

His face hardened. I knew Ace wouldn’t just wave my words off, but I still wanted to have some solid proof against Arthur. And now that he was standing before me, warning me off, I didn’t need any proof.

“I can’t believe your guts, Arthur. You run illegal businesses across the UK, you used to run brothels over there, you were threatening Sierra, and now you’re warning me that I should stay out of your path?” I raised my brow. “If I were you, I’d be running away with my tail between my legs if my dark secrets got exposed before someone. Because the time isn’t far away when you’ll be behind the bars,” I hissed.

I wanted to confront him about Liza and his working with Antonio, but I held myself back. That could bring Liza and her family more trouble.

With his fists clenched, eyes flashing, he took another step forward. But this time I held my ground.

“You want to tell him everything about me?” he cocked his head. “Then go ahead.”

I frowned.

“Go ahead and tell him. What’s the most he can do, send me to the prison?” He let out a laugh before an ominous look claimed his face. “But know one thing before you do anything, Emerald. I don’t play my cards without keeping an ace up my sleeve.”

“What do you mean?”

A smirk tugged at his lips. “You tell him, and I’ll destroy him. Now

Achilles's Rosebud won't do anything to break him to pieces, will she?"

A shiver ran down my spine. Destroy him?

"You can't. You don't have that power. Ace isn't an ordinary man you can—"

"Do you really think I would go and do all this without having anything against him in my hands?" He raised a brow. "I'm warning you for the last time, Emerald. I don't have any personal rivalry with you, so I'd suggest you stay away. Otherwise, your dear Ace will bear the consequences. The secret I have about your boyfriend can destroy him to ashes. Remember that."

I shook my head. "You're lying. You're just trying to threaten me to make me back off. You have nothing against him. He doesn't do any illegal businesses like you!"

Shoving his hands into his pockets, his features turned void of any emotions. "How much do you know about his past? How much did he tell you?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Other than his drug addiction and his father's suicide, I knew nothing. But could him being a drug addict in his teen years be strong enough to destroy him? No.

He shook his head. "You know nothing! Go and ask him. Then you might know what I'm talking about. What's the secret that can ruin Achilles Valencian?"

With that, he fixed his collar and walked out of the room, leaving me immobile.

His words rang warning bells in my head.

What secret he was talking about? What else was Ace hiding from me?

With my heart racing, I slowly trudged out of the door and walked away.

* * *

AFTER PACING around my office for almost half an hour thinking of Arthur's threat and waiting for Ace to finish his meetings, I called Warner. But again, he didn't pick up. Where the hell was he?

I needed to talk to Ace. I knew there was more to his past that I wasn't aware of. Like where his mother was or what happened to his father for him to take his own life. But I didn't know he had some secret buried in his past that was lethal enough to destroy him.

But what if Arthur was just messing with my head? To keep my mouth shut? Was there really something he could use against Ace?

But he wouldn't just throw it in my face if he didn't know anything. He even told me to ask Ace myself.

I need to talk to him now. I need to know what happened in his past to stop Arthur.

With a determination formed inside me, I headed to his office. Thankfully, he was alone when I entered. Standing before the floor to ceiling window, his gaze was set into the distance. Hearing my footsteps, he turned to me.

"Rosebud?" His arms spread for me to fly in them, and I did. Without wasting a second.

Filling my lungs with his intoxicating soothing scent, I closed my eyes against his chest. A sigh left me with his arms firm around me.

My home. All the anxiousness and tiredness washed off my mind now that I was in my Ace's arms.

Nuzzling my hair, he took a deep breath. “Where were you? I was waiting for you so that we could go home.”

“In my office. Matt told me you were busy in a meeting,” I mumbled in his chest.

“That wasn’t important. And even if it was, you should’ve come and stayed with me. I don’t like it when you’re not before my eyes.”

A smile touched my face. Kissing his chest, I looked up at him. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Good. Now can we go home? I want to spend some quality time with my Rosebud.”

I nodded, not saying anything.

What secret he was hiding from me?

His gray eyes narrowed. “What happened, baby? Is anything bothering you?”

Raising my hand, I touched his cheek. “Ace, now that we’re in a relationship, I want everything to be perfect. There should be no boundaries between us, no restrictions, no hesitations.”

Cupping my cheeks, he brushed his lips against mine, kissing the corner of my mouth softly. “There are no boundaries between us, my rose. And if there are, I will wipe them off. Nothing can come between us, not even a single gust of air.”

“I want to know everything about you, Ace. Everything that I don’t know.”

“You know everything about me, baby. What more do you want to know?” He frowned.

I held his gaze. “Your past. Everything about your past.”

He stiffened. Something flashed across his eyes. But it was gone soon as he kissed my forehead.

“What do you want to know?”

I was surprised at the ease his stance was radiating. I’d have believed he wasn’t bothered by my words if his gray eyes weren’t so blank that I couldn’t even trace a hint of emotions in them. And it unnerved me.

“Where’s your mom?” I asked. “After your father’s death, she was gone from your life. Where is she, Ace?”

His face remained neutral as he said, “She’s in Italy now.”

“Why did she leave you and Caleb like this? You had no one to look after you. Didn’t you try to stop her?” As far as I knew, she always adored Ace and Caleb. I didn’t understand what had gone wrong.

His grip tightened on my hips. “As I told you before, after my father’s death, she couldn’t take it. So, she left. Due to her depression and habit of consuming alcohol, she needed an escape from her life and this place. To get herself better, she left us with Arthur and went to Italy for treatment. She couldn’t come back. This city held too many bad memories for her.”

As he spoke, I didn’t find a hint of hatred towards his mother in his voice. I thought he hated her for leaving him like that. But he didn’t. Instead, he was giving me justification for her.

She went to Italy for treatment and stayed there. Didn’t she even try once to meet her son?

“You’re still connected to each other? I mean, I understand why she doesn’t want to return, but doesn’t she wish to meet you once in a while?”

He nodded. "I do meet her on some occasions. Especially on her birthdays. But except that, we talk sometimes on the phone."

The edge in his voice had my heart clench. He missed her a lot. I noticed how he didn't say she wanted to meet him, instead he said he met her every once in a while. What made her turn like this? Didn't she miss her son?

"Do you miss her?" I whispered.

A muscle of his jaw ticked. "Sometimes."

I rubbed his chest to provide some comfort. "Why don't you talk to her every day?"

He averted his gaze. "Because she doesn't like that. She got out of her depression with a lot of difficulties. And seeing me and Caleb, means her past, brings her... unwanted memories."

Seeing her own son brings unwanted memories?

"But she does try. That's why we talk sometimes," he added. He still loved her, no matter how much she stayed away.

My heart tugged for him.

Nodding, I cleared my throat. *Come on, Emerald. Ask it.*

"What happened to your father?" My eyes held his stormy grays. "Why did he commit suicide?"

FIFTY-FIVE: THE DEMONS OF THE PAST



*H*is entire stance tensed as soon as I asked the question. His eyes still away from mine as he took a deep breath, his jaw locked tight.

“Rosebud, we just got together. Let’s keep the bitter chapter of my life out of our new beginning, shall we?” Gray orbs met mine. They held desperation for me to understand. “I don’t want to relive my past when all I want is to make new, beautiful memories with you.”

I knew it hurt him to talk about it, but I couldn’t let this go. I had this intuition that whatever Arthur was talking about was related to his father’s suicide. I needed to know everything to sort things out.

Even though it pained me to torture him with his memories, I didn’t back off. “Until you let go of your past, you can’t start fresh. You can’t be truly happy. I can see it, Ace. You’re battling with something. There’s something bothering you. And it’s not just Antonio. Please tell me, what is it? What happened to your father? I want to know everything.”

Closing his eyes, he pulled away and showed his back to me. Facing the window again, he stood there with his hands fisted.

“There’s not much to know, Rosebud.” His voice came out cold. “I used to always look up to my father as my idol. I wanted to become like him. Until I got to know his real face.”

I didn't dare interrupt him, fearing he would switch off again. I just stood there silently, listening to him.

“He was a womanizer. After some years of his marriage with Mom, he started to cheat on her. And that broke my Mom,” he revealed.

A gasp slipped through my lips.

“But even after being unfaithful, he loved his reputation more than anything. He was always discreet about his affairs. He wanted his image to be great before the society and his children. Mom had always doubted his activities until one day he wasn't careful, and she caught him with one of his girlfriends in their own bed.”

I stood there immobile, shocked at the revelation. That's why they never had a good relationship.

“And it wasn't only Mom who caught him. Caleb and I were also there, and so were Tobias and Tess.” His broad shoulders were rigid. “And not being able to handle the shame, he ended his life.”

Silence.

He stood with his tensed posture. Only his heavy breathing reverberated across the room.

Something clenched in my chest at the pain he wasn't willing to show. I knew how much it was affecting him.

Padding closer, I wrapped my arms around him from behind. My hands rubbed across his chest slowly, trying to provide some comfort.

“I'm so sorry,” I whispered.

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me in front of him and engulfed me in his arms.

With his arms wrapped around me tightly, he nuzzled my neck. And I hugged him back, running my fingers through his hair softly.

“It was the worst day of my life. That night still haunts my dreams sometimes.” It pained me the way his voice cracked.

I placed a kiss on his shoulder. “I know saying it is easier said than done, but you’ve to let it go, Ace. I know whatever happened would be traumatic for anyone, but you can’t let it affect your whole life this way. Let it go. I know you still can’t accept it. But you have to. Accept it and move on. I can’t see you suffering like this.”

“I’m trying. But the demons of my past pull me back into their darkness whenever I try to move on.”

Moving away slightly, I cupped his face. “Then we’ll fight those demons together.”

“But will you always be there with me?” His features were unreadable.

I brushed my lips against his. “I will,” I promised. “I’ll be always there with you.”

Watching me for a moment, he smashed his lips with mine. The intensity of his kiss told me how he wanted to convey his feelings through the kiss.

Pulling away, he let out a sigh and pulled me into his arms again. “I love you, my Rosebud.”

“I love you too.”

Even though he told me everything, I felt like something was still left out. I didn’t find anything Arthur could use against him. Was Arthur really telling me the truth? Or did Ace not reveal everything?

Whatever it was, I decided not to ask him any more questions for now.

He already told me enough. I didn't want to torment him further.

But the tight grip of his around me, as if I'd disappear somewhere at any moment disturbed me. What was he hiding?

* * *

STIRRING the pasta in the pan, I put the cake in the refrigerator after getting it out of the oven. Then I went busy with preparing the icing.

A pair of strong arms snaked around my waist from behind. The fragrance of his soap from his fresh shower reached my nostrils. A smile tugged at my lips.

"What's my Rose doing?" he rasped in my ear. His thumb brushed on my belly in circles.

"I'm preparing dinner for the guards." Tossing the pasta, I sprinkled some more salt.

He raised his brows.

I rolled my eyes. "Of course I'm making food for both of us. Though we can send some for them."

"No. Only I can taste the food my Rosebud makes for me." The place between his brows furrowed.

Shaking my head, I chuckled.

Unbelievable.

He nuzzled my neck again. A shiver ran through me as his stubble tickled my skin. I let out a giggle.

"Stop! It tickles!"

He rubbed his face more against my neck, making me laugh.

When his fingers crept up my sides, I let out a squeal, trying to get away.

But holding me back, he tickled my sides, throwing me into a fit of laughter.

With a smile stretched across his face, he watched me wiggling in his arms, cackling like an idiot.

“S-stop! I can’t breathe!”

But he didn’t stop. His laughter followed behind, it sounded musical to my ears.

And when I started wheezing, only then he stopped. Wiping the tears from the corner of my eyes, I glared at him. He grinned, pulling me into him again.

“I’m hungry,” he whispered, his hand crawling into my blouse.

I bit my lip at the tug in my lower abdomen. “Dinner first.”

“I can’t wait anymore. I need you, baby,” he groaned, his hands inching closer from my chest.

Pulling away, I took the pasta off the stove. “No, I’m making dinner and we’ll enjoy the food now. Other plans are for later.”

He grumbled, trying to touch me again. But I put the ladle between us, halting his movements.

“Now let me finish my job. I need to ice the cake.”

His lips pressed together. “All right. Let me help.”

“No. Today is my turn to feed you. I’ll do everything myself. I’m almost done, anyway. You go finish any work you have left.”

“Oh, I can’t wait for you to feed me,” he commented, licking his lips.

My cheeks flamed at his double meaning. Letting out a laugh, he pressed a kiss on my lips and walked away.

Shaking my head, I let out a sigh.

I could see through his façade even though he acted like nothing happened. I saw the storm brewing in his eyes behind all his teasing and laughter. He appeared more tense than usual after our little talk in his office.

Something was bothering him, and it broke my heart to see him this way.

* * *

TURNING UNDER THE BLANKET, I felt cold. I didn't wake up to the warm body I went to sleep with. My hand stretched for him on the bed, but he wasn't there.

Reaching out, I turned on the lamp that lightened the dark room.

The washroom and balcony doors were locked.

Where did he go?

After our dinner, he took me to the bedroom and made love to me until I was exhausted and couldn't move a limb. With his gentle touches and sweet whispers in my ear, I had found myself in a peaceful sleep.

But now he wasn't here.

Ignoring the discomfort down there, I got up and put on his T-shirt, the one he threw on the floor earlier during our hot session. Padding out of the room, I went to the living room and then the kitchen. Not finding him there, I checked the other rooms. But to no avail.

“Ace?”

Silence.

My gaze went to the narrow hallway that led to the library, gym, and his office. Biting my lip, I trudged through the hallway and came to a halt in front of the gym. Through the gap beneath the door, I could see the lights

were on.

I frowned.

What was he doing here at midnight?

I pushed the door open and walked inside. “Ace—”

But I was cut off by the scene before me.

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FIFTY-SIX: FEARS



Sweat trickled down his strong back along with the tensing and flexing of his shoulders while he was engrossed in killing his massive punching bag.

Only the sound of his ragged breathing and punches echoed throughout the gym.

But what shocked me was the bloody spots on the punching bag.

Rage boiled inside my veins. My fists clenched. He was doing it again.

“Ace! Stop it!”

His movements stilled. His broad shoulders rose and fell with every heavy breath he took as he turned his head to me. Dark, stormy gray eyes met my turquoise ones.

Striding closer, I grasped his hands. A gasp left me at the sight. They were worse than I’d ever seen before. They weren’t just bruised, they were bloody.

“What the hell you’re doing!” My eyes burned with tears as I held his gaze. “Have you lost it? You’re bleeding! How many times do I have to tell you not to do this! You’re hurting yourself again!”

But my outburst didn’t seem to reach his ears. His eyes were too busy

watching me, roaming every feature of mine.

When a tear slipped down my cheek, he blinked, coming back to his senses.

“Rosebud? What happened, baby? Why are you crying?” He cupped my cheeks. “Are you hurt?”

Didn't he realize what I was talking about?

Something squeezed inside my chest. What bothered him to that extent that he didn't even realize his own pain?

“Yes, I'm hurt.”

Concern etched on his beautiful face as they searched for any injuries on my body. “Hurt? Where? How did you get hurt?”

“You hurt me,” I whispered.

He stilled, watching me in silence. A pain flashed across his eyes as if even the idea of hurting me haunted him. “I could never hurt you, Rosebud. I'd die before doing that.”

“But you did. Not physically, but emotionally. You're hurting me by hurting yourself.” Taking a hold of his bloodied hands carefully, I held them before his face. “You lied to me. I thought you told me it would stop once I'm in your arms forever. But it didn't. I guess I'm not important enough for you to make your pain go away.”

Shaking his head, he tried to touch me, but I stepped back.

“Rosebud, there is no one more important than you in my life. You're the sole reason I live for.” Pain flashed across his eyes as another tear fell down my cheek.

“Then why? Why do you torture yourself like that?” I sniffled.

Glancing down at his knuckles, a muscle of his jaw ticked. “Pain makes me forget, Rosebud. It helps me escape my fears and insecurities. And intense working out helps me with my frustration and the storm that rages inside me.”

Fears? Insecurities?

Hearing those words from Achilles Valencian’s mouth sounded foreign. What fear could this powerful man before me have?

“What fear?” My voice came out as a whisper.

“Fear of losing you.”

My heart stopped as I stared at him, speechless.

“Why would you lose me? I’m not going anywhere.”

He averted his gaze. With his fists clenched, he turned away. “It’s late, Rosebud. You should go back to sleep now.”

“Do not change the topic!” Grabbing his arm, I made him face me. “I’m not accepting my questions being unanswered anymore! You’re hiding something from me and that’s eating you alive! What is it? Tell me. Please, Ace. Don’t keep me in the dark anymore.”

“I’m not hiding anything from you,” his reply came out cold.

“Of course you are! Don’t lie to me!” I snapped, my temper rising.

I couldn’t let him torture himself like that. He needed to let it out. And I needed to know why he had this fear of losing me. Because I knew I wasn’t going anywhere.

“You’re still hiding something from me about your past, aren’t you? You didn’t tell me the entire truth.”

He tensed as his dark eyes snapped to me. The unreadable emotions

swirling around his irises were unknown to me.

“I told you everything that you needed to know.”

I tilted my head. “So that means the things you’re hiding from me aren’t important enough for you to tell me?”

His lips pressed tight, eyes flashing. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“You have to! I won’t let you torture yourself like that! Nor will I let you keep me in the dark anymore!”

“Why do you have so much interest in my past?” His voice boomed across the room, making me flinch. “I’ve been hearing these questions the whole fucking day! Can’t you just get that I don’t want to talk about it? Leave my past the fuck alone!”

I stood still. Shock, surprise and hurt ran through me at once. He had never talked to me like that.

Seeing my shock, guilt washed over his face as he let out a curse, rubbing his face in frustration.

“Rosebud, I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry, baby.” His features were laced with agony. “I didn’t mean to shout at you. I just—I lost it.”

When he tried to reach me again, I took another step back.

“It’s all right, it can happen sometimes. I don’t mind. As long as you tell me the truth.”

Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Emerald, please stop it. I can’t.”

Even I couldn’t. As selfish as it sounded, he didn’t know what dagger we had dangling on our necks. To truly start our life together and defeat Arthur, I

needed the truth.

“I won’t. You’ve kept me in the dark for seven years and it made both of us suffer. I won’t let you do it again. Tell me, Ace. Please, I beg—”

“Oh, for God’s sake! Stop it! Don’t be so fucking stubborn, Emerald! I told you everything you needed to know. You don’t need to know anymore. So let’s just keep it that way! It’ll be good for both of us!”

Before I could say anything else, he stormed out of the gym, slamming the door behind him.

I just stood there silently. So many questions were swirling inside my head like a wildfire. But I had no answers.

* * *

I WALKED BACK to the bedroom again. Leaving the door ajar, I sat on the bed.

A sigh left me as I glanced at the clock.

One in the morning.

After our fight, he left the penthouse before I could even come out of the gym. I knew he wasn’t returning for a few hours.

Where did he go?

Now that I calmed down a little, I realized how harsh I was with him. I knew how sensitive this matter was for him, but I continued to poke him. Nagged him for answers. I should’ve just given him some time instead of snapping at him.

How could I be so careless?

It was the fear of Arthur harming him and the desperation of throwing him out of our lives. And now, seeing how much the truth was affecting him, I needed to know everything even more. I wanted to heal his wounds. I

wanted to comfort him, tell him I was there with him, that I understand. But how could I if he wouldn't let me in completely?

If he didn't open up to me completely, it'd become a hinder between us for the rest of our lives. It would always weaken our relationship. I wanted him to open up to me. I wanted him to trust me with his secrets.

Maybe I should just give him some time.

And then I remembered I didn't bandage his knuckles.

Picking up my phone, I dialed his number. But it directly went to voicemail. I called again, but to no avail.

Where the hell is he?

His wounds are needed to be taken care of.

Frustrated, as I slammed my phone on the bed, it began blaring.

With a skip of my heart, I picked it up. But disappointment soon followed as Warner's name flashed on the screen.

Rubbing my forehead, I received the call.

"Hey. I called you earlier today, you didn't pick up. What's up?" Honestly, I didn't have the strength to talk about Arthur at that moment.

"I was busy digging out some worms, but guess what? I've found a snake instead," he said from the other side of the phone.

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Remember once you told me how you didn't know a lot of things about Achilles's past? And knowing how sensitive it was for him, you were hesitating to ask him?"

I remembered talking to him at Tess's wedding. When he saw Ace and me together, even though he didn't look happy, he congratulated me. He

asked me what my next step in our relationship was. I told him I wanted to know more about Ace.

But seemed like it was turning out quite difficult.

“Yeah, but why are you talking about that now?”

“Well, I thought I could help you a little. And guess what? I was right from the beginning. That man doesn’t deserve you. Because he never told you the truth. All he did was keep you in the dark and manipulate you in his trap with his sweet lies!” he hissed.

“What do you mean? What are you talking about? I thought I told you not to talk about him like that—”

“I’m just stating the truth, Em. I just called to tell you what a liar he is.”

My eyes narrowed further. “Get to the point. What lie did he tell me? What do you want to say exactly?”

“He told you his father committed suicide, didn’t he?”

Something churned in my stomach as I slowly nodded, even if he couldn’t see me. “Yes?”

“His father didn’t commit suicide, Em. He was murdered.”

FIFTY-SEVEN: MISSING HIM



I stilled. His words slowly processed in my head.

“W-what are you talking about? Everyone knows he committed suicide. And I know why he did that. Ace told me everything.”

I heard him scoffing.

“Ace lied to you again. Just like he did every time. Just like he created a sham to break your heart.”

I ignored his jab.

“How do you know his father was murdered? Who told you that?”

“Digging out Arthur’s truth as we got to know what illegal businesses he runs, I had a suspicion Achilles could have some connections with his uncle’s activities. I mean, Arthur was doing all these under his nose, and he had no idea about it? It’s difficult to believe. So I asked my cousin to look into Achilles’s past and look what I found.”

I let out a breath of disbelief.

If he was murdered, then why did everyone, even the media, say it was a suicide back then? And why did Ace lie to me about it?

“Do you have any proof? What makes you believe he was murdered? And who’d murder him and why?”

“Rich people, they can do anything with money, even hiding evidence, Em. After his death, the forensic reports said he was murdered. But the Valencians fed some cash to the cops, and all was settled,” he said. “Your Achilles Valencian did a good job of wiping all evidence of the murder and any mentions of the person who did the crime. So, we didn’t get any proof except some words from a person who was a former cop involved with the case back then. And when we asked him if he would give any statement about it to the police, he replied with a big no. We could only make him spit out this information once we got him drunk at a local bar.”

Shocked, I slumped on the bed. His voice rang into my head again and again.

His father was murdered, and he destroyed all evidence against the criminal?

Who was he trying to save? And could I even trust Warner’s information? Did Ace really do it?

But my heart said he couldn’t do it. He wouldn’t save his own father’s murderer.

“D-did that man tell you Ace did it? He bribed the cops?”

“He said ‘the man from Valencian’s side’. And as Arthur wasn’t in the country at that moment and Caleb was too good to even think of that, who do you think would do that if not Achilles?” he asked, tone mocking. “What a great man you love, Em. The man who saves his own father’s murderer.”

My jaw clenched. “Warner, you don’t know the whole truth. So, I’d suggest you don’t jump to any conclusions yet! I know Ace, he’d never do that! He loved his father!”

He did until he knew his father’s real face.

And I meant what I said. Yes, I was shocked at the revelation. But I wouldn't doubt him like that. I'd just ask him directly. I needed him to come home.

“You don't understand, Em. Something really fishy is going on. Achilles isn't the right person for you! He's only manipulating you into his trap—”

“I'll talk to you later.” I cut the call.

Keeping the phone aside, I rubbed my temples.

I had no strength to argue with him right now. All the mess spilling into my life from the last few months was rising an exhaustion in me. Why were there so many questions and I had no answers?

And the person who could free me from the torture wasn't ready to open up to me.

I tried to tell him about Arthur so many times, but every time I chickened out, thinking I could ruin our relationship out of my rash decisions. But now that I was finally ready to tell him everything with Liza's subtle confession, Arthur's threat to destroy him stopped me.

Was Arthur talking about this? Was it related to Ace's father's murder? But what could it be that was lethal enough to ruin him?

And was this secret connected to Ace's fear of losing me?

Did he think I'd leave him once I found out how he closed the cops' mouth to hide a crime?

Letting out a frustrated breath, I picked up my phone and called him again. But again, it went to freaking voicemail!

Hours passed away. But he didn't return. Nor did he call. I even called Carter to see if he knew anything, but he didn't have any idea of his

location. The flashes of his enraged gray eyes that hid an unspoken agony behind them replayed in my mind when sleep slowly engulfed me.

* * *

CARTER: Sorry, Ms. Hutton. I still couldn't find out boss's location. But don't worry, he's fine. He'll come back soon.

Sighing, I put the phone on the kitchen counter and took a sip of my tea.

It was ten in the morning, and he still wasn't here. I again messaged Carter to look for him, but this was what I got as an answer.

Worry nagged me constantly. With Arthur and Antonio roaming free, I couldn't sit in peace. That infuriating man didn't even take the guards with him. No matter how sinfully built he was, he couldn't fight against five or ten men, could he? He shouldn't have left like that alone.

The blare of my phone put a break on my fuming.

Tess's blinding smiling face showed up on the screen after I received the video call.

"Em! You won't believe how beautiful this place is. Look at the background! It's the view from my balcony!" Her gushing in happiness put a small smile on my face. Behind her, blue sea glittered under the sun that peeked through the mountains adorned along the long beach.

She and Caleb left for Greece for their honeymoon right after their wedding reception. And this was the first time we were talking since that day.

"Yeah, it's amazing. How are your days going there?" I kept my voice as chirpy as I could.

"It's going great! Even though we're spending most of our time in the bed. The views are amazing. I totally fell in love with this place!" She giggled.

As envious as it sounded, I wished Ace and I could go somewhere far from here, just the two of us. Away from all the tensions and threats. Though he was planning a vacation for us, with all the things going on, I didn't think it was possible now.

Caleb's always happy face appeared beside my sister.

"Hey, Achilles's Rosebud! What's up? My cousin is treating you good in my absence, right?"

I smiled. "I'm good. And don't worry, he's pampering me too much for my own good." Well, except for his behavior last night. But I'd blame his situation for that. "And what about you? You better treat my sister well in my absence, mister. Otherwise, you'll find me chasing you all around the Greece soon."

Letting out a laugh, he kissed Tess's temple. "Oh, though I'm not as romantic as Achilles, I'm trying my best. Ain't I, baby?" His puppy eyes fell on my blushing sister.

"You're doing great," she whispered.

I cleared my throat, getting both of their attention back.

"Don't ruin my morning, guys. I can talk to you later if you need some privacy," I teased.

Caleb awkwardly scratched the back of his head, grinning sheepishly while Tess grew red.

"No need!" She pushed Caleb away from the camera. "You go get something for me to eat. I'm hungry. Let me talk to my sister."

Grumbling, he complained about how bossy she was and walked away. Tess turned back to me. A serious look etched onto her face.

“What’s wrong, Em? Your eyes are not as chirpy as your voice sounds. Is everything all right?”

My smile dropped. The dark circles under my eyes and dull appearance said it all.

“Nothing. Just didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Don’t lie to me. Tobias called me to tell what’s happening there. What happened that he left like that? Has he returned yet?”

Along with Carter, I also sought my brother’s help. But I got no luck in it too.

I shook my head, my shoulders slumped. “He didn’t. We had a little argument last night. And he just... snapped.”

Her brows furrowed, disbelief flashed across her blue orbs. “He got mad at you?”

I shrugged. “It was my fault. I pushed him too much.”

“Is it about Warner? Because the only thing that can get him mad at you is his jealousy.”

Well, there was another thing you didn’t know.

“No, not Warner. I was trying to find out something I felt he was hiding from me. About his past. I can see it, Tess. It’s eating him alive. Something is bothering him, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

Understanding laced her features. “You know how sensitive his past was, right? Maybe that’s why? There are some parts that maybe you don’t know about his parents.”

“I know everything. He told me yesterday. But it feels like there is still something I don’t know.” I fidgeted in my chair. “Uh, do you know the

reason behind his father's suicide? I know why he did it, Ace told me. But is there something else he doesn't want anyone to know?"

Maybe she knew something more than Ace told me? Maybe she was aware of the murder case?

Her frown deepened. "No, he did it because of shame. There's nothing else. Why do you think so?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know. Don't you think it sounds a bit odd that the man who didn't care about his wife's emotions and cheated on her, even after knowing her suspicion, took his life just because his family caught him red-handed?"

She pondered for a moment, biting her inner cheek. "I don't know, Em. I was there that night when we saw him with his girlfriend. But after that, Tobias and I left, not wanting to intervene in their personal matter. And we heard the news the next day. I don't think there's anything more to this. Achilles would've shared it with us then."

Sighing, I nodded. I didn't know whose words to believe. But Warner wouldn't lie to me without any solid information.

"All right, Caleb is here. I'll talk to you later. Let me know when Achilles comes back," she said, glancing behind her. "And Em, take it slow. I'm sure, if there's something, he'll tell you. Sooner or later."

Smiling, I nodded again before cutting the video call.

My ardent eyes went back to the clock.

When will he come back?

Tess was right. I should take it slow and give him some time. No matter how much this new information bothered me, I could do it for him. I didn't

want to reach any conclusions without knowing the whole truth.

The doorbell rang, making me leap up to my feet. My heart started to thump in my chest.

He is here!

Sprinting to the door, when I pulled it open, my smile faltered.

The familiar brown eyes greeted me as I stood there, surprised.

“Warner? What are you doing here?”

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FIFTY-EIGHT: GOOSEBUMPS



“Came to meet my best friend. Why? I’m not allowed in Achilles Valencian’s cave?”

I rolled my eyes. I knew inviting him in could cause a catastrophe if Ace came back and saw him here, but I couldn’t just send him away.

“It’s not like that. Come in.”

He strolled inside as I opened the door wide for him.

“Coffee?” I asked while he looked around the penthouse, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Sure.”

Nodding, I padded into the kitchen, and he followed behind.

“So, what brought you here? You didn’t tell me you were going to drop by.”

“After last night, I thought I’d talk to you personally. I wanted to see if you’re okay,” he replied.

“I’m fine, Warner. Don’t worry.” I put water on the stove.

“Did you ask him yet?” He watched me carefully.

A sigh left me as I shook my head. “I didn’t get the chance. He hasn’t

been home since last night.”

One of his brows raised. “Home, huh?”

I ignored his bitter tone.

“I mean, his home.” Though it’s just been two days since I was staying here, this penthouse started to feel like home to me. He was my home. So, wherever he stayed, my home resided there.

Once I made him a cup of coffee, we settled in the living room.

I just hope Ace doesn’t show up at this moment.

“So, you got any more information on Arthur?”

Then something clicked in my head. How could I be so irresponsible? I forgot to tell him Arthur knew about him and his detective cousin.

“Unfortunately, no. We tried our best, but—”

“You have to tell your cousin to stop investigating right now!” I cut him off, causing a crease to settle between his brows. “Arthur knows everything. He threatened me to stay out of his path.”

His eyes widened. “What? Shit! That’s what I was afraid of!” Shaking his head, his eyes landed back on me. “And what threat? Did he do anything to you? Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m fine. He just warned me to stay away otherwise... uh, you know what he can do.”

I didn’t want to involve him more in this by telling him about Arthur’s threat. He already suspected Ace. I didn’t want him to go after Ace’s past anymore. If Ace hid something from the world, there must be a reason behind it. Making everything worse wouldn’t be a good idea.

“I’m really sorry, Warner. I shouldn’t have involved you guys in this.

Now you and your cousin are on his radar,” I apologized. “Please stop whatever investigation your cousin is running. Thank you so much for your help, but I’ll handle everything myself from now on.”

Shaking his head, he took my hand in his. “It’s not your fault, Em. It’s me who offered help. No need to thank me, it’s what friends do, right?” He smiled. “And there is no way you’re doing this anymore. It’s risky, Em. Don’t instigate him further. He already warned you once.”

“I’m not scared of him. Nor am I gonna back out. He’ll rot behind bars. I’ll make sure of that!” Determination laced my voice.

It was just a matter of time.

He let out a defeated sigh. “Why aren’t you telling Achilles then? Arthur threatened you by showing his real face. Isn’t that enough for Achilles to believe you? Or you also think he’s involved with his uncle’s sins?”

I snatched my hand from his, giving him a pointed look. “We’re not doing this again, Warner. I told you not to assume anything before you have solid proof against him.”

“Solid proof? Didn’t you hear what I told you last night?” His voice rose, jaw tightened. “He destroyed every proof that could prove his father’s murder before the world. He’s saving a criminal. A heinous criminal. And you’re saying not to assume anything? I can’t believe you, Em!”

“You don’t know the whole story. Whatever happened years ago, we don’t know anything about it. Even the man you talked to. There must be a reason why Ace did it, or there’s also a possibility he didn’t even do anything! That man could be talking about someone else.” I tried my best to keep my tone calm. “So, please. Until I know the whole truth, I don’t want to hear any more about this topic. It’s mine and Ace’s personal matter, Warner.

I'd like you to stay away."

A dry chuckle left him, sadness flashing across his eyes. "I almost forgot you're not my Em anymore."

I averted my gaze. I should've felt guilty right now, but I didn't. He was crossing his limits now. I had to stop him.

"I'm still your Em, your best friend, Warner. But things are different now. I really appreciate your concern for me. But trust me, Ace isn't what you think he is. Even if I believe your word that he's lying to me, there must be a reason for that. Because I know he wouldn't do anything to hurt me intentionally. He loves me, Warner," I said, softly.

His brown orbs met mine. "I loved you too, Em. But that didn't make you stick with me as much as you're doing for him."

"Warner..."

He rubbed his face. "I'm sorry! I again crossed my limits, didn't I? I just... can't accept the fact that you're with someone else now."

I sighed. "It's for the best. No matter how much I loved you as a friend, I never loved you as a lover. My heart always belonged to someone else, and you knew that. We weren't meant to be together. Even if Ace hadn't come into the picture and somehow we were still together, trust me, Warner, neither of us would stay happy. I could never make you happy. So, it was necessary to end it before we made it worse."

"Well, that's just your opinion. Because I was very happy with you in our relationship."

But I wasn't. I wanted to add but decided against.

"There's someone out there who's worthy of your love, Warner.

Someone who can give you equal love in return of your affection. And I'm sure you'll find her soon," I whispered. "Anyway, let's not talk about it anymore. How's everything going in your life? You're probably going back to Seattle soon, right? I'm quite impressed your boss let you take leave for that long. I thought he was a snob?"

Taking a sip of his coffee, he shrugged. "I quit my job."

"What?" I gaped. "Why? I thought working in such a massive company was your dream. Everything was going smoothly. What happened?"

His gaze locked with mine. "Achilles Valencian happened."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

He let out a sigh. "As you already know, my boss was an ass. I didn't know why, but he had an allergy with me taking any leave. Even when I wanted a few days off for Tess's wedding, he denied. Of course, my main purpose was to see you. But I couldn't stay in Seattle without sorting things out with you. Yes, I was mad with you, but there was still hope I could win you back." Casting me a glance, he cleared his throat. "Anyway, I didn't wait for his approval and left. I told him I was sick and couldn't work for a few days."

"Then what's the problem?" I probed.

"The problem is that the owner of the company found out about my leave and demanded my immediate presence in the office. And if I didn't, I'd lose my job." His laughter was dry. "I was surprised about why an owner of a multi-billionaire company would be interested in an ordinary employee's leave. So, I looked him up on Google. And guess what? What a coincidence, my big boss and your boss turned out to be friends."

My frown deepened. A warning bell rang in my head. "Friends? You

mean Ace's friend?"

He nodded. "Can you connect the dots? Now I understand why among so many candidates, some even from the most prestigious colleges, they chose me. They made me move to Seattle. Or should I say, *he* made me. To keep me away from you."

I stared at him, flabbergasted. I didn't know what to say.

Did Ace really send Warner to Seattle to keep him away from me?

"How can you be so sure?" My tone was low.

He threw me a look of disbelief. "After everything I told you, you're still trying to defend him? Isn't everything clear? He clearly told his friend to get me a job in his company, so I'd have no choice but to leave you behind. So, he could have his chance with you. And he did! He took you away from me!"

His fists clenched and unclenched, eyes flashing with anger.

"That's why I didn't fall into his trap again. I quit the job, even if my boss told me that if I quit the job just like that, it'd breach the contract they made me sign. And I'd be responsible for the big red mark on my career." His jaw ticked. "But I couldn't let him win this time. So, I quit. And Achilles Valencian did what he wanted. He made sure I didn't get any job anywhere. First, he took you away from me, and now he ruined my career."

"I can't believe this!" Putting my head into my hands, I let out a breath.

What the hell is wrong with him? What the fuck was running in his head when he did all these things? He couldn't just let his possessiveness ruin someone's career, for God's sake! That freaking prick!

"Now you know why I keep telling you he's not the right person for you? You're an obsession for him, Em. He wanted to get you at any cost. And he

did. But trust me, Em, obsession doesn't stay for long. Once he gets bored with you, he'll toss you away like you're nothing."

His words didn't reach my ears because all I could think about was how to smash something on his head when he would come back home. Rage boiled in my veins like lava. How dare he do that to Warner?

I looked up at him. "I'm so sorry, Warner. I don't know what to say... I'm extremely sorry. I'll talk to him, don't worry. Everything will be fine. You'll get your job back, I promise."

He shook his head. "You're still not leaving him? Even after everything?"

Closing my eyes, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I love him, Warner. I can't just leave him."

He stared at me for a moment and then averted his eyes. Nodding slowly, he got up. "I guess I should leave now. And you don't have to talk to him about my job. I'll take care of it myself. Thanks for offering help."

"Warner, stop!" I stood up as he turned to leave. "Don't leave like this. I'm extremely sorry, but—"

"It's okay, Em. You don't need to say sorry. I should've known that no matter how much I try, I can't take his place in your heart. I have to be somewhere right now. I'll see you later." And then he was out of sight.

My shoulders slumped. The broken look in his eyes made my heart ache. I didn't want to hurt him. But still, I did. And to add salt to his wounds, my freaking boyfriend just ruined his career!

He has a lot to answer for!

But where the hell was he?

Picking up my phone, I called him. But it went to the voicemail again.

Letting out a curse, I threw the phone on the couch.

To get some fresh air, I took my purse and stormed out of the penthouse.

I needed to collect some clothes back from my home. And to have a small chat about my sudden relationship with Mom and Dad, of course. They had been nagging to know what was going on between me and that prick.

As much as I was mad at him, I was going to come back. Otherwise, how'd I knock some sense into his thick head?

* * *

PARKING my car before the office building, I got out with my duffle bag.

Heavy breeze blew my hair in different directions as a thunder cracked in the dark sky. The hefty clouds covered the moon tonight, inducing an ominous ambience around. The sudden change of the weather in this early winter was kind of unexpected. It was a good sunny day, but now it seemed it'd pour at any moment.

Greeting the watchman, I strolled inside and got into the VIP elevator. Due to the bad weather, most of the employees seemed to be in a hurry to leave earlier tonight.

Because of all the tension and headache he gave me, I didn't join the office today.

I didn't know if the devil was home yet or not.

My jaw clenched.

Meeting with my parents went smooth. I was grateful they didn't ask many questions about why I didn't take him along. He was supposed to go there with me. But they were pleased I decided to give Ace a chance.

But I didn't think they would be happy if I told them what their favorite

Achilles Valencian did.

Shaking my head, I padded out of the elevator as the doors slid open. The bodyguards' postures were stiffer than usual, and their nods were tight.

What's with them tonight?

The sound of lightning reached my ears again as I walked into the penthouse and closed the doors behind me.

A frown was immediate to form between my brows.

The lights were off. But I left them on.

Was he home?

Shrugging off my coat, I trudged inside. Goosebumps crawled up my skin as the cool air kissed my arms. The living room's lights were dimmed, and the eerie silence unnerved me.

And then I saw a shadow. Sitting on the couch, its posture was slightly leaned forward with its elbows resting on its knees.

My heartbeat ran fast. "Ace, is that you?"

And the only reply I got was silence.

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FIFTY-NINE: STORMY NIGHT



“Ace?” I called again, but the shadow didn’t move.

Padding closer, I squinted. The lightning that cracked outside left a flash of luster on his face for a fleeting second. Stormy gray irises were set on me. But they were dark tonight. Much stormier than I ever encountered.

I let out a sigh of relief. “What the hell is wrong with you? You almost gave me a heart attack!”

When he didn’t answer, I found the switch and turned the lights on.

And there he was.

Still in his last night’s pants and a fresh black shirt, the one he must have worn before storming out, his disheveled form sat silently on the couch. Some of the buttons of his shirt were undone, giving me a sinful sight.

I missed him.

I mentally shook myself. It wasn’t a time to drool over him.

“So, you finally came back.” My tone was sharp.

I pressed my lips together when he just continued to stare at me with his icy gaze.

“I’m talking to you! Where were you the whole night and the entire day? I was going crazy out of concern!”

“You were concerned about me? I thought you were too busy spending time with your special friend.” His bitter voice came out with his head tilted to the side.

Special friend? What was he talking—

Oh!

But how did he find out about Warner? He wasn't even here.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I held a straight face. “I don't think it should bother you if I spend a little time with my friend.”

“Of course, it should bother me!” He snapped, standing straight. I flinched back at his thunderous voice. “My woman is getting cozy with her ex-boyfriend behind my back in my own house, and you're saying it shouldn't bother me? It does fucking bother me!”

I stilled.

Behind his back?

“Behind your back? What are you implying, Ace?” My voice came out as a whisper.

My chest tightened. How could he think I'd ever do that to him?

Shock flashed over his eyes in place of rage as realization of his own words hit him. “I meant...” Tone thick. “When I wasn't present here. What was he doing here in my penthouse? How did you even let him in? Even after knowing how I feel about it? Even after knowing how he feels about you!”

“Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't know I wasn't allowed to let my friends in *your* penthouse. I'd have definitely asked for your permission if you were available on the phone.” I faked a sweet smile.

I thought it was our home...

I blinked away the burn in my eyes. Was he even aware how he was hurting me getting lost in his anger and jealousy?

His fists clenched. “Emerald, don’t test my patience. You know very well what I’m talking about.”

Emerald again?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Warner came here to talk to me, and we had a little chat. Then he left. I don’t know what we did for you to think I was cheating on you.”

Striding closer, he pulled me close by my arms. “I said I didn’t mean that! Don’t twist my words!”

I wiggled out of his grip. “I’m not twisting your words! I’m just stating what you said. You were clearly implying I was cheating on you! I can’t believe you think I could ever do that to you. How could you?”

“I know you can’t ever do that, damn it! The one I don’t trust is that man!” He cupped my cheeks, holding my gaze with his furious ones. “Can’t you see what he’s trying to do? Can’t you see what he wants? He wants to take you away from me. And you’re letting him!”

“Just like you took away his career from him? Just like you sent him to Seattle because you wanted him away from me?”

A muscle of his jaw ticked, but he stayed silent. His unapologetic, flaming gaze drove my temper haywire.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe this. How can you ruin someone’s career like that? He’s just a friend to me, he always was. How many times do I have to tell you? I ignored everything you did in these past months. You buying Cooper’s company so you could bring me back to California, putting guards after me, threatening off any men who came near me and making me

an equal owner of everything you own.” I counted the only incidents I could remember at that moment. “I let everything go, thinking you’ll come around eventually. But I won’t tolerate this! I won’t let you do this to Warner!”

His nostrils flared. “Why?”

I frowned.

“Why is he so important to you? Why, even after I’m telling you he wants to steal you from me, you’re still fighting for him!” He roared, cupping my jaw. But no matter how furious he was, his grip was gentle. “Why do you still care for him that much now that he isn’t your boyfriend anymore?”

I gritted my teeth. Didn’t he hear what I was saying again and again?

“Because he’s one of my best fri—”

“You love him?”

Words caught in my throat as soon as the question came out of his mouth.

Pressing his forehead against mine, his thumb gently brushed over my cheek. Vulnerability flashed across his eyes, along with the light of thunder that fell on us through the open window. “Do you still have feelings for him, Rosebud? Does he love you more than I do? Do you regret leaving him, leaving a good, sensible man for a crazy, obsessed man like me who has a tainted past?”

The crack in his voice hit my heart like a dagger.

“W-what?”

Achilles Valencian was showing me his fear, insecurities. So that’s why he was so vexed about Warner hanging around me that much? Not only his jealousy, but his insecurities made him do all these things. Because he thought he wasn’t good enough for me?

But why would he think like that?

“I wouldn’t be with you right now if I regretted even a bit. I wouldn’t be in your arms like this if I had loved him and not you.” I held his gaze as I said those words. “If I didn’t love you, and only you, I wouldn’t be waiting here for you, even after the way you left last night.”

“Then why do you still care for him so much? Why are you still letting him in your life?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Ace!” I jerked away from him. “Just because we broke up doesn’t mean I’ll throw him out of my life! I won’t because he’s my friend, and I’m telling you this for a thousand times! I don’t love him, I never did! I don’t understand why you’re so insecure about him being around me?”

“Because even after you broke up with him, he still wants you! He wants you back in his life, can’t you see it!” His shoulders rose and fell with every heavy breath he took. “You don’t know him, Rosebud. He wants to take you away from me. He—”

“I don’t care if I know him or not!” I cut him off. “Nor do I want to know him. I thought I knew you. But guess what? I don’t know anymore.”

A tear left my eye as I stared at him. His gaze followed it, his hands clenched.

“You lied to me,” I whispered. “I didn’t think my Ace would lie to me like that.”

His lips pressed tight. “I don’t remember you asking me about Warner suddenly getting hired and anything regarding his job.”

“That’s one of the things you hid from me. But I’m not talking about it right now,” I said. “I’m talking about your father’s death. You told me he committed suicide. But it’s not the truth. He didn’t commit suicide, he was

murdered.”

His shoulders tensed. In place of the rage on his features sat an unreadable mask now. But no matter how much he tried to hide his true feelings, his stormy grays revealed everything. Shock, confusion, frustration, anger and... fear.

I had decided to give him some time to reveal everything before me. I didn't want to force him to do anything. Understanding how sensitive it was for him, I thought I'd give him his needed space before he was ready to let me in.

But now seeing his irrational fear, insecurities, and jealousy, seeing to what extent he went under the influence of them, I couldn't sit quietly. Because of that past, he had this assumption that he wasn't good enough for me. That I could leave him anytime realizing the fact. A secret that was eating him alive and was the reason behind his fear of losing me. I wanted to be aware of that. Because the way he was behaving every time at the mere mention of his past, I didn't think he'd be ever ready to tell me anything.

Because he thought if I knew about this dark past of his, I'd leave him. And he'd do anything but let me go.

I wanted him to trust me, to let me in. I wanted to heal him. I wanted to be beside him, the thing I couldn't do years ago. And for that, I needed to know everything.

“How... how do you know that?” Greek accent was deeper than ever. “Who told you about this?” A silent tension was rolling off his stance, ready to explode any moment. His nails dug into his palms.

Even though I knew Warner wouldn't lie to me, I was still shocked knowing his father was indeed murdered.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” A shaky breath left my lips. “Your father was murdered.”

“Who told you that?” Sharp jaw ticked.

“Who did it, Ace?” I asked, ignoring his question. “And why did you hide it from me?”

He inhaled deeply, eyes darker than earlier. “I didn’t lie about anything. Whoever told you this nonsense doesn’t know shit. So just forget about it.”

“Don’t lie to me again, Ace! I can see it in your eyes!” I glared. “I don’t know why you’re even hiding anything from me. We both know what the truth is. Then why—wait,” I tilted my head. “Are you trying to save someone? Are you trying to hide the person who killed your father?”

The unnerving silence and the storm brewing in his gaze was my answer.

I gasped. “It’s true then. You’re trying to save a murderer.”

“Emerald, stop it.”

Shaking my head, I gaped at him. “So, it’s also true it was you who bribed the cops to save the culprit.”

“Stop—”

“How could you? No. I don’t believe this. You can’t do that. There must be a reason behind that, right? There was a valid reason. You can’t do that to your own father—”

“I said stop!”

I flinched at his thunderous roar. My horrified gaze met his flaming one.

“Fucking stop it already! I’ve had enough! Can’t you get one fucking thing in your head that I don’t want to talk about it?” he hissed. “I don’t owe you anything. I don’t need to tell you every fucking thing about my life. Stay

the hell out of my past! And leave me alone!”

Turning away, he stormed out of the room, to his bedroom.

My hands curled into balls. My blood boiled in my veins. I wouldn't let him have his way tonight. Not after everything he did.

Soon, my legs followed him to the bedroom.

“No! I won't leave you alone until you tell me everything! I won't let you hurt yourself every night because you like to keep everything bottled up. I won't let you behave like this with me just because you don't want to share anything with me! And I'll definitely not let you accuse me of cheating out of jealousy because you fear you will lose me if I know about your past!” I held my ground. “You have to tell me! I have every right to know—”

“You have no right to know anything! You're not my fucking wife that I need to explain everything to you!” he snapped.

My breath caught in my throat. A pain shot through my heart at his words.

I had no right? No right?

My lower lip trembled, but I was quick to bite it still. I could feel something breaking inside me.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I should know my boundaries. Silly me, I thought I meant something to you,” I whispered, my treacherous eyes blurred with tears no matter how much I tried to mask my feelings.

His gaze snapped to me. Guilt washed over his face as again realization of his words set in. The pain he caused me reflected in the windows of his soul. His gray eyes.

“Rosebud...” he gulped. Cupping my face, he made me look up at him.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that. You mean the world to me. You’re the reason I’m alive...”

I shook my head. A tear slipped down my cheek. “You can’t just say sorry and say you didn’t mean it after you literally accused me of cheating on you and then tell me I don’t mean anything to you.”

His words hurt like a bitch. I knew he was disturbed, but he couldn’t just spit venom at me like that.

“You’re not my Ace. My Ace would never speak to me in that manner. He would never hurt me like that. You’re not the Ace who promised not to hurt me on purpose.” I removed his hands from my cheeks. “And you’re hurting me purposely.”

I could see how my tears affected him.

“No, baby. I-I’d never hurt you on purpose. You’re my whole world. I’m so sorry I said those things. I was mad. I didn’t have any control. I just wanted to make your questions stop. I didn’t mean it at all. I’m sorry, Rosebud. Please forgive me.”

“You’re not sorry. If you were, you’d explain to me why you’re doing all these things. Why you’re behaving like that. You’d let me in. If I was really that important to you, you’d trust me and open up to me. You’d let me be there for you, help you with your past. But you clearly don’t want that. Because I’m not that important for you to tell me the most important truth of your life.” Warner’s words echoed throughout my head. “I must be just an obsession for you that you don’t want to lose. That’s all I am to you, aren’t I?”

A muscle of his jaw ticked as he pulled me against him. “Yes, you’re my obsession! You’re my obsession because I love you. I’m obsessed with you

because I can't live without you! And I don't want to lose you because my heart fucking refuses to beat without you!" Letting out a sigh, he closed his eyes for a moment before they met mine again. "But... I can't tell you this, Rosebud. Please don't force me. I can't tell you this one thing. I just can't."

"Why?" I whispered.

"Because you'll hate me once you know how tainted my past is. You won't want to stay with a damaged man like me."

I held his gaze. "Do you think a bitter truth that happened in your past will make me leave you? Do you think my love for you is that shallow?"

"Rosebud..."

"Don't you trust me, Ace? Don't you trust my love? Don't you trust me enough to let me know every dark secret of yours?"

Silence. Nothing came out of his mouth. He just stared at me.

"Ace?"

Nothing. Not even a word.

I stepped away from him.

My heart was breaking into pieces.

"You don't trust me," a whisper slipped through my lips.

Another step back. He tried to pull me in again, but stopped when I shook my head. Tears fell down my cheeks. My throat tightened.

"If there's no trust in a relationship, then that's nothing but a shallow façade. You say you love me, but love comes with trust. And there's no trust in your love," I said. A shaky breath left my lips. "And I don't think I can stay in a relationship where there's no trust in it."

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SIXTY: LEAVING HIM



With clenched fists, I stood there with tears brimming in my eyes, watching him going still. Color slowly drained from his face as his gray eyes widened.

“W-what did you say?” his deep accent asked.

“I said what you heard. If you don’t trust me at all, I don’t think this thing between us can work.” Shaking my head, I wiped my tears furiously. “I’m tired of you continuously keeping me in the dark! I’ve already suffered for years because of your one-sided decision. I won’t take more. You can now happily stay in your penthouse with your stubbornness, secrets, and privacy! No Emerald will nag you again and again to know your past from now on!”

Ignoring the way his shoulders tensed, the crazed look that flashed across his eyes, his clenched jaw, I turned around and stormed out of the room.

“Don’t you dare step out of the penthouse, Emerald! You aren’t going anywhere!”

This time, I didn’t flinch at his roar as he started to approach me. Instead, as soon as I stepped out of the room, I closed the door from outside, locking him in. I knew he wouldn’t let me leave at any cost. But if he was stubborn, so was I.

His heavy fists landed on the other side of the door. “What are you doing? Open the door, Emerald! You’re not leaving me! No way in hell! I won’t let you!”

“I will! And you can’t stop me!” Yelling out, I strode towards the main door.

“Emerald! Stop it! Open the door, please! You don’t mean what you’re saying! You can’t leave me!” The door jiggled with the force he tried to open it. “Rosebud, please! Baby, open the door. You belong here with me. You can’t just leave like that. I won’t let you! Please, baby. Open the door!”

Shrugging my jacket on as I pulled the main door open, his voice made me hesitate.

“Baby, please! I-I love you...”

I gulped the thickness of my throat. My eyes went back to the closed door of his bedroom.

I hesitated.

Then the words he spit out earlier rang in my head again. The ache in my heart added fresh fuel to my anger. Gritting my teeth, I wiped my cheeks furiously.

“Goodbye, Achilles Valencian!”

“No! Don’t you dare, Emerald—”

I slammed the door close behind me and the sound of his violent pounding on the bedroom’s door stopped along with it.

I strode towards the elevator as fast as I could. My heart pounded along with the relentless pouring of my tears. The guards stared at me in confusion. The moment I stepped into the elevator, a distant thud reached my ears.

And I knew very well what it was. He freaking broke the door down.

But it was too late. He couldn't reach me now.

The moment the elevator's doors started to slide close, he stormed out of the penthouse. His oddly crazed dark, stormy gray orbs met mine, making my heart skip.

"Emerald, stop!" His voice boomed throughout the corridor. The guards went on alert, looking back and forth at us.

But before he could even move from his place, the doors closed, and the elevator began to go down.

The cool breeze, along with the heavy rain, slapped me in the face when I stepped outside. But the rumbling sky and flashing thunders couldn't stop me.

I needed to be away from this place. I needed to breathe.

With my soaked clothes, I slid inside my car and drove away as fast as possible, without looking back. I knew he was coming after me. And his finding me so soon wasn't on my wish list right now.

Once I was far enough from the office building, I slowed down near a park. The road was almost empty except for some passing cars and hurrying people under their colorful umbrellas.

The raindrops poured over my windshield relentlessly with the wipers sliding over them in a tireless motion.

Letting out a breath through my lips, I leaned against the seat, closing my eyes. A tear slipped down my face.

Do you trust me, Ace?

He didn't answer. He didn't even say a word. I would have understood if

he said he trusted me, but he needed some time. I would have kept quiet. But he didn't say anything.

My lower lip trembled as I bit back a sob. I knew I was rushing him to give me answers. I knew leaving like that was immature and an act of a coward not being able to face the problem. But I couldn't stay there after he said those hurtful words to me. I knew he was jealous and insecure, but that didn't give him permission to accuse me of cheating. That didn't give him an excuse to tell me I had no right to know anything about his past right in my face.

I knew I pushed him, too. I shouldn't have started the conversation right then. I should've stuck to my decision to give him some space. But I just... burst out.

He remained all night and day out without letting me know about his location or if he was all right when I was dying out of concern. Then he came home and started the jealous boyfriend act. And this time, he crossed his limits.

I always ignored his possessiveness over me. But I couldn't tolerate when he said those words.

Behind his back.

I was already mad at him for telling me such a huge lie and doing those things to Warner.

I always thought his doing all the insane stuff for me would stop someday. But now, after knowing what he did to Warner, how he sent him away and then when Warner came back into the picture, he threatened to destroy him if he didn't go back to Seattle using his friend, I knew he would never stop.

Anyone in my place would've freaked out. When they'd know how an insane man trapped them with their insane ways, they'd have run for the hills. But here, I just ran out of the penthouse.

Because even after everything, I freaking loved that man. Even after knowing what he did seven years ago. Yes, he did it for me, but it didn't hurt any less. I tried to focus on forgiving him and moving on. Because that's where our happiness lies. But tonight, I felt like everything was crashing around me at once.

Not to mention he bribed the police to save his father's murderer. And even if that wasn't the whole truth, he wouldn't tell me. Why? Because he didn't trust me.

What did he think? That I'd leave him once he told me about his past? Or I'd tell his secret to someone else?

Punching on the steering wheel, I got out of the car under the open air. The rain wasn't heavy anymore, but it was still there. With slow steps, I approached a bench at the side of the road and sat on it. Fresh cool air filled my lungs.

My phone hasn't stopped buzzing since I left the penthouse.

I let it be. I knew who it was, anyway.

Letting out a sigh, I looked up at the sky. Even after the heavy pouring, the dark clouds still engulfed the sky.

I knew he was looking for me. But I wasn't going back to him so soon. Not after what he did.

Yes, I told him I was leaving him. But the truth was, I knew my statement wouldn't stay consistent for long. I knew I couldn't live without him for long. Even after everything, I couldn't hate him a pinch.

But that didn't mean I wasn't hurt.

I could still hear his silence. It hit me like a dagger to the heart.

And above all, there was still a sword hanging over my neck.

Arthur.

I hadn't seen him since that day. Well, I didn't go to the office after that. Though he didn't do anything else after that confrontation, I knew he wasn't going to sit still. Knowing that I knew his truth, he'd always have this fear of being exposed in his mind. And he would do something to prevent that.

And that vexed me. I wanted him out of our lives as soon as possible. But until I knew what part of Ace's past he was using as a weapon against me, I couldn't do anything. And that was half of the reason behind my urgency to know the truth.

I could just tell Ace about it, but I couldn't take the risk of Arthur doing something to Ace, either. I just couldn't. What if he was telling the truth? What if he really did know something, the same thing Ace wanted to hide from me?

I groaned. Frustration built up in me. Everything was turning into a mess.

My phone buzzed again. I glared at his name that flashed over the screen.

I didn't know what I was going to do next, but I wasn't going back until he tells me that he trusts me and promises not to repeat the words he spit tonight. He had to rectify his mistake and apologize to Warner. For everything he did to him.

I cut his call and wiped my face. The rain stopped, leaving goosebumps on my skin with the chilling breeze it left. I was only in a thin cotton sundress. The wet fabric clung to me like a second skin.

My phone buzzed again. This time, it was a message. From Warner.

Warner: Please, Emerald. Just one last time. Don't I even deserve it?

I frowned in confusion. What was he talking about?

And then I read the other message he sent me earlier. It was delivered in the evening. My phone wasn't with me then, so I couldn't check it earlier.

Warner: Em, I know I crossed my line again today. For that, you must be mad at me. And I'm really sorry for that.

Warner: I'm leaving for NY tonight. I don't know when I can see you again. So... can you please meet me one last time before I go back? I want to remember your smile when I leave.

My frown deepened. He was leaving? Tonight? But why so sudden?

I sighed. Of course. After the way I hurt him and after what Ace did to him, why would he want to stay? Plus, he had a life of his own.

I also didn't want him to leave on a bitter note. I wanted to apologize to him for Ace's actions again.

Sniffling, still with a heavy heart, I got up and walked to my car. When the phone buzzed again with the devil's name flashing on the screen, I turned off the phone.

I wasn't important enough for him to tell me anything, right? Let him taste his own medicine now.

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SIXTY-ONE: PANIC



*K*nocking on the door, I waited.

The hallway of the hotel was cold and empty. There weren't many people around. This hotel's being so old and deep in the city could be the reason behind it.

This was the hotel Warner was staying at for the time being. He once gave me his address to meet him there, but I couldn't find time to do so. Well, I had been ignoring him a lot in the last few days, even months. And here I was thinking not to hurt him anymore.

It was my luck to have such a great friend like him. Even after everything, he was here for me.

When nobody answered, I knocked again. And this time, I heard his voice.

"Who is it?" He opened the door, his swollen eyes met mine.

Surprise flashed in them.

"Em? Y-you came?" An uneven smile stretched across his face. "I thought you don't care for me enough to keep my last request before I go back."

I frowned. His words totally went ignored by me as I took in his

appearance.

Disheveled hair, half tucked button down white shirt, some of the buttons left undone. The redness of his eyes, dark bags under them, and the slur of his voice had me concerned.

“Are you drunk?”

His shake of head was immediate. “Not at all. Was just having one or two glasses.” Rubbing his face as if to make him look better, he held the door wide. “Come in.”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I walked inside. The crease between my forehead formed again.

He had booked a small room with an adjoined bathroom and balcony with it. It'd be cozy if it wasn't so messed up. Things were everywhere. Some of his clothes were scattered on the floor and on the bed. The cushions of the couch lay on the floor, and the coffee table was upside down. Even the sheet of the bed was half hanging down and half covering the bed.

It seemed like a storm had passed through this room.

I glanced at Warner. He awkwardly looked around the room before starting to pick up the cushions and his clothes.

Did he do this?

“Sorry, I-I was a little upset.” He swayed slightly on his feet. “I thought you weren't going to come to meet me. I thought I wasn't going to see you for one last time. But...” A goofy smile tugged at his lips. “You came. I was wrong, you do care for me. I was missing you a lot, you know?”

I smiled sadly. “Even after everything you're saying you were missing me. Even after everything you had to go through because of me. The things

Ace did to you...” Sighing, I shook my head. “I’m sorry again, Warner. I swear I had no idea about it. I wouldn’t have let him do that to you if I knew. I’m really sorry. But I promise I’ll make everything right.”

His brown orbs met mine. “I know you wouldn’t let him do anything if you knew his intentions, Em. It’s not your fault. It’s him who ruined everything.” His tone turned bitter at the mention of Ace.

I let it pass. I was mad at him tonight, too.

“You’re just too innocent that he caught you in his trap.”

I wanted to disagree with this statement of his, but he cut me off.

“Anyway, let’s not talk about him anymore. Let’s talk about something else. Like old times,” he said, pointing towards the couch for me to sit. Swaying on his feet, he walked towards the landline phone of the room. “Tea?”

“I’m fine. You don’t need to call the room service for that.” Running my hands up and down my arms, I sat on the couch. The temperature of the room was cold for my state.

“You’re soaked.”

“Yeah, got caught up in the rain on my way. You noticed it now?” I asked, glancing at him. His gaze roamed over my body clung to my thin red sundress.

I tugged the end of my dress over my knees as a feeling of discomfort rose in me.

“Yeah...” He cleared his throat, shaking his head. “I was too surprised seeing you here to notice anything else. Anyway, let’s have some drinks.”

Putting the coffee table back in its place, he brought a bottle of whiskey

and two glasses for us before plopping beside me.

“I’m not in a mood to drink right now, Warner. And you shouldn’t drink either. You’re already slurring.”

My switched off phone was on my mind constantly.

A certain someone must be going crazy out there. Well, he deserves it.

“Oh, come on, Em! One glass won’t do anything. And I’m fine, don’t worry about me.” He poured the liquid in both glasses.

When he pushed one towards me, I shook my head, hesitating. I didn’t come here to drink with him. Though I already said sorry several times, I wasn’t sure if he really forgave me.

“Just one drink, Em. For me? Can’t you do that for old times’ sake?”

His expectant eyes had me sigh. Nodding, I took the glass. The bright smile that etched on his face was instant.

Before I could take a sip, he gulped the whole substance in one go and slammed the glass on the table. I frowned when he refilled the glass.

“Aren’t you drinking too much tonight? You don’t drink that much usually.”

Letting out a humorless chuckle, he gulped the second fill. “Situations change a man, Emerald. And this thing,” he pointed at the bottle, “can be quite a good friend when you’re all alone. It makes you forget everything.”

Guilt washed over me as I looked down. “Well, it can’t. Because even when you’re drunk now, it’s not helping with your problems at all. You still remember everything.”

He shrugged carelessly, filling his glass again. “Let’s not talk about the problems tonight. Let’s talk like the old days. I’ve missed our time back in

New York.”

I smiled, twirling my bracelet. “I missed it too. Life was so simple back then.” And then Achilles Valencian appeared in my life. Like a storm, he turned my life upside down. And even it sounded insane, I still loved that storm.

He nodded. “I wish I could get those days back. Where there were only you and me. No one else.”

When I opened my mouth, a sudden dry laugh left him.

“I know, I know. I’m crossing my limits again. Sorry, I tend to forget the lines every time.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I took a sip. The sweet and bitter taste of it burned down my throat.

“By the way, did you tell your cousin to leave Arthur’s case alone? Because I don’t want him to get hurt.” I changed the subject. I didn’t want to argue with him on the night he was leaving.

He just nodded. Suddenly going all quiet, he just sipped on his drink and watched me.

Shifting in my place, I put the glass on the table. “I tried to call Sierra again, but her phone was unreachable. I really don’t know what to do—”

“Can you just stop it, Em? I thought we were having some ‘us’ time, like back in New York. And here you are, starting with your problems again. I’m tired of listening to all your problems now!” With his lips pressed tight, his voice turned demanding.

I just stared at him.

He had never behaved with me in that manner. Not even when he was in

his shittiest mood.

Maybe it was the alcohol?

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, sorry. I was just a little worried for her.”

His mood changed again as he smiled. Adoration filled his eyes as they roamed me again. “I know. My Em is always concerned for everyone.” Sliding closer, he grasped my hand. “Did I ever tell you this color suits you? It brings out your perfect skin tone so gracefully.”

When his thumb brushed over my knuckle, I tried to pull my hand back, but his grip was firm. His eyes didn’t leave my face as he tucked a strand of my wet hair behind my ear.

“You’re more and more beautiful every day. California’s weather is suiting you well, I can see.” His tone dropped to a husky voice.

With unease, I pulled my hand from his grasp and put some distance between us. Slight suffocation hit me suddenly being in this room with him, and I didn’t miss the way his features hardened at my reaction. His fists clenched.

“Uh, thank you.” I averted my eyes. “C-can I get a towel? I need to dry my hair, I guess. It’s still dripping.”

Remaining silent for a moment, he slowly nodded and got to his feet. Stumbling on his way, he went into the washroom and returned with a white towel.

“Thanks.”

Taking it from him, I started to towel dry my hair. He just watched me silently, with an unreadable expression. A chill ran down my spine at the way his dark brown gaze slid down my body. The eerie silence made my stomach

twist with nervousness.

I planted a tight smile on my face as I put the towel on the table and stood. “I think I should go now. It’s getting late.”

I thought coming here I’d have a good talk with him before he left. But now, I didn’t want to stay any longer. His behavior was different tonight. I had seen drunk Warner before, but his presence never made me feel that uncomfortable before.

His face dropped as he took an urgent step towards me. A frown formed between his brows. “You want to leave? So soon? We didn’t even talk much yet.”

“I know. And I’m sorry, but I have somewhere to be,” I excused. “So, uh, I’ll see you soon?” Maybe when you’re sober.

He shook his head, lips curling in displeasure. “It’s Achilles, isn’t it? You don’t want him to wait for you much longer. But you can definitely leave me here when all I wanted was to spend some quality time with you before I leave.”

I sighed. “It’s not Ace. I’m going to Beth’s place. I came to meet you, right? You also must have some packing to do. So... I’ll just leave now. You get sober and pack your bags. Otherwise, you’ll be late.”

His gaze hardened. “So, everyone in your life is important to you other than me. You have time for everyone except me?”

“Warner, please. It’s not like that, and you know that. You wanted to meet me, so I’m here. But I think I should go now. And I can’t stay in these wet clothes all night,” I explained. “As you’re leaving tonight, I think you should start packing now. I’ll see you soon.”

Gathering my purse, when I turned to go, his voice stopped me.

“Wait! Won’t you give me a goodbye hug before you go? Did I lose that right too?”

I turned to him. Though my brain was telling me to say no and get out of here, my heart called out for my friend. I could at least give him a bear hug before I leave, right? Nothing was wrong with that.

Flashing him a smile, I nodded and wrapped my arms around him. The strong smell of alcohol filled my nostrils instead of his familiar scent. He didn’t waste another second to pull me closer in his arms. Closer than I was comfortable with.

“I’ll miss you so much, Em.” His hot breath fanned my neck.

Ignoring the unease, I patted on his back. “I’ll miss you too. But it’s all right, we can talk everyday on the phone. And we can meet whenever we can. We’re not worlds away, right?”

As I tried to pull away, he tugged me to his chest again, placing his head in the crook of my neck. “Don’t leave me, Em. I want you here with me.”

I pushed his shoulders, but his hold on me only tightened, fingers dug into my skin.

Panic set in as I wiggled in his grip. “Warner, let me go.”

“I can’t, I can’t tonight,” his husky yet demanding voice close to my ear made me feel disgusted. A chill ran down my spine when his hands started to roam over my hips, to my sides.

“Warner! Let me go! What’s wrong with you?” I pushed at his chest, making him stumble back. “What the hell were you doing?” I snapped. But his dark gaze lingered on my lips.

Shaking my head, as I turned to leave, I was harshly pulled into him

again.

A shriek left my mouth with the force I collided against him. When he leaned in, I was quick to move my head away.

“What the fuck, Warner? Let go of me!” I tried to push him away, but he didn’t budge.

“Just one kiss, Em. Just one. I’ve been dying to taste those lips since I came here. But you didn’t even let me hug you properly.” His voice came out urgent, as he tried to reach my lips. His vice grip didn’t budge with my continuous fight.

“No! What are you doing! Let me go!”

Tears started to blur my vision as his lips landed on my jaw and cheek. I pushed away his head with my hands.

Letting out a curse, he took my hands and put them behind my back. “Just one fucking kiss! I was with you for two fucking years and you’re treating me like that! You cheated on me with that bastard, broke up with me, but I still tolerated your shit and helped you with Arthur’s matter! But you can’t even give me a kiss?” he hissed. Gripping my hair in his fist, he tried to turn my head to him. “Just give me one fucking taste and I’ll let you go!”

“No! Warner, please!” I whimpered at the sharp pain burned through my scalp. Tears rolled down my cheeks, my heart pounded down my chest with the panic that ran through my veins. “You’re drunk! It’s not you! Come back to your senses! What the hell are you doing? Let go of me!”

He twisted my arm behind my back, making me hiss. Cupping my jaw, he forced me to face him. “You’ll kiss me tonight. I swear, you’ll repent the moment you decided to leave me. No one can make you feel like I can. I’ll make you forget him.”

I screamed when his fingers tugged at my hair harshly.

“You’re mine, Emerald!” He slammed his lips on mine. Disgusted, I moved my head away again before he could thrust his tongue in my mouth.

In the hustle, furious pounding on the door reached my ears. Hope filled me. Just as I opened my mouth to scream for help, I heard his voice.

“Emerald! Open the door!”

Ace?

With my eyes blurred with tears, I let out a sob. “Ace! Ace, help me!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

I hissed as Warner pulled at my hair again. His eyes were dark, wild as he pulled me close to him, desperately trying to get my lips.

“I won’t let you go with him tonight. You’re mine, Em!”

Leaning away, I kept my face away from him throughout the fight as much as possible.

“Emerald! What the fuck—”

Ace’s voice was cut off. Panic washed over me once more, not being able to hear him anymore. Then I heard the door being pounded harshly.

“Ace!” I pushed at Warner again. “Let me go, Warner!”

“You’re not leaving!”

When his lips fell at the side of my lips, using all the power I had, I hit my knee against his groin and pushed at his chest. Letting out a hiss, he flinched away as I fell on the floor. And at the same time, the door slammed down on the ground.

With rigid shoulders, clenched fists and tense jaw, he stood at the

doorway. And then his dark and alert stormy gray orbs fell on me.
“Rosebud...”

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SIXTY-TWO: LET'S GO HOME...



Letting out a cry, I got up from the floor and ran to him. His strong arms wrapped around me like protective wings as soon as I reached him. I shook in his chest as hot tears ran down my cheeks. With my heart still pounding from panic, knees weak, I clung to him as if my life depended on him.

“Rosebud?” he called out. “Hey, hey! Baby, look at me, are you all right? What happened? What did he do? Tell me.” Cupping my face, he attempted to make me look at him, but I hid my face in his warm chest again, still trembling.

“He... he...” I hiccupped between sobs, unable to form any words. His arms tightened around me.

I felt him turn rigid, his muscles tensed. His breathing came out heavy.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” Deep Greek accent echoed in his voice, tone darker and rougher than I had ever heard. “What have you done to my Rosebud?”

The malice in his voice would've sent a shiver down my spine if I wasn't too absorbed in my own shock. My hold only tightened around him.

“She's not yours! She's my girlfriend! You stole her from me!” Warner's

slurred reply reached my ears. “I was just trying to get what’s rightfully—”

He didn’t get to finish the line as Ace untangled me from him and stormed towards him, connecting his fist with Warner’s jaw. A faint crack reached my ears. With a hiss, when he fell to the ground, Ace grabbed his collar and pulled him up.

“You fucking piece of shit! You dared to touch my Rosebud!” His thunderous roar echoed throughout the hotel room, making me flinch. His almost dark orbs flared with untamed rage, redness spread across his face and neck when the veins of his temple stood up with him shaking with anger.

“Let go of me, you bastard! I’ll kill—” Warner let out a cry when Ace’s polished shoe met his stomach. And as if a demon was unleashed inside him, he didn’t stop.

“You’ll regret the moment you were born in this world! How dare you touch her! Even after I warned you twice, you still dared to come near her!” Blinded with fury, he continuously punched Warner’s already bloodied face. Warner’s whimpers and yelling out in agony went unheard by him as he twisted his arm and kicked him in the stomach again, making Warner cough out blood.

“I’ll fucking destroy you!” he roared again.

Clutching the door frame to stand straight with my wobbling knees, I called out for him. “Ace... stop!”

But my voice didn’t reach him. Employees of the hotel rushed inside the room, hearing the chaos. But no one seemed to have enough courage to get close to him.

Warner whimpered as Ace delivered another punch against his jaw.

“Ace! Please, stop!” My voice cracked. “Stop it! You’ll kill him!”

I didn't want to stay here anymore. I just needed his arms around me right now. I wanted him to get me away from this place.

“He dared to touch you! I'll fucking kill him!”

Some of the hotel employees finally went forward and tried to get him off Warner, but he shrugged them away and went for him again.

“Ace, please! I-I need you.” More tears sprung out of my eyes as I slid down on the floor. “Please, stop!”

And that got his attention as his murderous gaze fell on me. Realization of my need for him flashed over his features. Soon, concern took the place of his anger. Throwing Warner on the floor, he rushed to me and scooped me in his arms.

“Rosebud, I'm so sorry, baby! I'm here! Everything will be all right!” he said, pulling me into his chest.

Though his voice was soft, the anger was still there. He placed his lips on my forehead as I let out a whimper.

“No one will come near to you. I won't let anyone touch even a strand of your hair, my Rosebud. I promise you that! Don't cry, baby.”

The chaos around the room and people's whispers went vague in my ears. I only concentrated on his soothing voice.

“Get me out of here,” I whispered. My hands clutched his shirt.

Nodding, he stood with me in his arms. My head didn't move away from his chest, nor did my grip on him loosen.

“Let's go home.” Placing another kiss on my forehead, he walked out of the room. And I didn't dare look back.

* * *

REACHING THE PENTHOUSE, he carried me straight to the bathroom. Throughout the whole car ride, I didn't move away from his arms. Nor did he say anything. The journey was quiet, but his soothing, slow rubbing on my back, lingering soft kisses on my head and forehead, and the tight grip of his arms around me gave me comfort.

When he tried to put me down, my arms tightened around his neck as a protest. A whimper left my lips.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby. I'll be right here with you. Let me run you a shower," he murmured.

Hesitantly, I nodded as he put me down on my legs.

"Lift your arms?" he asked, clutching the ends of my dress.

I obeyed. As he pulled the dress off me, I shivered at the frigid air that generated goosebumps across my skin. I tried to hug myself again, but he didn't let me. Instead, he unhooked my bra and let it fall on the ground, my panties followed next.

Instead of hiding myself from his eyes, I wrapped my arms around him again. Staying away from his warmth for this long was bringing back fear in me. Fear of the man I never thought I'd loath even the slightest in my wildest dreams.

Picking up my bare and trembling body in his arms again, he walked us inside the shower and gently placed me down on my feet. Undressing himself, he joined me and let the soothing warm water pour on us.

I stayed quiet as he squeezed some shampoo in his palm and started to wash my hair, gently massaging my scalp. A hiss left my lips when his hands went to the back of my head, where Warner had pulled at my hair harshly.

His shoulders tensed at my reaction. A muscle of his jaw ticked. Gray

eyes flashed. But he put on his calm mask again and went extra careful with the back of my head.

No matter how much he stayed normal, I knew the storm that was building inside him. I knew even if he said everything was all right, it wasn't for him.

My hands were firmly clutched on his waist as he shampooed my hair. I continuously needed his touch at that moment. No matter how much I tried to close off the memories from back at the hotel in my mind, they kept rushing back.

I could still feel his hands on me, his lips on my jaw, cheek and neck, his strong smell of alcohol. His harsh touch and violent behavior.

My stomach clenched at the memories that flashed over my mind, bile raised in my throat. I felt disgusted. I felt dirty with the way he tried to touch me.

Tears started to blur my vision again as I rubbed my arms and face harshly, trying to rinse off his touch from my skin.

“Rosebud? What are you doing?” he asked, gripping my wrists. “Stop it.”

I tried to break free. I needed to wash myself. I needed to clean myself off from his touch.

My tears washed away with the restless water as I fought against him, but he only pulled me into his chest and wrapped his arms around me.

“Calm down, baby. Everything will be fine. I'm here with you. Nothing will happen to you, I promise. Just calm down,” he said, rubbing my back.

I couldn't stop the sob that broke out of me. Clutching him harder, I cried my heart out in his chest. And he let me.

“I-I trusted him. I thought he was my friend. I-I never thought he could do something like that to me...” I spoke out through my hiccups.

His hold tightened. “Shh, don’t cry, baby. Don’t waste your tears on someone like him. It’s not your fault that you trusted him. He was always there for you until...” with a deep breath, he gritted out, “he showed his true color. But don’t worry, Rosebud. He can’t hurt you anymore. You won’t see his face ever again. I promise you that.”

Snuggling against his chest, I hid my face in the crook of his neck.

Then he lathered soap on my body, washing every part of me with utmost care. Once finished with the shower, he towel dried my hair and body, and carried me into the bedroom.

When he finished dressing both of us, he made me sit on the bed.

“Stay here, let me get something for you to eat.”

I shook my head. “I’m not hungry. I want to sleep.”

I was exhausted. Mentally and physically. Mostly emotionally. I wanted to sleep and forget about everything.

“But—”

“Please.” My voice came out croaky.

Sighing, he nodded. Walking closer, he arranged the pillows and laid me down before moving the blanket over me. I grabbed his hand, making his eyes snap to mine. Though he was calm, the fire in his gray orbs was clear. This was the calm before another storm rose.

“Sleep with me?”

He leaned in and kissed my temple. “You don’t have to ask.”

Turning the lights off, he slipped under the blanket with me and pulled

me into him, not wasting a second. But something didn't feel right.

"No clothes," I complained.

Letting out a low chuckle, he moved away slightly and discarded his T-shirt. Next went mine, the only thing I had on.

When my palm felt his sculpted chest, firm abs, and strong broad shoulders, and when our skin touched as he hugged me to himself, I let out a sigh of content.

The feel of him against me, his skin against mine, made me relax. I loved to sleep with him topless and he knew it. It always soothed me. It gave me more closeness with him. Not only physically, but also emotionally. And tonight, I needed him more than anything.

His big, calloused hand roamed over my hips and back. A silence fell over us. Even while lying down with me, his form didn't relax.

"D-do you hate me?" I whispered.

Under the dimmed light, I found his brows furrowed. "What? Why are you asking such a thing, Rosebud?"

I gulped. "F-for what happened back in the hotel... he-he tried to force himself on me. You must feel disgusted..."

"Rosebud..." he warned.

"I swear he couldn't do much. H-he..."

"Enough." He cut me off, hovering over me. "How could you assume I'd ever think something like that? It was not your fault. Even if he really did something, which he couldn't because you fought him bravely, I'd never feel disgusted by you. Never. I'll always love you and support you no matter what, Emerald. Always keep that in your mind."

My lower lip trembled. “Then why haven’t you kissed me yet?”

It was always me who had to push him away to take some breath because he wouldn’t leave my lips and chest alone when he would finally get me all to himself at night. But tonight, he didn’t try to kiss me even once, not even a peck on my lips.

A sigh left him. Pressing his forehead against mine, he bumped his nose with mine. “Because I didn’t want to do anything reckless out of my desperation that’d trigger something for you.”

His words surged warmth through my heart.

I shook my head, circling my arms around his neck. “You’re not him. Your touch would never trigger something for me. The only thing it can do is soothe me. Make my heart feel content.”

Letting out a breath, he cupped my cheeks. “You want me to kiss you?”

I nodded.

“My queen’s wish is my command.”

And then his lips were on mine. Capturing my mouth into a passionate knee weakening kiss, he pulled me closer. It wasn’t his regular kiss, hard and demanding. It was slow, soothing, yet possessive. The kind of kiss that would make anyone forget anything.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I clung to him and enjoyed his kiss as much as I could, forgetting everything for a moment. His touch made me forget. Only he could do that to me.

Pressing a firm kiss on my lips one last time, he pulled me back into his chest. I placed my head over his heart. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat calmed my own.

“Thank you.”

“What for?” he asked.

“F-for always being there for me. For coming at the right moment to save me.” A single tear left my eye. I shuddered at the thought of what could have happened if he hadn’t arrived in time.

I could feel him shaking his head. “I’ll always be there, no matter what. But you don’t need me to save you. You can do that yourself. You were doing it pretty good. He was hissing in pain when I broke in.”

Though he tried to lighten my mood, I could feel the edge in his voice. I could hear his need to destroy something. Destroy Warner.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Now what’s that for?” He played with my hair.

“For everything. For forcing you to tell me everything about your past, for not understanding your pain and... for leaving like that. If I hadn’t left, this wouldn’t have happened. I wouldn’t have gone to meet him if not for his message. He was leaving LA tonight and wanted to meet me. So, I went there.”

I knew he wanted to know why I went to meet him again. What happened out there. But he decided against it. The thing that he respected and cared about my situation made me fall more in love with him.

“It’s not your fault, Rosebud. You didn’t know his true intentions.” One of his hands ran over my back. “And... you don’t need to say sorry to me for earlier tonight. I shouldn’t have lied to you. And those words that I spit out...” He let out a sigh, his voice held pain. “I’m so sorry, baby. I was so lost in jealousy and anger that I didn’t know what I was saying. You don’t know what the mere thought of you leaving me does to me. I-I was scared of

losing you. To him.” At the mention of Warner, his arms tightened around me. “And there was also the fear that after you find out the whole truth about my past, which is your right to know, you’ll leave me. The fear, the jealousy, both surrounded my mind so much I couldn’t see how I was hurting my Rosebud. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean a word. I do trust you, baby. I trust you more than I trust myself.”

His words lifted a burden off my chest. Just the word ‘trust’ changed everything.

I was right. His jealousy and insecurities were the reason behind his behavior. But no matter how much I wanted to ask why he felt that way, I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t make the same mistake again. I’d give him the space he needed. No matter how eager I was.

“It’s all right. I understand,” I said, kissing his chest. “I was just hurt when I asked you if you trusted me and you didn’t say anything. That hurt the most.”

“There’s no one in this world I trust more than you. You’re the only one who matters to me.” He brushed his lips against my brows.

I sighed, snuggling against him. “I just needed to hear that.” A smile tugged at my lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He pulled me closer.

When some moments passed without another word, I thought our conversation for the night was over. And this conversation helped take my mind off the incident tonight. I thought I could at least sleep in peace in his arms now, until he opened his mouth again, snatching every bit of sleepiness from my eyes.

“You want to know everything, right? Everything about my past, about

my father's murder?"

My heart ran faster as I nodded, not saying anything.

"I'll tell you everything. Everything you want to know."

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SIXTY-THREE: MRS. VALENCIAN



A sigh left me with the continuous feathery kisses gliding down my neck and shoulder, when the gentle yet possessive touch of a pair of calloused hands over my curves pulled me out of the sleep. His hot breath fanned the skin of my neck. A raspy, deep groan reverberated through his chest when his palms glided over my chest.

“So perfect...” he murmured in my ear in a husky voice.

A gasp slipped from my lips as he softly bit on the skin of my throat. My eyes fluttered open to the shadowed room. The curtains blocked the sunlight out, only some rays of light peeked through the gaps.

A pair of beautiful stormy gray eyes peered into mine. With some strands of his ruffled bed hair falling over his forehead, thick stubble across his sharp jaw, and that familiar intense look of his whenever he looked at me left me breathless; as always.

“Good morning, my beautiful rose.” Gently grabbing my chin, he placed a soft kiss on my lips.

My heart fluttered at his simple yet sweet gesture.

I smiled. “Morning.”

“How did you sleep, baby?”

“Good.” All thanks to him. His touch and presence set my mind at peace. Even though his words from last night nagged me.

“When will you tell me?” I asked him last night, ready for the answers I was looking for so desperately.

His eyes met mine. “Tomorrow. You’ll know everything tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“I need some time, Rosebud. I need to prepare myself to live my past once again, the past I had buried in the darkest corner of my memories.”

He asked for a day. And I’d have given him more than just a day if he had wanted. I made a mistake by pushing him too far once, I had hurt him unintentionally. I didn’t want to do it again. One day wasn’t much to wait for.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Where are we going?”

He let out a chuckle. “Aren’t you an impatient one?”

Last night, he said he wanted to take me somewhere. Somewhere we could spend some alone time away from here. Especially after the stressful days. And in his words, it was a temporary replacement of the plan he made for our vacation. Because a long vacation wasn’t possible at the moment due to his constant meetings with the Russians. But he promised me to take me on one soon.

I knew he needed this day out as much as I did. He needed this time to prepare himself to reveal his every secret before me.

I pouted. “I hate it when you do that.”

“Well, it’s called surprise, baby.” His smile slowly slipped. A look of concern took over his features as he cupped my cheek. “You okay?”

Letting out a sigh, I nodded. “I’m better now.”

Last night was one of the worst nights of my life. I was shocked. But I was fine now. And the love of my life being there for me made it easier.

“You sure? We can postpone it if you want to stay in today.” His thumb brushed over my cheek.

I shook my head. “No. I’m fine. Don’t worry. I’m actually looking forward to this, uh, what to call it? A date?” One of my brows raised.

The breathtaking smile appeared back on his heavenly features. “Call it whatever you like. All that matters is you being with me.”

“So, it’s our second date, then?”

“Nope,” he said, making me frown. “First. Our first date as an official couple. Not just as friends.”

Rolling my eyes, I bit my lip. Heat crept up my cheeks, remembering how I forced him to go on a date with me just as friends. I had no choice, though.

I hoped this date would turn out good. Not that the last one wasn’t good. It was amazing, the most beautiful day of my life. But the end was equally disastrous. So, I wished everything would turn out well this time.

His gray eyes looked down at me with adoration and love. Tracing my cheeks, he leaned in and kissed both of them.

“These adorable freckles. Do you know I hate it when you hide them with powder?”

I giggled. “It’s makeup. And yes, I know that.”

“Then why do you do that?”

“Because I don’t like them much.”

His brows furrowed. “But they’re beautiful.”

I bit my lip at his confused face. He looked so adorable.

He snuggled against my neck, letting out a groan. “You don’t know how beautiful you look with them, my rose. You’re so fucking beautiful.” His voice came out husky, sending a shiver down my spine.

His hand returned to my chest, cupping me firm with his big, calloused hand.

Then I realized how my legs were wrapped around his hips. Our bodies were pressed together, my soft one against his hard frame. When his hand marked their territory over my chest, his lips left more hickeys on my neck, sending my senses haywire. His huge junior was rigid and hard against my thigh. I felt a painful tug at my core.

“My rose...” he groaned.

My breath came out ragged. I needed more.

And just as I pulled him closer, tightening my legs around him, my stomach decided to interrupt.

He pulled away slightly, a frown formed between his brows. “You’re hungry?” Then he shook his head. “Of course you are. You didn’t have your dinner last night.”

At the mention of last night, I felt his shoulders tensing. But he composed himself soon.

“Let’s freshen up and I’ll make something for you.” Moving himself away from me, he placed a kiss on my stomach. “Let’s go.”

Smiling, I put my hand in his awaiting one and let him carry me to the washroom. I didn’t ask him about his sudden tense mood. In fact, I was grateful he didn’t start any conversation about last night. I didn’t have the

strength to remember the incident again and again.

* * *

PULLING MY HAIR UP, I set it into a messy bun and stared at my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were still puffy from my crying last night, and the bags underneath them were noticeable.

Ace left to make breakfast when I decided to spend more time in the washroom, taking a shower. Now that he wasn't with me, memories of last night floated back into my mind. My hands tightened on the basin.

I tried not to think, but I failed.

I still couldn't believe Warner could do something like that to me. Yes, he was drunk and hurt. But that didn't justify his actions. He was... violent. He was a monster last night. I didn't know he had this side in him. Now I didn't know which Warner was real. The one I called my friend, or the one I came face to face with last night.

Bile rose in my throat recalling his actions. Closing my eyes, I took deep breaths to calm myself down.

I didn't care to know where he was right now or how he was doing after Ace had beaten him to unconsciousness. I didn't even want to think of him anymore.

Blinking away the moisture in my eyes, I walked out. As soon as I entered the kitchen, the mouthwatering smell of bacon and pancakes hit my nostrils. My stomach growled.

His gray eyes looked up at me before gliding down my body.

I was wearing one of his T-shirts that reached my mid-thigh. Nothing else.

The darkening of his eyes and tightness of his sharp jaw didn't go missed

by me as I sauntered closer.

“I bet you didn’t wear any panties, did you?” His voice came out deep.

My cheeks flushed. Shrugging, I sat on the counter. His eyes followed the movement of the T-shirt as it rose higher up my thighs.

“It’s long enough to cover my lady parts. So... yep. I didn’t wear anything else.”

He groaned, resting a hand on my knee. “You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you? Such a tease you are!” Leaning in, he nuzzled the crook of my neck, taking a breath. “If you wanted something from me, you could just ask, baby.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed at his chest, causing him to frown. “The only thing I want right now is food. I’m hungry.”

“Yes, it’s almost done,” he grumbled. Stepping away, he put some batter on the pan.

Giggling, I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Thank you for making me such delicious dishes everyday. I love you. You’re the best boyfriend in the world, you know that?”

Though we hadn’t discussed our relationship yet, nor did he ask me to be his girlfriend, I just started to think of him as my boyfriend. He already called me his, and he was mine, so I didn’t think we needed to give it a name officially.

My kiss seemed to brighten his mood as he pecked my nose. “I’m glad. Even though I don’t like the boyfriend tag and I’d like to change it soon, it’s okay for now. And I love you more.”

My heart raced inside my chest. Butterflies erupted in my stomach at his

words. Change the title soon? Did he mean what I thought he meant?

Heat touched my cheeks as I looked down at my lap, twirling my bracelet.

Chuckling, he kissed my head and pressed his forehead against mine. I looked up at him through my eyelashes.

Stormy grays peered into my soul with his intense gaze. "Soon."

Warmth surged through me, happiness bloomed inside my chest. Just at the imagination of him waiting for me at the altar did something to me. My whole body tingled at the thought.

Becoming Mrs. Valencian didn't sound so bad.

A burnt smell reached our nostrils, breaking our little magical moment. Crinkling my nose, I looked at the pan. The pancake.

I let out a chuckle when he only scowled at the almost black pancake, as if murdering it with his eyes for interrupting.

"Let me make another one."

I shook my head.

"Did someone come when I was in the shower? I thought I heard some voices when I was changing."

He nodded. "Yes. Arthur and Mr. Ivanov were here. I couldn't meet them yesterday, and the Russians were eager for a quick meeting. So, I told Arthur to get Mr. Ivanov up here."

My posture straightened. Arthur was here?

"Who's Ivanov?"

"The owner of the Russian company we're going to sign a deal with. There are two owners of the company. Mr. Balakin and Mr. Ivanov. Mr.

Ivanov is doing all the work on this upcoming project,” he explained.

“What did he want to discuss so urgently?” I asked. I heard mentions of the Russians many times in the past two weeks, but I never met any of them yet.

“Mr. Ivanov came up with a new proposal. At first, they were only interested in just working with OC Textiles, but now they want to work with Valencian Corp as well. Changing the original plan of Mr. Balakin, the other partner, Mr. Ivanov now wishes to work on several projects at a time. He said he had his full trust in us. So, the more projects they could work on with us, the more they can expand their name in the US market.”

“So, what did you say?”

He thought for a second, before going back to flipping the pancake. “At first I didn’t like the idea of acknowledging the amount of money Valencian Corp has to invest. But Arthur has a belief it can bring us a huge Russian market if we go ahead with it. Their company has a good reputation in Russia. Even Caleb seems to like the idea. So, I agreed.” A shoulder of his lifted.

“How much does Valencian Corp have to invest?” I raised my brow.

He glanced at me. “Five hundred million.”

I gasped. My eyes widened. Five hundred?

“And as it’s a vast amount of money, they don’t want to bear any risk before the projects complete. So, they suggested signing a contract. A contract where it says that if there would be any hindrance or loss caused by a party between the certain time before the projects finish, they shall compensate the other party with the whole amount they invested in the project,” he added. “So that either party wouldn’t have any kind of hesitation

regarding the deals.”

My mouth was on the floor, still absorbing his revelation. “And you agreed to go ahead with this? Five hundred million isn’t a joke for a company. I know you’re a freaking billionaire, but it can be a big issue for your company in the future if something goes wrong.”

He cupped my chin. “Our, it’s *our* company, baby. And don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. Our company handled deals like this before, though not with such contracts. But it’s not a big deal. They agreed to a lot of our conditions, we had to agree to this one of theirs. Normally I don’t work with others’ conditions, but Arthur seems to be adamant about working with them. He requested me several times to agree. So, I did.”

Something didn’t feel right. This contract didn’t sit well with me. Though people were working with contracts like that out there, with Arthur involved in this, seeing his desperation for this deal, I couldn’t help but worry.

He was definitely planning something.

“You said Arthur is going to handle this project?”

He nodded.

“Do you think you can trust him with it?” I asked carefully. “I mean, it’s quite a big project for him to handle all alone.”

“He’s not going to be alone, Rosebud. There are people who will be assisting him. And Caleb will also join once he comes back from his honeymoon,” he replied, putting some bacon on my plate. “Don’t worry. I trust him.”

That was what holding me back from telling him Arthur’s truth earlier, before Arthur threatened me with Ace’s past. He had blind trust in his uncle.

Seeing my silence, he gave me his whole attention. “What happened? What are you thinking?”

Should I tell him? Will he trust me?

What about Arthur’s threat? But that could be just a bluff, right? Maybe he didn’t know anything and was just bluffing to keep my mouth shut?

Kissing my lips softly, he made me look at him. “What’s bothering my rose so much?”

Should I?

I gulped. “He...”

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SIXTY-FOUR: THE VACATION



“*H*e...” I licked my lower lip, which suddenly felt very dry.

He nodded, patiently waiting for me to continue.

“He isn’t what you think—”

His phone blared on the counter, halting me mid-sentence. Frowning, he picked up the phone and let out a sigh.

“Sorry, Rosebud. Have to take this,” he apologized, answering the call. “Yes, Arthur?”

Even though the displeasure was lucid on his face being disturbed again, his tone maintained the respect for his uncle. If it was someone else, he wouldn’t be so lenient for the interruption.

“Hmm. All right. Just send the details to Carter. I’ll take a look later,” he said, while picking up a grape and putting it in my mouth. As I chewed on it, he listened carefully to what Arthur had to say.

Then his gaze snapped up to mine.

Nodding slowly, he said, “All right, will tell her. Yeah, see you later.”

I cocked my head at the side. Was he talking about me?

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Just some details of a meeting with the Russians. Regarding our final signing with them,” he replied. “Anyway, he gave you his greetings. He said he was sorry he couldn’t meet you today. He was in a hurry, but he’ll see you soon. He really enjoyed his last conversation with you.” A brow of his raised. “I didn’t know Arthur had time to converse with someone unless it’s regarding work.”

Something churned in my stomach. I gulped. It was a reminder of the sword he had dangling over my neck from him, not a message. When I was thinking about telling Ace everything, he stopped me again. Even if I didn’t entirely believe he had anything against Ace with him, a fear lingered. He was connected to Ace’s family and past, after all. He was there after his father’s death. He handled Ace. There was definitely a possibility he knew something.

And he’ll meet me soon? Why?

“Rosebud?” Cupping my chin, he made me look at him. “Where are you so lost?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just thinking about the office. It’s been a few days since I’ve attended. And yeah, we had a little chat a few days ago.”

He placed a kiss on my forehead. “Good. I’m glad you’re coming closer to my family. During your stay in New York, you weren’t connected with Caleb or Arthur. And don’t worry about the office, it’s your company. You go whenever you want.”

A genuine smile stretched across my lips, even though the thought of Arthur planning something was swirling in my head. At first, when he made me an equal owner of everything he had, I was livid. I didn’t want it. But now, I didn’t mind. At all. In fact, I was happy he loved and trusted me

enough to take such a huge step for me.

It was a proof how seriously he took our relationship. Of course, I wouldn't ever take any advantage of the power he gave me. But the thought of having rights to everything he owned, felt good. As if I was already his wife, his other half.

“You were saying something about Arthur? What was it?”

I shrugged. “Nothing. I was wondering if he could handle everything on his own. But I guess you're right. He has been doing this for years, after all. I shouldn't worry about it.”

Just one more day. As soon as I find out about his past, I'll be able to know what Arthur had against Ace. Maybe then I can do something?

Nodding, he picked me up from the counter, making me immediately wrap my arms around his neck.

“Let's have breakfast now. Then we can leave for our little vacation.”

* * *

“ACE, can I remove it now? I want to see where you've brought me,” I complained for the umpteenth time since we left the penthouse. He had put on a blindfold over my eyes before getting into the car so I couldn't see where he was taking me.

“Relax, baby. Just a few steps more and we'll be there,” he murmured in my ear.

I let out a huff and let him guide me to wherever he wanted to take me.

When he finally removed the blindfold from my eyes, I was left surprised. My lips parted as my gaze roamed over the beauty of the mansion stood before me.

The same mansion we had visited after shopping for Tess for her engagement, the night we met that accident. The house he had bought for his future.

If it was beautiful at night, it was breathtaking in the daylight.

Under the sun, it stood so magnificently with its black and white combination that I couldn't tear my eyes off it. The little garden surrounding it was now covered with colorful flowers, mostly roses. The grass was lush green.

I took a deep breath.

"Told you. It looked more beautiful in the daylight," he said, nuzzling my neck with his arms wrapped around me.

All I could do was nod.

"So, this is where we are going to spend our day?" I glanced up at him, finally tearing my eyes off the house.

"You love it, right?" he asked, getting an immediate nod from me. Tightening his hold on me, he gently pecked my lips. "Then not just a day, this is where we're going to spend the rest of our lives."

My heart skipped. A warmth surged through my chest. The thing that he thought about a future with me made me feel all tingly.

"S-so, you bought this house for our future?" I blinked away the moisture in my eyes.

He nodded, stormy gray eyes set on me. "For our future."

I bit my lip. "So, the bedroom with the balcony above the rose garden will be mine? I'll be staying there with you?"

A husky chuckle reverberated through his chest. His eyes held

amusement. “Yes, only my Rosebud’s. That’ll be our bedroom. And,” his voice dropped low as he brushed his lips against mine, “you’re the one who’s going to be sleeping in that bed with me, every night, my rose.”

Slapping his shoulder, I pushed him away and pouted. “You’re so mean! That means you were talking about me when you mentioned about your future wife sharing that bedroom with you? You were purposely making me jealous!”

I still remembered the jealousy and hurt I felt when he talked about his future wife and having a family with her. I thought he was talking about someone else. This prick!

“I didn’t mean to make you feel that way, baby. You just couldn’t understand my hint. All you had to do was just look into my eyes. And you’d know who I was talking about.” The intensity of his gaze made my heart flip.

I rolled my eyes.

“So, you were jealous, huh?” he teased, pulling me in.

With my lips still formed into a pout, I played with his shirt’s button. “Yes. Because you’re mine. No one else can be your wife except me.”

He took a sharp inhale, staring deep into my soul. “You want to be my wife?”

A blush rose to my cheeks. Even though he made his intentions clear this morning, he wanted to hear it from my mouth.

“Yes.”

“You know, that means you’ll have to spend the rest of your life with me. You’ll be stuck with me forever because I’m not letting you go.” He cupped my chin.

“Great. I’m not planning to go anywhere, anyway.”

A vulnerability flashed across his eyes, his grip tightened on me, pulling me closer. “Promise me? Promise me you’ll never leave me.”

The uncertainty and urgency in his eyes tugged a string in my heart. Now I understood why he was asking me this, even if he already declared he was going to change his ‘boyfriend’ status soon. He even bought this house for us. But he was still uncertain. He still had this fear that I’d leave him.

Rising on my tiptoes, I cupped his cheeks, holding his gaze. “I promise. I’ll never leave you. Never ever. No matter what happens.”

Exhaling a sigh, he pulled me into his passionate kiss. Not sweet and slow, but possessive and rough.

“I love you, my rose. I love you so fucking much.”

I smiled. “I love you too. More than anything.”

No matter what his fear was for, no matter what his past was, I would never leave him. I’ll always stand there beside him. Whatever happened in the past, I wouldn’t let it affect our present and future. And I had this belief he couldn’t do anything wrong. And even if he did, he wouldn’t do it on purpose.

Pulling away, the nameplate of the house caught my eyes.

Turquoise Heaven?

He followed my gaze.

“Your beach house has the same name, right?” I asked. “Why though? Seems like you like this name a lot.”

“Damn right. I’m in love with this name. Turquoise is my favorite color.”

I raised my brow. And I thought it was black? Since most of the time he

roamed around in black or dark suits. But why turquoise?

Then realization hit me.

The color of my eyes.

Flutters erupted in my tummy at his words.

“My eyes?”

He kissed my forehead. “Yes. My turquoise eyed beauty who I’m obsessed with. The girl I love with everything in me.”

Not knowing how to react, I wrapped my arms around him, hiding my face in his chest. Emotions soared high inside me.

“I can’t live without you, you know that?”

“I know. Nor can I, baby.” He pecked my forehead again. “Now, let’s go inside. I have so much to show you.”

Once we were inside, I was surprised again. Not only because the interior was beautiful as well as the exterior, but also because the furniture set around the house was very familiar to me. In fact, I chose them.

Before we got together, he had given me some weird jobs to choose furniture from hundreds of catalogues he sent me. Even confused, I marked the ones I liked the most. I didn’t know he was planning to use those for our home.

“It’s not done! Why didn’t you tell me then?” I glared at him.

The side of his lips twitched. “If I had, would you help me?”

Not having the answer, I just rolled my eyes and walked away from him. To the bedroom we were going to share.

And to my surprise again, while the rest of the house was decorated well with the furniture I chose, the master bedroom was left untouched. Except the

king-sized bed. Even the walls needed paint. When I threw a confused glance at him, he wrapped his arms around me from behind and rested his chin on my shoulder.

“I want you to decorate our room with your own hands and presence. From the color of the walls to the furniture, I want you to set everything as you want,” he said.

A smile graced my lips. “Why only me, though? You’re also going to stay here. Your choice also matters. What if I turn this room into a pink kingdom?”

He let out a chuckle and pressed a kiss on my neck. “I don’t care if it’s a kingdom of pink or purple as long as you’re here with me. Do you think when my sun will be before me, I’ll be able to see anything else beyond that?”

Letting out a shaky breath, I leaned into him. As cheesy as it was, every word fluttered my heart. He was always good with his words. They always managed to make me fall deeper in love with him, even if it was possible.

“What now?”

Pulling away, he grasped my hand in his. “My study. Come, I have something important to show you.”

“What is it?”

He looked at me. “A little glimpse of my past.”

SIXTY-FIVE: THE REVELATION - PART 1



Once in the newly organized study, I found it similar to his office in the OC Textiles, and of course, decorated with my chosen furniture. Similar dark wooden desk, two long shelves filled with files and books, a gray leather couch in a corner and a small golden chandelier hung right above the desk.

Except one thing.

The huge picture frame on the wall, covered with a white sheet. The same one I saw in this room during my last visit. I still remembered that blue diamond ring on her finger was unconcealed. But this time, the sheet hid it whole.

I had the same question again. Whose picture was that?

Still securely clutching my hand in his, he stood before the picture. A soft sigh left him.

“Ace?” My voice came out as a whisper.

Rising his hand, he tugged at the sheet, letting it fall on the floor. My eyes widened slightly.

It wasn't a picture. It was a painting. Painting of his mother, Ophelia.

As graceful and sophisticated as ever, she stood there with her head held high. Confidence sparkled in her blue eyes. The navy-blue velvety gown

hugged her petite body perfectly when dark red lipstick sat on her lips, bringing her smile to life. My eyes fell on the blue diamond on her finger. It was evidence of her high-class status and taste.

Whoever drew this painting was a hell of a talented painter. They brought this painting to life so beautifully. One could mistake this as a picture instead.

“She’s beautiful, as always,” I complimented.

He nodded. “She always wanted a painting of herself. And she finally got one on my sixteenth birthday.” With his gaze fixed on his mother’s face, he spoke in a low voice. “She was very happy that night.”

Though it seemed like he was telling a happy story, I could hear the pain in his voice. The way he let out a defeated sigh, my heart clenched for him. He missed her.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. Turning to me, he gave me a close-lipped smile.

“She loved this painting and always kept it in her room. But since... since she didn’t take it with her when she left, it remained in that dark old room. So, I thought, why not bring it here?” One of his shoulders lifted in a shrug. “As much as I didn’t want to open the memories of my past, I couldn’t leave this. I had to bring at least one of the things related to her over here.”

I squeezed his hand. “You did the right thing. Just because of some bad memories, we can’t abandon the ones we spent in felicity. I’m glad you’re starting to cherish those memories, even if you don’t want to think about your past.”

I was happy that he was opening up to me. He never talked to me about his mother before like that. But he was doing it now. It wasn’t much, but it was a beginning. I hoped he’d let me in properly soon.

He kissed the back of my hand. “Honestly, even though I brought it to this house, I wasn’t planning to hang it here. My first plan was to lock it in the basement. But then—” his eyes met mine, “—I remembered your words. The same ones you told me at Tess’s rehearsal. I thought it over. You were right. Until I accept my past, I can’t move on with my present. I can’t be at peace. So, I…”

“So, you decided to keep it here?”

Nodding, he took my hands to his lips again.

“It’s one of the best decisions you took, you know.”

He smiled. “Come, there’s more.”

Curious, I followed him closely as he went around his desk and got out an album from a drawer. An album full of his and Caleb’s pictures, there were Tess and Tobias’s pictures as well.

“These are from our high school and college,” he said, standing beside me as I flipped the pages. Some of them were even from their childhood. Two little chubby kids were grinning at the camera with their mouths smeared with chocolate. And I didn’t have any difficulties pointing out which one was my man. Those gorgeous stormy grays could never be missed.

I stared at the picture in awe. “You were so adorable back then.” He looked barely three or four in the picture.

“What do you mean? I’m not adorable right now?”

I laughed at his playful, accusing tone. Shaking my head, I pecked his lips. “No, you’re not adorable now.” At his raised brow, I winked at him. “You’re hot.”

Amusement danced across his eyes as he let out a chuckle, circling his

arms around my waist.

“When did you get this picture?” I asked, looking at a photo of him and Caleb eating cookies with both of their mouths and hands full.

A look of nostalgia crossed over his features. “When Grandma used to babysit us. When we would be alone in the house, Mom used to call Grandma over to look after us before leaving for work. And being the kind woman she was, she always used to make cookies for us, even after Mom asked her many times not to spoil us.”

Although I never met that woman, the fondness in his tone made me like her immediately.

“Here, look, here she is.” He pointed at a picture of a woman smiling at the camera with her gray hair tied in a bun on the top of her head and two little kids on her lap. “After the death of Caleb’s parents and mine being busy all the time, she took care of us. She’d have loved to meet you, you know. She’d be proud of my choice.”

His loving gaze on me made my cheeks hot.

“I would have loved to meet her, too. She sounds like an amazing woman.”

He nodded, kissing my head. “She was.”

Then a picture of a couple caught my eye. I didn’t know them.

“Caleb’s parents,” he answered.

They were a beautiful couple.

Among so many pictures, I didn’t find even a single photo of his father. Only one photo of his mother was there. She was with his grandma and Caleb’s parents. I knew he avoided keeping his parents’ photos in the album.

Especially his father's. From what I knew, he had a strong dislike towards his dad. He talked about his mom to me, but he never mentioned his father. His parents were a sore subject for him. That could be the reason why he kept his mom's picture covered with the sheet.

But I was glad he was at least trying to cope with his past.

After sharing some of his memories with his grandma, he showed me some of the trophies he won in his college. Those shining trophies were proof of him being active in sports, he was a born winner in everything. He even told me how sports and gym helped him with his drug addiction. He spent most of his time in them to keep his mind busy and away from drugs.

In just some short moments, I found out so much about him. The more I knew him, the closer I felt to him. And I couldn't be happier he was opening up to me, letting me peek into his past.

As the day passed, we played some matches of chess. Of course, I made him promise he wouldn't let me win on purpose. And obviously, I lost in every damn match! So, to make up my ruined mood, he made me lunch. My favorite, cheesy garlic shrimps and chocolate cupcakes. Though this time, I helped him make the food in the beautiful, fancy kitchen. Now who would miss ogling a half-naked Greek god cooking while his delicious abs were on display?

After he made me sit on his lap and fed me my lunch, he took me out to the open meadow that was filled with roses. The same one he showed me from our bedroom's balcony during our last visit.

And he was right. It was breathtaking in daylight. The beauty of the freshly bloomed roses, the green meadow, the lush grass, and the gentle breeze filled with a faint fragrance of flowers blew my mind away. I could

spend the rest of my life here without any complaint. And the fact that he groomed this place with rose plants for me, only made it more special to me.

Then he took me to explore the backyard. The woods. It wasn't dense, nor there were any wild animals, so I thought it'd be a great place for children to play around. Of course, I didn't voice out my fast-forwarded thoughts and let him guide me through the uneven ways with my hand tightly secured in his.

* * *

TYING the belt of the robe around my waist, I bit my lip, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

Mr. Valencian was waiting for me in the pool. The rooftop swimming pool I was quite excited to swim in. After exploring the woods and roaming around the small market nearby, we decided to take a dip in the heated pool.

Though I didn't bring a swimsuit, as I wasn't aware where he was taking me, I did wear matching black lacy underwear. Thank God for that!

And I looked quite good in those, sexy even. I was wondering what his reaction would be seeing me in them.

Grinning, I padded to the rooftop, where he was patiently waiting for me. With his back facing me, he stood in the water with a glass of fruit champagne we bought from the market earlier this afternoon in his hand. Gaze set in the distance, he took a slow sip on his drink.

Even though he smiled and laughed with me throughout the day, I could see his stress. His shoulders never relaxed, even when he was teasing me or kissing me. His grip on me was firmer than ever, his need to keep touching me was stronger than ever. Even when I told him to wait for me here, he didn't look pleased.

He said he'd tell me everything today. And as the day passed, his stance grew more tense.

Hearing my footsteps, his stormy grays turned to me, making my heart skip. His hair was wet and swiped back, water droplets rolled down his broad shoulders and strong back. My mouth watered at the sight.

Will this man ever fail to amaze me?

“Took you long enough—”

His words stopped as I untied my robe and let it fall around my feet. The cool breeze kissing my bare skin wasn't the reason for the goosebumps that crawled across my body. His lips parted as he let out a sigh, his intense gaze roaming up and down my body. My cheeks flamed hot.

Licking those firm pink lips sensually, he placed his glass of champagne on the edge of the pool and beckoned me with his head. And my feet obeyed.

The moment I was in the warm water, he pulled me flush against him. My heart thudded against my ribcage at the suddenly very awake, hard organ of his against my lower abdomen.

“Fucking hell, Rosebud! Do you want to kill me?” Letting out a curse, he ran his hands over my sides while undressing me with his eyes. They were glued on my chest that was barely covered with the lacy bra.

I let out a breathy moan when he pressed his lips against my neck, hands feeling my behind. A shiver ran through me at the feel of his hot tongue on my jaw and the calloused hands cupping my flesh roughly.

“So fucking soft,” he murmured in my ear, biting my earlobe. “You have no idea how much I crave to feel this velvety soft skin against me, to touch you, to taste you.” The husky groan of his directly hit my lower region, causing me to close my thighs. But he opened them soon with his leg in

between them.

“Ace...” I whimpered as he sucked on my neck. One of his hands played with the edge of my panties.

“I had to take countless cold showers, thinking of you every night. You were so close to me, but I couldn’t touch you. Those nights and days were a torture for me.” Pulling me forward, he moved me against his hardness. My lips parted at the sensation. “You feel that, my rose? What you do to me? What pain you make me go through every fucking day with just a simple glance of yours?”

Closing my eyes, I leaned into him and felt his touch, his kisses, his warmth.

“You tortured me for years in my dreams,” he murmured.

At this, my eyes snapped open as a very troublesome question popped up in my head. Moving away slightly, I looked at him.

“How could I torture you in these years?” I felt a squeeze in my heart at the thought of some other woman touching him. “You—you didn’t have anyone to...”

Cupping my chin, he stared deep in my eyes. “There was no one in my life since college. Not even a single date. There was only you in my heart, baby. Only you.”

I was both touched and surprised at his admission. But then I couldn’t stop myself from asking another question.

“H-how many girls were you with in college and high school?” I knew I shouldn’t be jealous of the affairs he had in his past, but it still pricked me.

A brow of his raised. “Where is this coming from? I thought we were

going to do something hot...” His hand crawled up to my chest, but I slapped it away.

“Answer my question.” My eyes narrowed. I wanted to know how many girls he slept with, where he was the only man who touched me. I just hoped the number wasn’t too high. But with his Greek god looks, I didn’t think girls were decent enough to keep their distance.

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SIXTY-SIX: THE REVELATION - PART 2



*H*e let out a sigh. “Two.”

It wasn't much, but it still managed to sting. Biting my lip, I nodded and looked away.

This was ridiculous. It was in his past. Then why did I want to murder those girls who got to have him?

Pressing his forehead against mine, he held my gaze. “It was when you left for New York. Even for just some time, I thought to let you go. I wanted to forget you so you can live your life happily. So, for that, I thought other girls could help me. Even if deep down, I knew I couldn't last long until I finally lost it and ran back to see you.” He placed a kiss in between my brows. “And it happened. I could stretch it only for one month until I lost it. I knew no one could take the place of my Rosebud. Nor could I live without loving her, without seeing her.”

A tear slipped down my cheek. “Those years were hell for me as well. At least you could come and see me from afar. But I had to fight with myself constantly to forget you. The fight I knew I would never win. Everyone thought it was just a crush of a teenage girl.” I shook my head with my vision blurry with tears. “But it was much, much more than just a crush. I had lost my heart to a boy I never thought would love me back.”

“But he did. More than anything, more than himself, with every fiber in his being,” he whispered, brushing his lips against mine. The crack in his voice told me his pain. I could express my agony with my tears, but he couldn’t. “I’m so sorry, baby. Because of my one decision you had to suffer that much. But trust me, I did it only for you. Even if it killed me.”

I felt his rough stubble against my palm. “I know.”

He pulled me into his chest, wrapping his arms around me tightly. “I love you, my rose. I love you so fucking much.”

I smiled. “I love you too.”

We went silent for a moment until I spoke again.

“Ace?”

“Hmm?”

“You said you were waiting for me to complete my studies. What would you do if I really had managed to move on from you and fell in love with someone else?”

His grip tightened on me. Greek accent was deep as he replied, “Then I’d kill that bastard and make you fall in love with me again.”

I giggled, shaking my head. “What if I truly loved that man and hated you for doing that? What’d you do then?”

“Rosebud,” he warned.

Pulling away, I looked at him. “Tell me. What would you do?”

He pulled me back into him. “I’d kidnap you, tie you to my bed and seduce you until you forgot him and start loving me again.”

My eyes widened. This caveman! “What if I kept hating you and wouldn’t love you back as you wanted? What would you do then? What

would you do if I never loved you again?”

His shoulders tensed. Jaw clenched and unclenched. His fingers tightened on my hips as he stared at me with hard, yet unreadable eyes.

Then I saw the vulnerability. The uncertainty. The fear.

“I’d die.” He let out a shaky breath. His thumbs gently brushed over my cheeks. “I’d die if I had lost you completely. You don’t know what you mean to me. This man standing before you only breathes for his Rosebud. Without her, he is nothing. Without you in my arms,” he leaned in, pressing his forehead against mine again, “I’d be lost. You’re my light, baby. I can’t think of my life without you even in my wildest dreams. I can’t live without you.”

My heart broke with every tremble in his voice. With a tear slipping from my eye, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his lips softly. “Good. Because I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life. I won’t leave you even if you want me to. Because this Rosebud of yours also can’t live without her Ace.”

Cupping my cheeks, he captured my lips in a deep, hungry kiss. With one hand around my waist, he pulled me up, making me wrap my legs around his hips.

Sucking on my lower lip, he growled against my mouth. “Promise me.”

I knew what promise he wanted from me. The same one he asked me to do when we arrived here. He was asking it again. A promise of never leaving him, a promise of not giving up on him ever. A promise to love him for the rest of our lives.

Pulling him closer, I pressed my lips against him again while moving my hips against him, trying to show him my every emotion through my actions.

“I promise.”

Keeping me in his arms, he got us out of the pool and took me directly to our bedroom. To show me his love, his passion, his wildness, his tenderness, and his promises.

* * *

OPENING MY EYES SLOWLY, I squinted into the dark room. My hand reached for him beside me on the bed, but his warmth was missing. There was only coldness.

Where was he?

The bathroom's light was off, and the balcony's door was closed.

"Ace?" I called out. But I didn't get any reply from the silent dark room.

Getting up, I grabbed the shirt he left at the end of the bed earlier before going to the pool and put it on. Running my fingers through my semi damp hair, I padded out of the door.

He didn't give us a chance to dry ourselves off before he...and I didn't complain. Why would I when I was getting what I wanted?

A blush rose to my cheeks, remembering the way we were relentless. And he was insatiable, as always. He didn't stop until I couldn't take it anymore. I was glad we were alone in this whole house. Otherwise, my screams and loud moans would send us to jail for sure.

And after tiring me out, he took care of me. He cleaned me up and towel dried my hair well so I wouldn't fall sick. After he was assured I was well taken care of, he returned to me under the blanket and pulled me into his chest.

Only for me to wake up to a cold bed in the middle of the night.

Where is he?

After checking the whole floor, I climbed down the stairs and padded into the living room. And there he was.

Before the fireplace, he was seated on the single couch. With his elbows resting on his knees, his gray eyes were lost deep into the fire crackling around the burning timbers. The hot amber glow descended on his beautiful, hard features.

But the tightness of his jaw, icy gaze, and clenched fists weren't appealing to me at that moment.

The sudden feel of the tense air around me made me cautious.

"Ace?" My voice came out as a whisper. As if afraid to break the silence.

He didn't respond, not even moved a muscle. The only answer I got was eerie silence, except the crackling of the fire.

When I almost thought he didn't hear me, his deep voice echoed throughout the room. Low yet powerful.

"I always looked up to him as my role model. I always wanted to be like him. Powerful, successful, and dedicated to his work. A nice and humble person," he paused. "Until I saw him raising his hand on my mother."

A gasp slipped through my lips.

He used to beat Ophelia? I never thought he'd stoop so low. But if he could cheat on his wife, then hurting his wife physically wasn't impossible for him.

But I didn't speak my thoughts out loud, not wanting him to stop.

"I always ignored their conflicts and arguments, thinking it wasn't my business to interfere. I thought every couple had their disagreements sometimes. I didn't pay any mind to Mom's suspicion about him. Until I

caught him with his secretary in his office.”

A muscle of his jaw ticked while I listened to him silently. Nor did he turn to look at me yet.

“My whole opinion about him changed right at that moment. Instead of respect, I only felt disgust about that man. And my disgust turned into hatred when he found me standing there at the door and kept his secretary on his lap. As if his own seventeen-year-old son didn’t just catch him cheating on his wife.”

My heart tugged for him. I couldn’t imagine how broken and shocked he was when he found out his father’s real face. And I felt bad for Ophelia. Though I didn’t get to spend much time with her, she was a great woman. She didn’t deserve it.

“Did you tell her about it?” I asked, not moving from my place.

He shook his head. His eyes were hard as stone. “I didn’t have the courage to. Even though she had her own doubts, she was never sure about it. He never let himself get caught. She was already drowning herself in alcohol. I couldn’t give her more reasons to increase her misery.”

“If she wasn’t happy with him, if he was treating her that way, then why didn’t she just leave him?” I queried, curious to know more. “Even after the doubts, why did she stick around?”

“Because of love.” Those dark stormy gray orbs met mine. “She loved him, Emerald. Even after he threw her out of the board members when she had equally worked hard with him to raise the company to success, even after he started manhandling her, even after he disrespected her every day, she didn’t want to leave. She wanted to stay with the man she once fell in love with hoping that he’d magically become the same charming man she once

knew. She didn't want her family to get shattered. So, she stayed. Tolerating everything.”

I gulped the tears that threatened to spill. She loved that man so much, but the only thing she got in return was heartache. “And she found solace in alcohol to forget her pain?”

He nodded, staring hard at the fire that flickered so high, as if it just needed a bit more air to spread its destructive wings into raging lava. The rage in his eyes matched the zing of the flames in the fireplace.

“Even though most of the time she used to be lost in alcohol, she sometimes used to come into my room at midnight to kiss my forehead and whisper goodnight.” His voice cracked at the end.

Not being able to stand there anymore, I walked up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. But he didn't look up at me. Maybe because he didn't want me to see the moisture in his eyes.

A tear slipped down my cheek. His pain was slicing through my heart. I wanted to hold him to my chest and tell him everything would be all right, that I was here with him. But the stiffness of his shoulders and rigid posture stopped me from doing so.

“She tolerated everything even after she was dying inside. She kept smiling at the fancy parties he took her with him, so no one could raise a finger at our family. She took his insults every fucking day without relent. But everything had a breaking point. Everything had a line.” His lips curled in distaste, his nostrils flared in rage. “And the line broke that night.”

I straightened. My heart pounded. I knew my answers were just a few moments away. I knew it was the night that became the worst night of his life. The night that still haunted him.

“After a long time, Caleb and I decided to have a family dinner outside with her. That was the night of Thanksgiving. We thought we could at least make her mood brighten a little. Even Tobias and Tess joined us. We were supposed to leave for your home afterward to spend the rest of the night with your family.” Looking up at me, he held my gaze. “I was eagerly waiting to meet you and give you the gift I bought for you. But...Mom couldn’t control her urge and got drunk. So, we had to cancel the plan and return home.”

His voice turned deeper and rougher as he continued. His jaw clenched and unclenched. I squeezed his shoulder to provide him some comfort.

“The moment we reached home, we...heard them. Him and one of his mistresses.” Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. “I still remember the way she stood frozen before her bedroom door. I still remember the tears that formed in her eyes. She...found him with a woman on the very bed they shared. With her very best friend.”

Another gasp left me as I stood there, shocked at the new revelation.

“And that night her patience broke. I never saw that side of my mother. She was shaking with anger and hatred. Tears were rolling down her eyes from the betrayal she got from the two people she loved a lot. That night, she lost it.”

The way the anger in his eyes slowly turned into fear unnerved me.

“Tess and Tobias left immediately. Caleb stood at the door, frozen. And that man didn’t have a bit of shame to even show a bit of remorse. Instead, he was mad she entered the room with the children. He accused her of wanting to demean him before us.” He paused, gulping. “I stood there listening to them scream at each other, their curses and shoves. I didn’t know what to do. Nor did Caleb. I wanted to console my mother, punish my father for his

deeds. But all I could do was stand there in a corner. For a seventeen-year-old, the situation was very confusing and traumatic.”

Without warning, he stood. Away from my touch and closer to the fire. His shoulders rose and fell with every heavy breath he took. His curled fists shook at his sides.

“I-I didn’t know what to do until—until Mom got out a gun from her closet. The same gun he bought for his protection,” he said while I stood there frozen in my place. I didn’t expect everything to turn out like this. “She was so drunk and hurt that she didn’t know what she was doing. She went to shoot her friend, screaming at her for betraying her in that way. And he loved his mistress enough to snatch the gun from her and raise it to his wife.”

My heart pounded in my chest as I waited for his next words to come. My hands and feet turned cold out of anxiety and nervousness. An ominous feeling rose in my chest.

“He was mad. I still remember how red his eyes were. I still remember how much hatred he held in his eyes as he watched Mom. But even if he held the gun at her, she didn’t stop screaming at them, shoving him, and grabbing that bitch! And then he lost it,” he murmured. “I saw him curling his finger around the trigger. His words still echo in my head that he spit out, staring right into Mom’s eyes. ‘I’ve had enough of you. You’re becoming a nuisance for my professional and personal life now. I just wanted to remove you from the company, but now it seems like I have to remove you from my life as well. So I can live in peace. And this is the perfect time to do that.’”

I let out a shaky breath. Not even a word left my mouth.

“He was about to pull the trigger. And that’s when I jumped in between him and Mom. I requested him to put the gun down. But he didn’t seem to

care that his son was standing before the deadly nozzle. He just pushed me aside and went for Mom in rage. But I couldn't let that happen. I tried to snatch the gun from his clutch, but he didn't let me. He just wanted to kill his wife at that moment. And I had to do something, Emerald. I had to stop him. And I...did."

He slowly turned to me. Dark eyes held mine. Not even a trace of emotions was on his face. Something churned into my stomach.

"You were right. I didn't tell you everything. I hid two things from you. One, he didn't commit suicide, he was murdered. And two—" Greek voice was dense as he stared deep into my eyes, "—he was murdered by his own son. The trigger set off by my hands during the fight. I killed him."

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SIXTY-SEVEN: SHE'S MY HOME...



ACE

I watched her silently as she stood frozen in her place. With her turquoise eyes wide in shock, her lips parted. Color drained from her face the moment those words left my mouth. The truth I had been hiding in the deepest corner of my memories. The ugliest and darkest truth of my life I never wanted to reveal before her.

She kept quiet. Unbearable silence echoed throughout the hall. Other than shock and disbelief, I couldn't read a single emotion on her beautiful face.

I inhaled deep. The same ominous feeling rose in my chest again, choking me in its vicious grip. Clenching my fists, I ignored the pain that shot through my heart.

"Emerald," her name snuck out as a whisper through my lips. "Say something."

She didn't. She just stood there, staring at me with tears glistening in her eyes.

I turned away from her. Deep, labored breathing came out of me. My hands shook at my sides. The pain in my heart only soared high, it physically hurt.

I knew it. I knew she was going to hate me. After knowing what a

monster I was, she could never love me the way she did. She could never stay with a murderer. A murderer who killed his own father.

I clutched my chest, trying not to fall apart or destroy something. This fear, this fear of losing her didn't let me sleep for years. Once I let her go because I didn't deserve her time and love. I let go of her not only because I was a drug addict and I didn't think I had a future, but also because I knew my past wouldn't let me live freely so easily. It'd follow me everywhere I go. A monster like me didn't deserve a flower like her.

But I was too selfish to stay away for long. Her absence in my life was ruining me. The thought of those turquoise eyes not looking at me with full of love and adoration, not hearing my name from her sweet angelic voice, not watching her blushing because of me, and not hearing her giggles drove me insane. It still did.

That was why I didn't want to tell her. I decided to keep my past miles away from her so it never could be a hindrance in my path of keeping her in my life.

But... but she deserved the truth. She deserved to know everything about me before I bound her to me for the rest of our lives. I couldn't keep her in the dark.

She promised to never let go...But who could love a murderer?

"I..." I gulped, rubbing my chest to soothe the burn. "I know you must hate me now. I know I don't deserve you. You deserve a simple—" I took a deep breath, to even think of her being with another man made my blood boil, "—man. A simple man with a simple life. Not a man with a tainted past. Not a man who killed his father and was a drug addict. But...I love you, Rosebud." I clenched my fists, trying my best not to pull her into the cage of

my arms and lock her there forever. So she couldn't leave me.

I wouldn't survive without her.

"I'm too selfish to let you go. I can't function without you. I can't..."

A pair of petite arms wrapped around my torso from behind. I felt her pressing her cheek against my back.

"I'll not leave even if you want me to. I can never," she said.

As if a sudden light lightening my dark insides, the pain in my chest disappeared. Replaced a feeling of desperation to hear those words again.

I turned around, cupping her cheeks. "You-you won't leave me? You don't hate me?"

She shook her head. Her beautiful eyes watched me with the same love and adoration they had for years. Not a trace of hate was there as I expected.

"Never. I can never hate you. Even if you were wrong, I couldn't hate you. I'd always love you."

I frowned in confusion. "I know I can't let you go, but aren't you disgusted with me? I..." I gritted my teeth. "I'm a murderer. A monster, Emerald. You don't need to lie to me not to upset me. I can understand if you think you need time—"

"You're not a monster." She cut me off, her voice was firm. "Neither are you a murderer."

I shook my head. "Maybe you didn't hear what I said. I killed him, Emerald. His blood was on my hands."

"It wasn't your fault. You didn't kill him. It was an accident," she said softly.

Taking my hands, she made me sit on the couch and placed herself on my

lap. My arms pulled her closer against me instinctively.

“I can understand your dilemma, Ace. No matter how he was, he was your father. And because of that incident, you feel guilty for his death. But it’s not your fault, baby. It wasn’t your fault he died. It was an unfortunate accident. You were just trying to help your mother.”

I stared at her, utterly appalled. I just told this woman my darkest past, my crime, the deed I have been blaming myself for years, and she wasn’t still repulsed by me. Instead, she was looking into my eyes, cupping my cheeks and telling me I wasn’t at fault.

I gulped the thickness of my throat, clutching her tightly. “You really don’t hate me? You—you aren’t disgusted by me?”

She placed a delicate kiss on my forehead before peering into my soul. “Why would I if it wasn’t your fault? I can never hate you for the crime you never did. I can never feel disgusted by a man who had enough courage to stand before a gun for his mother. And you were only seventeen then. I don’t think anyone at that age has the amount of bravery you showed that night. If you hadn’t done that, you would have lost your mother to that monster. But you stopped it from happening. You saved her.”

Letting out a breath, I pulled her into me, placing my head in the crook of her neck. She ran her soft hands through my locks as I took a lungful of her sweet scent. She didn’t know what she had said. She didn’t know what favor she had done to me by saying those words. The fear of her leaving me was lesser in my heart now. My muscles relaxed as the pain in my chest slowly dissipated.

“You won’t leave me,” I whispered, more to myself than to her. I needed to hear it out loud.

Her hug tightened. “Never.”

I could feel the storm inside me calming. She won’t leave me. My Rosebud will always be with me, in my arms.

I breathed her in again, desperately held her against me tightly. And she didn’t complain.

“Stop punishing yourself for the accident that happened years ago, baby,” she murmured, rubbing my back soothingly. “I know what happened was unfortunate, but stop blaming yourself for that. I know you didn’t want to tell me about your past because you thought I’d hate you. Because you thought you were a murderer, you were guilty. But you’re not. You were just trying to snatch that gun from him so he couldn’t hurt your mom. But he didn’t let you. He was in a trance of anger and hatred. If you hadn’t stepped between him and your mom, he would’ve killed her.”

My jaw clenched at the possibility.

“It was his insistence not to leave the gun. So how was that your fault?”

“I know what I did, I did it for Mom. But that memory, Rosebud, it doesn’t leave me alone. His blood on my hands, the way his lifeless eyes stared at me after...” I clenched my fists as recollection of that night flashed over my eyes. “The thought that maybe if I handled things differently, maybe if I could do something else other than fighting him, he would be alive, our wrestling wouldn’t cause the trigger to go off. I wouldn’t have to take the burden of his death on my shoulders for years.”

“Then don’t.” Pulling away slightly, she cupped my cheek. “You don’t need to take the burden, Ace. You couldn’t have done anything else at that moment. No one could do anything at that moment. You did what you felt right. Tell me one thing.” She made me look at her turquoise eyes. “Would

you do it again? Would you fight him again to save your mom if you could go back in your past?”

“Yes,” I replied, without hesitating.

A soft smile tugged at her lips. “That means you weren’t wrong. You did what was right. You saved your mother from your father. Anyone who loved their mother would do that same thing you did. That doesn’t make you a murderer. It wasn’t your fault. It was his fault that he didn’t let go of the gun. He just was too blinded by his fury. You didn’t kill him, Ace. You saved your mom.”

I just stared at her.

How did I get so lucky to have her in my life? I was thinking she would leave me once she knew everything. And here she was, providing light and warmth to my darkness. She was my sun keeping the demons of my past away.

Pain flashed through her eyes as she leaned in and wiped my cheek with her thumb. A tear I didn’t realize slipped from my eye.

Placing my forehead against her, I kissed her knuckles. “I love you, my rose. I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too,” she murmured back.

I brushed my lips against hers. “Thank you so much. You don’t know what you’ve done to me by saying those words. Thank you...for not giving up on me. For not leaving me. I don’t know what I would do if you left me.”

“And thank you for trusting me with your past.” She smiled softly.

“I wanted to tell you everything on our first date. But then, I didn’t have the courage. I thought even if you would forgive me after knowing about

seven years ago, you would hate me forever if you got to know about it. So, I backed out and just told you what I thought would be right.”

“But you were clearly wrong. If I think you weren’t at fault now, I would think the same then. Maybe if you told me that night, I would have found your reasons behind pushing me away stronger. Maybe I would have forgiven you easily.”

“I’m sorry, Rosebud.” I pulled her into my chest again. “I was scared. I can tolerate anything but losing you.”

“Was it the reason behind your turning to drugs? Your guilt?”

I nodded, sighing. “No matter how bad of a person he was, I still couldn’t forget he was my father. And no matter the reason was, somehow he died because of me. I couldn’t deal with that feeling, Rosebud. After that night, Mom went into depression. She was broken. She blamed herself for his death and my status. She thought if she hadn’t reacted that way that night, if she hadn’t pulled that gun out, nothing would’ve happened. She completely pulled away from us, from life. And it just pushed me more into darkness.”

I still remembered the way I used to wait for her to return home every night. But she used to be missing for days, drinking, and staying out. It continued until she finally stopped fighting her grief and decided to leave this place, us, her past behind and go somewhere far.

Her hand ran over my chest in a small, slow circle, soothing me.

“How did Caleb take all of this?” she asked.

“At first, he was as shaken as we were. But then slowly, he got better.” My lips turned up into a sad smile. “He became the eldest among us, taking care of me when I used to be senseless with drugs and alcohol.”

“I’ll be forever grateful to him for that,” she said.

I knew she felt guilty she couldn't be there for me when I needed her the most. Yes, I did need her the most. But I couldn't drag her into my mess. I couldn't taint her with my darkness. She was too pure and innocent for that.

"You know it was only because of you I didn't lose hope." I looked at her. "It was because of you why I tried my best to become normal again and leave drugs behind."

She smiled, kissing my chest. "I'm glad I could help in some way."

I sighed. "You always helped, baby. If it wasn't for you, I would've let my addiction consume me. You have no idea how horrible it was. There wasn't anything I hadn't tried. I almost overdosed once." She gasped, shocked at my words. I squeezed her hands. "But thank God I'm out of that hell now. And all of it was because you were constantly on my mind when I was trying to get better in the rehab center."

She hugged me closer. "I wish I could be there for you," she whispered.

I kissed her head. "You were, baby. You were always there with me, in my heart."

After a moment of silence, she asked, "When did you go to rehab?"

I gazed into the fireplace. "Right after you left for New York."

She turned her head up to look at me, still not moving away from my chest. "But you were in the UK at that time for your degree..." Then realization set on her face as her eyes widened. "So, you went to the UK for rehab, and not for a degree?"

I shook my head. "No. I went there to get better. After Arthur returned, he handled the company, as Mom was always absent. Then he suggested I should go to the UK for my treatment. He had a friend who could help me. So, I did, but not to his friend, but to a renowned organization that Jonathan's

friend ran.”

She sat up straight. “Dad? He knew about your condition?”

Nodding, I tucked a strand behind her ear. “He knew everything.”

Her head tilted at the side. “Everything, as in...”

“Yes, Rosebud. He knew what happened. It was your father who helped me with everything. He kept the police away from me and used his influence to make everything look like it was a suicide.”

Her mouth hung open, eyes wide in shock. “Dad?”

“Yes. I didn’t know what to do after that... accident. I had no one to seek help from. Mom was in too much shock to do anything. So, I called your father, and he rushed over immediately. After listening to everything I had to say, he placed a hand on my shoulder and said to leave everything to him.” I said, remembering the way he reassured me like a guardian.

A guardian I never found in my father.

“I wanted to tell everything to the police, but he stopped me. He feared the media would use it against my name for their own TRP. My reputation and career would be ruined in just a day. My future was at stake. No matter how it happened, our powerful rivals were ready to jump on us. They just needed a spark to turn it into a volcano. And that mistress of my father was ready to give a statement against me. Jonathan showed it to the world as a suicide. He even shut that woman’s mouth with money. He destroyed every proof that could be used against me.”

A shaky breath left her as she took my words in.

Kissing her forehead, I pulled her tightly against me again. Even if she said she wouldn’t leave, I needed to feel her against me to assure myself she

was still here. With me.

“Please don’t hate me because I didn’t tell the truth to the cops. I just didn’t know what to do, so I just did what Jonathan asked me to do.”

She shook her head. “You did the right thing. You don’t know how grateful I’m feeling to Dad for what he did. If he hadn’t done it, your rivals would definitely use it against you and your company. And without anyone there with you, you wouldn’t be able to defend yourself at that time. Don’t blame yourself for anything.”

I squeezed her hip gently. “Thank you for understanding me.”

She kissed my lips. “And thank you for letting me in, even though it was difficult for you to talk about your past.”

I pressed our foreheads together. “Anything for you, Rosebud. Anything for you.”

After that, I carried her to our bed and pulled her into me again. I felt much lighter than I ever felt. Especially now that I had my Rosebud in my arms forever. Throwing a leg over my waist, she snuggled against me. And I placed my hand on her thigh.

Then a question struck my mind. “How did you know that he didn’t commit suicide? Who told you about his murder?” Because I knew neither Caleb nor Jonathan would tell her anything about it. They even didn’t tell Tess and Tobias.

Her form stiffened. After a silence, she spoke, “Warner told me.”

I tensed. The mere name of that bastard had my blood boil. “How did he know about that? No one except me, Caleb, Mom, and your father knew about it. The officer who handled the case was loyal to your father, he wouldn’t spit a word out. And the woman died a year later in a car accident.”

Pulling away slightly, she stared at me for a moment. A small frown formed between her brows. “No one else knew about that incident?”

I shook my head. “Even if there was any proof left, I made sure to destroy it forever. There isn’t anything left.”

She went quiet again, thinking something, biting her bottom lip.

I moved my gaze from her innocent yet provocative act. “What are you thinking, Rosebud? You didn’t answer my question. How did he know about it?”

My fists clenched. How badly I regretted not finishing that insect right at that moment. It was the only right punishment for him for even thinking of harming my Rosebud. Now he dared to dig up my past!

She shrugged, hiding her face in my neck. “He didn’t like you from the beginning. He might’ve investigated you so he could use it against you and make me question our relationship.”

That bastard!

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

“Are you sure no one else knows about it? What if someone found out something, like Warner did, and will try to defame you using the media? You still have quite a number of rivals who want to take you down. And if they get to know you lied to the world not to put your future at risk, they can use it to show everyone that you hid the truth to save yourself. They can even accuse you of being a murderer and say you did it so the police wouldn’t catch you.”

I was amused how far her mind raced. Worry was thick in her voice.

“No one would do anything. They can’t because no one has any proof.

Even if anyone knows what happened that night, they don't have any evidence to prove it. They don't have the autopsy report or the gun that had my fingerprints on it. I made sure to destroy everything, Rosebud. So don't worry. No one can do anything."

Letting out a sigh of relief, she finally relaxed against me. Kissing her head again, I closed my eyes.

But the glimpses of that night continued to flash behind my eyelids. Subconsciously, my grip tightened on her thigh.

Raising her hand, she ran her fingers through my head, massaging my scalp softly. "Sleep now. Everything will be all right. I'm right here with you."

Heaving a sigh, I flipped our position and placed my head on her chest. With one arm around her waist, I placed her leg over me again.

My home.

With her soft hands running through my hair, soon darkness overtook me into a peaceful sleep I haven't had in years.

But not before I took an oath to destroy those who wanted to take my home away from me.

Antonio was down. Now it was time to get his partner in crime out of his hole.

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SIXTY-EIGHT: ONE DOWN



EMERALD

Sunlight beamed against my eyelids, making me slowly flutter them open. A yawn snuck out of me as I stretched across the bed. The soreness in different parts of my satisfied body bloomed a smile on my lips.

But it slipped as soon as I found the emptiness beside me when my hands searched for his warmth. The sheets were cold enough for me to know he had gotten up a long time ago. It was getting on my nerves not finding him with me in the bed when I woke up in the morning. I craved his body warmth around me and his sultry kisses.

Then memories of last night flooded my mind. My heart clenched with the recollection of his pain and suffering for years. For the crime he didn't commit.

It was saddening he lived half of his life thinking he was the cause of his father's death and thought I'd hate him after learning the truth. I wished he told me earlier about his guilt and fear. I would've made it clear to him that I wouldn't leave him, no matter what. I couldn't. Especially when he was innocent.

I let out a shaky breath, remembering the torment in his beautiful gray eyes. My heart bled for him. I wanted to take all his pain as mine, only if I could.

After knowing the truth, I saw everything from a new angle. My respect and gratefulness for my father went another level higher now. Though it was still shocking to know it was Dad who saved Ace from that tragedy. And he never told a soul about it. On the other hand, my opinion about his mother also changed. No matter how much my heart went out for her, even though I understood her pain and sufferings, I wouldn't be able to forgive her for leaving Ace and Caleb when they needed her the most. Especially Ace.

I understood she needed an escape from her traumatic life, but she shouldn't have left her son behind to suffer in the endless guilt and insecurities. He needed her. There was no one to give him emotional support.

Maybe I was being selfish. I was only thinking about the love of my life. But I wouldn't leave my only son like that, no matter the hell I went through. Though I'd never voice out my opinion about his mother before him. I knew no matter what she did, he didn't hold it against her. He respected and loved her.

Sighing, I sat up, rubbing my face. A note on the bedside table caught my eye. The smile returned.

It must be from him.

I was a little upset I didn't find him in the bed with me when I woke up, but he did sleep the whole night wrapped around me like a baby. He didn't get up in the middle of the night and go to the gym to channel his frustration and fears into the punching bag last night. And I think this was a big progress.

Good morning, my beautiful rose!

I'm so sorry, my love. I couldn't stay until you woke up. Had to leave for an urgent meeting. But just for two hours. Stay here. I'll come home as soon

as I'm finished.

I made you breakfast. Heat it up before eating. I'll try to cut this meeting short and fly into your arms as soon as possible.

Love you!

-A

PS: As it's a very important meeting, my phone will be switched off. If you need anything, just call Carter. He'll give your message to me. But DO NOT leave the house until I'm there.

Placing a kiss on the note, I pressed it against my chest, and a sigh of bliss left me.

How did I get so lucky with love? I thought I was never going to get this man. And here I was, staying in the house he bought for our future, sleeping in his arms, on our bed.

God, I already missed him.

Then something clicked in my head.

Wait. Meeting?

What important meeting did he have where he had to leave our vacation and drive back to the office so early?

As far as I remembered, he didn't have any important meetings until the next Monday. Except...

My eyes widened.

The meeting with the Russians! He said they were about to sign the final contract. It must be it!

Damn it!

Leaping to my feet, I grabbed my clothes.

I had to stop him. I had to tell him about Arthur before he signed the contract. The contract that old bastard was so eager to make Ace sign.

After hearing everything last night, I didn't find anything he could use against Ace. First of all, Ace didn't murder his father. It was an accident. His father got shot during the fight. It wasn't his fault. Even if he and Dad kept it hidden for the sake of his future, it wasn't that big of a crime for Arthur to destroy Ace. Nor was there any proof. He might know about it, just like Warner did, but he didn't have anything to prove. Ace and Dad made sure not to leave any evidence of the past.

That leech! He knew what Ace meant to me. I'd die before letting anything happen to him. The bastard just used it against me to keep my mouth shut until he got a way out of his crimes and Ace's wrath.

I was a hundred and one percent sure he didn't have anything against Ace. If he did, wouldn't he and Antonio have used it already?

And the frustrating thing was, why didn't I figure this out earlier? Why didn't I listen to my instinct?

I was certain he was planning something big this time. And he would pull off his plan through this contract. I didn't know what was exactly going through his wrinkled brain, but I had a strong hunch. He'd be using this contract to harm Ace and the company. Half a billion wasn't a joke.

But I wouldn't let this happen.

I wanted to tell Ace everything last night, but he was distressed enough for me to start any more stressful conversations with him. He needed a break. I thought I'd tell him this morning calmly, but he was gone even before I could wake up.

Rushing down the stairs, I dialed his number. But as he said, it was unreachable. So, I called Carter. After two rings, he picked it up.

“Good morning, Ms. Hutton.” His cheerful voice came through the phone.

“Carter, can you please pass the phone to Ace? I need to talk to him urgently.”

“Umm, I’m so sorry, Ms. Hutton. But maybe he has already entered the conference room. I’m on my way back to the office. I need to pick some files. Do you want me to give him a message?” he asked.

I came to a halt, panting from flying down the stairs so fast. “Wait, the meeting isn’t happening in the office?”

“No. It’s being held in hotel Diamond Valley.”

Diamond Valley? It was a twenty-minute drive from here. Not that far. But...the meeting has already started.

“Is it with the Russians?” Even though I knew it was, I hoped for the otherwise.

“Yes, Ms. Hutton. Both companies are going to sign the final contract today.”

I groaned. “Listen to me very carefully, Carter. Stop the meeting. Go there as fast as you can and tell Ace that I said, no, I pleaded not to sign the contract. You understand me? I need to tell him something important before he does it. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

Grabbing my purse, I ran out the door.

“What? But what happened, Ms. Hutton? Is there any problem? I don’t think there’s anything wrong with this contract—”

“Just do as I say! Give him my message and make sure he doesn’t sign anything. At least not before I get there. If you fail to do that, it can cost you your job, Carter. Remember it. I already left for the hotel.” I cut the call before he could say anything and rushed out of the enormous silver gate.

But my legs stopped as several big hulky men in black towered over me. Their tinted sunglasses hid their eyes. I could recognize two of them were from Ace’s security team.

I frowned. Where did they come from? They weren’t here yesterday.

“Ms. Hutton. We’re extremely sorry to inform you that you can’t go out anywhere until the boss arrives. Please, go back inside,” one of the hulks spoke in his deep voice.

“What? Where did this come from? I’m free to go anywhere I want! I need to go somewhere urgent, so move away from my path!”

They blocked my way again.

“We apologize, miss. But we can’t let you go. It’s the boss’s orders. You can’t leave the house.”

My temper rose. “Why?”

Why the hell did he tell them to lock me in the house? I didn’t remember him mentioning any of this yesterday. Everything was fine. What happened?

Then I remembered his note.

DO NOT leave the house.

He warned me not to leave. But forgot to give me the reason.

I was going to be late. The meeting had already started. If I don’t reach on time, he would sign the contract. I didn’t care at that moment about why he didn’t want me to leave the house. I had more important things to handle

right now.

The guard shook his head. “We aren’t allowed to say anything. But we can’t let you go.”

“Listen here, I’m getting late. So, move away from my way. I’m going to your boss. I don’t think he’ll mind me leaving.”

They didn’t budge from their places.

My lips pressed tight. “Move.”

“Sorry, miss. But we can’t. We’re just doing our job.”

I cocked my head. “What will you do if I leave? Stop me? How?” I took a step towards them. “Manhandle me? Drag me back inside the house? Because, of course, I’ll fight tooth and nail with you. But you can’t do that.” A smirk tugged at my lips. “If you even touch a strand of my hair, Ace is going to skin you alive,” I hissed, glaring at them.

The subtle look they exchanged and one of them gulping slowly planted seeds of hope in my heart. I was winning this fight. I just needed to hold my ground.

“Now you don’t want me to run to him crying and say how you guys manhandled me and hurt me to drag me back inside, do you? Do you know what will happen then?”

The color of their faces drained. They stood still, not uttering a word.

I smiled. “Good. Now excuse me.”

“But—Ms. Hutton. Stop!” One of them called out, but I didn’t stop. Ignoring them coming behind me, begging for me to stay, I stopped a taxi and got into it immediately before they could reach me.

* * *

THE MOMENT I walked through the entrance of Diamond Valley, a voice made me turn around.

“Ms. Hutton!”

Carter climbed up the stairs before reaching me. His sky-blue shirt clung to his body, soaked with sweat. With a red face, he looked up at me. Some files were tucked under his armpit.

I frowned. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in the conference room to deliver Ace my message?” Then realization set in, and my eyes widened. “Don’t tell me you’ve just arrived! Where the hell were you?”

Shit! I made the taxi driver drive faster than a sane man would to reach my destination, bribing him with double cash. I thought Carter was already here, interrupting the meeting. But he just freaking got here!

“I-I’m so sorry, Ms. Hutton. I got stuck in the traffic,” he panted.

Shaking my head, I turned around and ran inside.

Damn it! I just hoped he didn’t sign the contract yet.

With my heart thumping down my chest, anxiety rolling in my stomach, I made my way towards the elevator.

“Ms. Hutton, wait!” he called out for me, still at the entrance, huffing and puffing.

“Which floor?” I yelled over my shoulder, attracting some glances.

“Thirty-eight, room number 1504, but Ms. Hutton, wait! They won’t let you inside the VIP area without...”

His words faded away as soon as the doors of the elevator closed.

While the others in the elevator patiently stood beside me, I kept fidgeting in my place. My palms were clammy as I wiped them on my jeans.

I hope I'm not late.

Chanting this prayer in my mind, I tried his number again, but it was still unreadable. I had left some voice messages for him in hopes he would switch on his phone and hear my messages. But clearly, he didn't.

My phone blared in my hand, making my heart leap, thinking it was him. But disappointment soon filled me as Cassie's name flashed across the screen.

"Cassie, I can't talk to you right now. I'm a little bus—"

"Em, did you see the news?" I cringed at her loud screech. "Oh, God! It's everywhere! I can't even recognize his face!"

"What are you talking about?" I rubbed my temple, getting restless. I needed to stop Ace. "Look, Cassie. I'll call you later. I'm in the middle of a —"

"It's about Antonio! Didn't you see it yet?"

She again cut me off. But the name she took grabbed my attention.

"Wait, Antonio?" I frowned. "What about him?"

"God, Em, what world are you living in? The internet is going crazy over this. Antonio's butt is in the open now. Everything his stupid ass has done, all his illegal businesses is out now. It's all over the internet. That prick is even involved with human trafficking. Can you believe that?" I could imagine her shaking her head. "He got out of the jail last time, I don't know how, but this time no one can save him. Everyone knows his deeds. He's going to rot in jail for the rest of his life!"

I gasped. "You mean, he's been exposed before the world? But how?" Last time, he got out using his connection with some powerful politicians.

But if the media had proof against him in their hands now, no one can save him.

“You and I both know who is behind this.”

Of course. Who else? But why didn't he tell me anything?

“Though I hate that man, I can't help but feel pity the way he's looking covered in blood,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

She sighed. “You don't know anything, do you? I'm sending you a video. Watch it.”

Moments later, my phone buzzed as she sent me a message, at the same time the elevator's doors opened, letting me move out.

As soon as I opened the video, my eyes widened at the sight.

Antonio was lying on a stretcher as some people carried him inside a hospital. His face was battered with bruises and cuts, the same went with his hands. Blood soaked his shirt and the side of his head. He looked horrible.

I read the headline.

‘The famous business tycoon Antonio Raymond was found beaten brutally and unconscious in his own apartment. Police are looking into the matter. Though people are content with his state with his illegal activities now out before the world.’

I stood there, shocked.

Exposing him with proof was understandable. He deserved Ace's wrath. He had been trying to mess with Ace for so long. But torturing him like that? Was he responsible for this, too?

Even after Ace told me everything about his past, his secrets, I felt like I

didn't know everything about Antonio. He was still hiding something.

But I was content one enemy of ours was down. He couldn't harm us anymore. And now it was Arthur's turn.

It's enough, Arthur. Let's finish your game now.

Clutching my phone in my hand tightly, I held my head high and went for room number 1504.

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SIXTY-NINE: FORBIDDEN PLACE



Walking through endless corridors, I scanned the room numbers so I wouldn't get lost.

The hotel was huge. It was a palace built in the nineteenth century, now turned into a lavish five-star hotel. With the mixture of antique architect and modern decorations, it gave a feeling of royalty. From the paintings on the walls, the huge gold-plated flowerpots on both sides of the corridors, the gorgeous chandeliers shimmering with a golden glow, to the red carpet down the way, everything screamed money.

As soon as I neared my destination, I found the whole area separated from the others by a pair of glass doors. VIP Area was written in bold red letters on the glass. Two men in dark uniforms stood on both sides of the door.

Not again!

I remembered Carter's warning about some restrictions.

Mentally groaning, I approached the VIP conference area. The guards straightened, noticing me, their hands blocking the way in.

"Our apologies, miss. But random people aren't allowed here," one of them said in their thick Russian accent.

Random? Who are they calling random?

My brows creased. “I need to go inside. It’s important. And I’m not any random girl wanting access. I’m Emerald Hutton, Achilles Valencian’s girlfriend and a board member.”

“We don’t know you. No matter who you are, no one is allowed to go inside whose name is not on the list. And you’re not on the list we were given.”

What the hell? Not allowed? Were they having a CIA meeting or something?

They were definitely not Ace’s men. Otherwise, they’d have immediately recognized me.

“Listen to me. I need to go in there, please. I need to talk to Achilles about something very urgent. Please, let me go,” I pleaded.

That rude man shook his head. “We’re afraid, we can’t, miss. We have strict orders not to let anyone in until the meeting is over.”

I gritted my teeth in annoyance. “And who gave you the orders?”

“Arthur Valencian.”

Of course. I should’ve known! That fucking leech didn’t want anyone to interrupt the signing. That’s why he put guards here.

I groaned.

What do I do now? They won’t let me in at any cost. I can’t even call Ace.

Damn it!

Wait, Carter must have access.

I looked over my shoulder. There was no sign of him. Where the hell was

he?

Distancing myself a few feet from the guards, I dialed Carter's number. He didn't pick up.

Why isn't he picking up his phone!

As I dialed again, I saw him approaching me with hasty steps, still panting.

"Carter, where the hell were you?" I snapped. "They won't let me in. Please talk to them. You have access, right?"

"I do. But just to deliver these files," he huffed. "I'm sorry, Ms. Hutton. I had to wait for the elevator."

His words went ignored when my eyes found a shadow at the end of the corridor, around the corner. Someone stood there with their phone against their ear, their back facing me.

I knew the person very well.

Arthur.

What was he doing out of the conference room?

"Please tell them to let us in," I said, not moving my eyes from that silver-haired villain.

Nodding, Carter went to the guards. But I stood there, watching Arthur. When he slightly turned his body towards me, I saw his face.

A smirk was stretched across his lips. With malice in his expression, he nodded at something the other person said through the phone.

Without realizing it, my feet moved closer to hear what he was saying to the other person. I managed a good distance not to come into his sight, but enough to hear his words.

“Is everything ready?” he asked, glancing down at his watch.

Then he nodded, old eyes sparkling with malice.

“Stay there. I’m coming.” He turned on his heel and walked away. But not towards the elevator, he turned down a dark corridor.

Who was he meeting here? Was it one of his partners who was involved in all his conspiracies along with Antonio?

I had to know.

“Ms. Hutton?” Carter called out, making me turn to him. “I’m going in, but unfortunately, they won’t let you through. Your name isn’t on the list.”

I cast a swift glance to where Arthur disappeared before saying, “No worries. You go in and give Ace my message. Tell him I’ll meet him in a few. Go stop him. I’ll be back.”

A confusion etched on his features. But before he could ask anything, I pivoted on my heel and followed Arthur, ignoring the way the guards shared a discreet look with each other.

I had a much more important task to do than thinking anything about it. Ace wouldn’t sign if he gets my message and wait for me. I trusted that. But now I had to find out if someone else was with Arthur in his plan to destroy us. Because if we kick him out of our company and life after I expose him before Ace, it wouldn’t be that beneficial for us if he leaves a minion of his behind to continue to betray us.

Today was a very important day for him. He was close to finishing his plan. And if he wasn’t in the conference room and going to meet someone, then it must be something important.

Turning left, I came face to face with a long, wide hallway. A man and

woman were busy in a conversation, but there was no sign of Arthur.

Continuing down the hallway, I took another turn. I knew he came this way because there were no other routes.

But where is he?

Then a distant figure caught my eye.

Still talking on the phone, his silver-head disappeared around the corner. And I followed. Thanks to my sneakers, it didn't announce my presence with loud clicks, like heels would have done.

I stopped in my tracks once he halted before a staircase that led upstairs. But at the foot of the stairs, 'No Entry. Under Maintenance' was written in bold words on a whiteboard, a barricade tape stretched across the way in.

And to my surprise, he ducked down the tape and climbed up the stairs.

Why the hell would he meet someone in a forbidden place?

Of course! So no one can see him.

Should I follow him?

I hesitated. If upstairs was under maintenance, and then no one would be there right now. The workers wouldn't be there at this time.

But...I needed to know. I wouldn't let him do any more chaos.

With a determination surging through me, I put my phone in silent mode and went forward.

Once Ace gets my message, he will call me. And I don't want to get caught while spying on Arthur. Especially when no one will be there for my safety.

I knew this step could cost me a lot, but I would do it for my Ace. I wanted this backstabber out of our lives.

Once I reached the upper floor silently, I kept a good distance from him. His distance murmurs could be heard, along with his heavy footsteps. I glanced around. Compared to the rest of the hotel, this place was covered with dust. And it was eerie. Not to mention the flickering of lights every once in a while.

I froze as he suddenly stopped in his tracks, his shoulders went rigid. My breath caught in my throat as he put the phone down slowly.

Shit!

Just as he started to turn around, I jumped and curled into a ball behind one of the huge flowerpots. My back slammed against the wall, and I slapped a hand over my mouth to cover my whimper.

Silence.

I could hear my heart pounding against my ribcage as I waited for a sound. Sound of his footsteps.

But for some moments, there were none.

Then I heard him taking some steps closer.

No, no, no!

Closing my eyes, I shrunk against the cold wall as he approached. I couldn't get caught.

As I prayed in my mind relentlessly, the blare of his phone echoed throughout the empty hallway.

His footsteps stopped.

“Hello?” His slimy voice reached my ears.

Silence.

And then I heard him again. “Yeah, I’m almost there. Did you bring your

dogs with you?”

Dogs?

“All right, see you in a minute.” His footsteps retreated and slowly faded away.

I let out a sigh of relief.

Coming out from behind the flowerpot, I stood up. That was close. Thank God for his phone call.

I have to be more careful.

But what dogs was he talking about?

Without wasting another second, I tiptoed down the narrow corridor that led to another wide, darker one.

Gulping, I tried to ignore the fear knotting inside my stomach. I felt the pepper spray in my back pocket that I always carried and gripped my phone tighter in my hand. Just in case.

My heart thumped down my chest as I slowly peeked around. No sign of him. The corridor seemed endless, with endless rooms on both sides.

Sweat trickled down my spine as I took slow steps ahead.

Carter should've told Ace by now. Why hasn't he called me yet? I hope he didn't sign the contract.

I looked at the phone to see if there were any missed calls or messages. But there was none. Keeping an eye around, I called Ace. It went unreachable again. With a silent groan, I called Carter.

But it was switched off.

What the hell? What's wrong with his phone now?

I tried again, but to no avail. It went directly to voice message.

Something churned in my stomach. An ominous feeling rolled inside me.

Why were both of their phones off? Ace should've switched on his phone by now. And Carter? He never kept his phone off, nor did he ever let his battery die.

Was everything okay?

And then I heard them. Male voices.

Following the sound, I came to a halt before a room with its door slightly ajar. Though the hallway's light was dimmed, the room was bright enough for me to see every faces clearly.

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SEVENTY: HE DIES...



Six men stood there in the middle of the room. Before Arthur stood a man in his early fifties with short height, dark curly hair and a thin mustache on his upper lip. Four more much younger men stood behind him with the same black clothes the guards wore at the VIP entrance.

They obviously worked for this unknown man and Arthur.

“Congratulations, Mr. Valencian,” the man said in a thick Russian accent. His mustache twitched as a smirk tugged at his dark lips.

“Congratulations to us, Ivanov. After all, it’s the result of both of ours hard work.”

I frowned.

Ivanov? Why did this name sound familiar?

My lips parted in shock. Ivanov, one of the partners of the Russian company Ace was going to sign the deal with.

He was with Arthur? Oh God!

What are they congratulating each other about?

That Russian shook his head. “Nah, I just helped you for the sake of my friendship with Antonio and the promise you gave me. All the planning was yours. And finally, that nephew of yours signed the contract. I was starting to

doubt your plan but seems like your nephew trusts his uncle blindly.”

A silent gasp slipped past my lips. With my hand over my mouth, I stood there, shocked.

Ace signed the contract? But how? I sent Carter to stop him. Didn't get my message?

Shit!

This shouldn't have happened. Why did Ace sign it? He should've waited for me.

Or was I already late? Maybe he signed even before I arrived here?

Failure and disappointment ran through me.

I was right. It was a part of Arthur's master plan. But the sad part was, I couldn't stop it from happening even if I was aware of it.

Ivanov being connected to Antonio didn't surprise me at all. Even when Antonio went down, he left his friend behind to help Arthur with his plan to destroy us.

But what promise did Arthur make to Ivanov that he agreed with his plan?

Whatever it was, it wasn't too late. If I tell Ace everything about them and the deal, he will find a way to deal with it.

Arthur let out a joyous chuckle. “Honestly, even I had a little bit of doubt that he'd agree to sign such a risky contract. One mistake and it can cost his company half a billion. Even though half a billion isn't a big thing for him, but for my plan, I needed him to sign it. He wouldn't have gone for it if he was the same Achilles a few months ago. To escape his haunted past and in the absence of the love of his life he threw himself deep into work. He

concentrated on his business. But now that his Rosebud is in his life again, he turned into a total fool from a shrewd businessman.” He snorted. “All he can think about is fucking that annoying bitch to give attention to his business.”

My fists clenched. Rage boiled through my veins. He was calling Ace a fool because he trusted him?

This bastard!

“But I think it came in handy for our plan. With just a request of mine, he accepted your offer to work with you and made me the head of the contract.”

“Ah, that beautiful young lady—” the Russian twirled the end of his mustache “—I cannot blame your nephew to be so smitten by her. I’ve seen her pictures in newspapers posing beside him. A beauty, I must say.” While I wanted to throw up, he cocked his head, giving Arthur a look of wonder. “Wasn’t she becoming a hindrance in your way? How did you take that wild, sexy cat off your back?”

Arthur’s mouth twisted with disgust. Walking to the small bar across the room, he popped open a bottle and poured some drink in a glass.

“She was. That bitch was all set to expose me before Achilles. She even sent her ex-boyfriend’s detective cousin after me to collect evidence against me.”

Taking a sip of his drink, he turned back to the Russian. A smirk tugged at his lips.

“I threatened her about destroying her precious Ace using his past if she tried to open her mouth. And like I said, fools in love, she believed my fake threats and backed out. She knew about my illegal businesses, even suspiciously went to meet Sierra after she saw me with her, unfortunately. Then she went to meet Liza in the jail. Even though I knew those girls

wouldn't open their mouths, I was pretty sure that bitch found out more than she needed to. And I couldn't let that happen."

As much as I wanted to slap that smirk off his face, he was right. I was a fool to believe him. I thought he really had evidence against Ace. I couldn't take any chances. But the truth was, he didn't have shit against Ace. If he did, he would've given it to Antonio way before Ace grabbed Raymond's neck.

"So that's why you sped up your plans and took action?" Ivanov inquired, raising an amused brow at him. His men stood behind him silently, with their arms crossed over their chests.

Arthur nodded, passing a glass to Ivanov. And he took it gladly.

"Yes. Even if I kept her mouth shut with my fake threat, which I wish was real because I've been trying to get evidence of Achilles accidentally killing my moron brother but got nothing in my hand, I knew she wouldn't keep quiet for long," he said, pursing his lips. "I knew sooner or later, my threats wouldn't affect her and she'd spit out everything to Achilles. So, I sped up my plan and brought you into the picture. Antonio was in no shape to help me in any way."

Ivanov chuckled. "Achilles Valencian isn't that foolish. He wouldn't leave any evidence behind which can harm his reputation in the future. Obviously, you didn't find anything just like Antonio except knowing what happened to your beloved brother."

"Antonio was another fool. I thought he could help me ruin Achilles, but he couldn't do shit except framing Caleb in that drug case. And see where he is now. Suffering on a fucking hospital bed and then will rot behind the bars."

"Yeah, that poor friend of mine. He took Achilles too lightly." Ivanov shook his head. "Anyway, now that Achilles signed the contract, what's

next?”

Arthur shrugged nonchalantly before casting Ivanov a sinister look.

“He dies.”

I froze. My blood ran cold in my veins as my heart stopped. As the words slowly set in my mind, parting my lips I let out a shaky breath, stumbling a step back from the door.

T-they are planning to k-kill Ace?

No! No, no. I won't let that happen. I won't let him do any harm to my Ace. Over my dead body!

My hands shook at my sides with fear and uncontrollable rage. Fear of losing my love and rage to destroy my enemy. My heart pounded down my chest, eyes burnt with tears, but my feet were glued to the ground even if my mind was screaming to go in and kill him or run away and tell Ace everything.

“That I know. But how? You didn't tell me how you were going to pull it off.” Ivanov quirked a brow.

That bastard gulped the remaining drink in one go and placed it on the bar counter. “Simple. He gets into his car for his new home that's a little far from the city and an accident happens in the middle of the road.”

The more I heard, the more I felt my breathing getting heavy. I felt suffocated. Clutching the phone in a death grip in my fist, I listened.

“Ah, an accident would be a nice cover for your heartless strategy,” Ivanov mused. “But I don't understand one thing, even after Achilles dies, how will you get the company? I mean, after him, as your brother's adoptive son, your other nephew, Caleb, gets everything. Even before that, Achilles

made his girlfriend an equal owner of everything he owned. So obviously, Emerald Hutton would be the sole owner of everything after Achilles's death."

Arthur smirked, fixing the collar of his shirt. "Caleb wouldn't be a problem. He's just a puppet under Achilles's hand. He doesn't know shit about how to run a company successfully. So of course, after Achilles's unfortunate, sudden demise, the company would face a disaster. The board members would want another Valencian to take his place. So, once I prove everyone Caleb's worthlessness, the throne would automatically become mine."

Getting out his phone from his pocket, he typed something before putting it back.

"The thing that will work in my favor is the contract. And right now, it's the biggest project they're going to handle. So, to avoid any chances of loss after the owner's death, as I'm the head of the project and know everything from A-Z about the company, the board members are going to want me to take the responsibility. Which I will take gladly. And about Emerald Hutton," he paused, cocking his head. "They're like love birds. If one dies, the other follows. Achilles is the Alpha here, once he's gone, it won't be much of a hassle to get rid of his bitch."

So, this was running in his head all the time? And again, I was right. He wanted the company, everything Ace owned. That leech!

But he was right about one thing. Without my Ace, I wouldn't be able to live. Without him, I'd die even before he would try to do the work himself to get rid of me.

My heart clenched painfully at the thought of him not being in my life.

But I wouldn't let that happen. I'll fail his conspiracy.

“That's why, before getting rid of him, I needed this contract in my hand. Besides, you'll also support me taking Achilles's place before the world. As you're an important client to the Valencian Corp, everyone will respect your wish,” he added.

“And when would I get my share of the pie?” Ivanov asked.

“Right after I take everything as mine, which is my birthright.” The backstabber's face turned cold, hatred laced in his voice. “The right my brother took away from me because he thought I wasn't good enough to be able to run the company beside him, because he thought I'd tarnish the Valencian name due to my reckless, illegal businesses.” Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and looked at Ivanov again. “But I'll get my right back now. And as promised, you'll get 45% of the shares of the company.”

That's what he promised him?

Ivanov flashed a slimy smile. “Now that's what I wanted to hear. I can't wait to watch the news of the famous business tycoon's sudden death all over the news channels.”

I gritted my teeth.

This dream of yours will never come true, you bastard!

I have to tell Ace. I have to stop him before he leaves the hotel.

Wiping the tear that rolled down my cheek, I turned around and ran.

But as if the whole universe was against me, my feet came in contact with a small flower base that was lying on the floor in the darkness, making an unfortunate noise throughout the empty hallway.

Their conversation stopped immediately. As did my heart.

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SEVENTY-ONE: CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT



An eerie silence fell over the ambience for a moment while I stood there frozen. Only the sound of my own heavy breathing reached my ears.

Then I heard footsteps approaching from the other side of the door.

Oh, no! They're coming!

I need to hide! I wouldn't be able to run from them. They'd catch me if I ran.

Looking around frantically, I searched for a place to hide.

Rushing to the one of the doors, I tried to open it without making a noise. But to my utter bad luck, it was locked. I tried another, but to no avail. They were locked.

No, no, no! I can't get caught! I can't! I need to inform Ace about his plan.

My heart pounded under my rib cage as I went to the opposite side of the hallway and pushed on a door. And this time, it opened.

Almost letting out a sob of relief, I rushed in and quickly closed the door behind me, as silently as I could. The sound of doors being slammed open and their shoes hitting the floor harshly made me flinch.

They didn't utter a word, but I could tell they were surveying the area.

Then I heard a voice, a cold thick Russian accent. "Search around."

I gulped. Sweat rolled down my spine. With trembling knees and hands, I stood against the door with my back pressed against it.

Once several footsteps split up, the sound of doorknobs being jiggled, the doors being opened and closed reached my ears. Stopping myself from freaking out, I tried Ace's phone again. But it was still unreachable!

Damn it! Why isn't he switching on his phone?

"There's no one on this side." I heard one of them saying.

They must be the guards. Because neither Arthur nor Ivanov's voice could be heard.

"Try this side. He or she must be still lurking around. They couldn't have escaped in just a matter of seconds," the cold voice stated. "Search every room. If the door is locked from inside, break it."

My heart dropped.

My knees wobbled as I heard them opening and closing the doors. The ones are locked from outside, maybe they were left alone. Because I didn't hear them breaking down any.

But they will soon.

With shaky hands, I typed a message to Ace, even though he wouldn't see it anytime soon.

Ace, don't leave the hotel! Please, I beg you! Your life is in danger. It's Arthur. Please check my voice messages! And I'm here, in Diamond Valley. I need your help! Please call me as soon as you switch on your phone!

With tears rolling down my eyes, my throat clogging up, I tried my best

not to let out a sob out of fear and anxiety.

I slapped my hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming as I heard footsteps outside my door.

“Did you check this one?” the same cold voice asked.

“No. These three rooms are left,” answered another voice.

Then there was nothing. The other men continued to search around. No one tried to open my door, but I knew he was there.

My heart pounded in my chest so hard that I feared they would hear it. His footsteps came closer, right outside the door.

My eyes closed, letting the tears roll down my cheeks. Biting on my hand, I covered my cries. Praying continuously to God in my mind not to let them find me, I hugged my body, falling on the floor, curling into a ball.

I needed to go out. I needed to go to my Ace. I needed to save him.

More tears fell as helplessness filled my chest.

I didn't know if I'd be alive to be able to tell him anything.

The doorknob jiggled, making me jolt.

With eyes wide in fear, tears blurring my vision, I watched the door in horror.

No, no, no! God, please!

Then came another.

Just as I closed my eyes, shrinking away from the door, Arthur's voice cut in.

“Easy there, boys. There's no one. Don't worry, maybe some curious cat passed by.” His voice was nonchalant. “Let's go now. We're getting late.

You guys need to reach the spot before Achilles does. Come on!”

With that, two pairs of footsteps walked away, followed by the others. And after a moment, I heard that man also moving away from the door and then leaving.

Slumping against the door, I let out a relieved sigh. Thank God!

Then I jumped to my feet and rushed out of the door.

I need to stop Ace before he leaves. I have to hurry up!

I waited for five minutes with all my inner strength. I knew I had to run to Ace, but I had to wait for Arthur and his people to leave this floor.

In the meantime, I tried to call Carter again, but to no avail.

Where the hell is he?

I didn't have Ace's guard's phone numbers. There was no one I could call right now who could help me stop Ace.

Waiting long enough for them to leave this floor, I rushed down the hallway, remembering my way back to the staircase. The corridors were so long it took almost a lifetime to pass one.

Without stopping my legs, I called Tobias. Maybe he could help me in any way.

After some rings, just as he received the call, my phone was snatched from my hand.

Halting abruptly, I looked over my shoulder.

My breath caught in my throat, and a gasp slipped from my lips.

Standing before me were two of the guards who were with Arthur and Ivanov.

“Going somewhere, Ms. Hutton? You seemed to be in a rush,” the man with the same cold voice from earlier said. With an ugly scar running down from his left brow to his cheek, he towered over me with his huge body. Dark eyes stared at me without any emotion.

Breathing heavily, I took a step back and turned around to run. But another two were already standing there, blocking my way.

My eyes widened as my hands curled into fists.

No, no, no! This isn't happening!

When I tried to walk past them, they pushed me back.

“Let me go!” I hissed. They knew I was here. They were waiting for me to come out. They set a trap for me, and I got stuck in it.

One of the guards before me smirked. “We will, but to heaven, not anywhere else.”

A chill ran down my spine. With my throat parched, I gulped.

“L-listen to me. I have nothing to do with you. So let me go,” I stuttered out.

“Right, we have nothing to do with you,” the man with the scar said, making me turn to him. “But our boss does. If you were so eager to leave, you shouldn't have come here in the first place. There's a saying, ‘Curiosity killed the cat.’ It became true for you.”

Maybe a curious cat passed by.

I remembered his words.

Fear rushed through me.

He knew. He knew I was here. But then why didn't he do anything about it?

I let out a shaky breath. “P-please let me go. You won’t gain anything by killing me. My Ace will kill you. Y-you don’t know him.” I licked my lips. “But if you let me go, I’ll give you more money than Arthur offered you. Please.”

As if my words didn’t even reach his ears, he got out his phone from his pocket. “Before you die, the boss wants to give you his greetings.”

I stared at the phone in his hand.

Gulping again, I shook my head, turned around, and pushed the guards away. But as soon as I started to run, I was pulled back harshly by my hair.

I whimpered at the pain that shot through my scalp.

“Fucking suka! Don’t test my patience! Don’t make me make your death painful. So just do as I say!” Shoving the phone to my ear, he hissed, “Talk!”

Tears streamed down my face, my hands trembled as I held the phone against my ear. “H-hello.”

“Ah, Emerald, my dear.” His mocking voice came through the phone. Even hearing his voice, rage and hatred boiled through my veins. “Didn’t I tell you to stay out of my way? You clearly didn’t take my warning to your head. Now see what you’ve done. You followed me and got trapped. I thought I would get rid of you slowly after I was done with your boyfriend, but see, I had to change my plans again for your stubbornness. Now I have to kill you first.”

“You knew I was following you,” I stated, hatred laced my tone.

A malicious chuckle. “Of course, I knew. You think I didn’t notice you? My vision hasn’t gotten get that old yet. I saw you behind me, but I still let you come and listen to our conversation.”

“Then why didn’t you catch me earlier?” I spit out. The grip on my hair tightened, making me gasp in pain.

“To make you suffer. I wanted you to feel the fear of me and suffer a little before you died, Emerald dear,” he replied. “And I thought to do you a favor and let you know everything before you leave all of us forever. At least I could do that for my beloved nephew’s Rosebud. I knew you couldn’t escape because I already told my men to wait for you at the exit of that floor. You did notice me doing something on my phone, didn’t you?”

I remembered. He was messaging someone while talking to Ivanov. So he was giving instructions to his men?

“You’re not getting anything out of it, Arthur! You won’t be able to harm Ace. I won’t let you touch a single strand of his hair!” I screamed through the phone, trying to fight off that man.

“Goodbye, Emerald. Don’t worry, I’m sending your Ace to you to heaven soon. You can live there together forever because, unfortunately, you won’t be able to do that in this world.”

“You bastard! I will kill you!” I thrashed in that man’s hold, and in return, he smacked me across my face, sending me to the ground.

A cry left my lips as the world spun around me, blood rushing to my head.

“Yes, boss,” he said, pressing the phone to his ear. Nodding, he glanced down at me with cold, merciless eyes. “Don’t worry, we won’t leave any evidence behind.”

With wide eyes, I stared at him in shock. Panic rattled inside me as he cut the phone call and got a gun out of his back pocket, holding it directly at me.

“No,” I whispered, backing away from the gun. My stomach churned as I

glanced at the cold, deadly nozzle. My heart pounded in my chest.

“Goodbye, Ms. Hutton. See you in the hell.” He curled his finger around the trigger. A deafening sound boomed across the hallway.

Letting out a scream, I fell to the ground with my arms before my face.

A pain shot through my back, the spinning in my head only increased. But it wasn't as severe as I thought a bullet's hit would be.

I didn't feel any piercing pain in any parts of my body.

A thump before me made me open my eyes.

The man with the scar was lying on his chest on the floor, right before my feet, in the pool of his own blood.

Before I could understand anything, gun fires started across the hallway. Chaos rose around as the other guards kept firing at the direction my back faced while trying to save themselves from the incoming bullets.

I screamed at the ear-piercing sounds, covering my ears with my hands. Tears rushed down my face, heart thumped in my chest. I shook as I curled into a ball on the floor, trying to stay away from the bullets.

The air filled with smoke and the smell of gunpowder, making me cough.

The floor vibrated under me as body after body dropped. After some hisses and yells, cries of agony, the firing finally stopped.

Lifting my head, I surveyed the area. Three of the guards were dead. Red blood soaked the carpet, turning it into crimson.

I watched the sight before me in horror. I couldn't move. For a moment, I couldn't even hear anything. Though I could feel the fast racing of my heartbeat.

Then footsteps reached me. A pair of polished shoes came into my vision.

“Jesus, Emerald! Are you all right?” A familiar deep voice, laced with an Italian accent, made me look up.

Duncan De Sylvano.

His alert, icy blue eyes watched me in concern.

“Emerald? You okay there? Are you hurt?” he asked. “Don’t worry, we’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

When I didn’t say anything, he shook my shoulder.

“Emerald? You hear me? You all right?”

My eyes snapped up to him, finally realizing my surroundings. Five men stood behind him. They saved me...

Ace?

Panic washed over me as I remembered what Arthur’s plan was.

With my breath caught in my throat, I grabbed my phone and jumped to my feet, swaying a little afterward. Duncan tried to hold me, but I was in too much rush to wait.

The only thing ran through my mind was reaching Ace.

Tears blurred my vision as I ran.

“Emerald, wait! Where are you going?”

Ignoring him, I rushed to the floor the conference room was on. The guards weren’t there anymore. Even the lights were off.

I shook my head. No, God, please. Please don’t let him leave yet.

Getting in the elevator, I hurried down to the ground floor. People threw glances at my disarranged state. But I didn’t care. I needed to find him. My Ace.

Scanning the lobby, I didn't find him anywhere. I wiped my cheeks and dialed his number again. But again, it went directly to the voicemail.

Damn it!

I pulled at my hair, not knowing what to do. My knees were still wobbly, and my heart still raced from almost facing death.

"Ms. Hutton?"

I turned around. Carter rushed towards me, limping, with an equally disheveled state as me.

"Carter! Where the hell were you? I called you so many times! Where is your phone?" I snapped, walking closer to him. "I told you to stop Ace. Why the hell didn't you tell him anything? He fucking signed the contract!"

I didn't know what I was saying. I only felt desperation and fear. The only thing on my mind was keeping him safe.

"Ms. Hutton, I'm sorry. I don't know why, but after you left, those guards grabbed me, took my phone and locked me in a room," he said, eyes wide in shock. "I tried to fight them, but they were too strong. By the time a hotel staff heard me and let me out, I was too late. The meeting was already over, and everyone left."

Nothing he said reached me, as all I could hear were the last two words he said.

My stomach dropped. Blood drained from my face.

Everyone left?

"W-where is Ace?" I asked. "He didn't leave, did he? He—"

"He also left, Ms. Hutton. The manager told me the boss and Mr. Balakin left in his car."

I stumbled back. My blood ran cold as I gasped.

Tears blurred my vision as I shook my head. I felt everything crashing down on me. I couldn't breathe.

No. I couldn't let anything happen to him. I will keep him safe. I won't let him die.

"Ms. Hutton—"

"Give me your car keys!"

"Keys? But why—"

"I said give it to me!"

Once he hurriedly took out his keys and handed them over to me, I turned around, and rushed towards the exit.

"Ms. Hutton, wait!"

"Emerald!" I heard Duncan's voice called out.

But I didn't stop. I needed to go. I didn't know what I was going to do. My mind wasn't working. The only thing I knew was I needed to reach him.

"Send me Mr. Balakin's number!" I yelled over my shoulder as I ran to Carter's car. Getting in, I drove away as fast as I could.

Ace's phone was switched off, but Mr. Balakin was with him. Hopefully he had his phone with him.

I didn't know if Mr. Balakin was working with Arthur, too. But if he was, what was he doing with Ace in his car?

Weaving in and out of traffic, I pressed the horn when a car didn't move out of my way. I didn't know when Ace left the hotel. I had no freaking idea how far they've gone. I didn't even know if he was going directly to our new mansion.

A frustrated sob left my mouth as I hit the steering wheel. I couldn't prevent the signing and now I couldn't stop him from leaving the hotel. I never felt so helpless and weak before. My heart clenched in fear. Fear of losing him.

What if Arthur succeeds in his plan? What if I really lose—

With my eyes prickling with tears, I drove as fast as possible.

I won't let that happen.

I went down the road that led to our home.

Arthur planned to make Ace's car meet an accident while he would be going home. And Ace did promise that he'd go home as soon as the meeting finished. And he never broke his promises.

I had a feeling he was heading this way.

My phone blared in the car. My heart skipped thinking it might be him. But then I saw an unknown number flashing over the screen.

Maybe it was Carter?

I picked it up.

“Carter? Why didn't you send me the number yet?”

“Emerald, it's me, Duncan. Wherever you're going, stop. I'm coming to get you. You—”

“Where is Carter? I told him to send me Mr. Balakin's number! I need to talk to Ace, doesn't he understand?”

A curse left my lips as a car suddenly came into my lane. Moving the phone away from my ear, I turned right, barely avoiding a hit.

When I put the phone in my ear back, I heard him asking if I was all right through the phone.

“I’m fine. Please tell Carter to send me the number. I need to call Ace, Duncan. He’s in danger! Arthur is planning to kill him. Please help me. Give me Mr. Balakin’s phone number!”

The knot of fear and anxiety only became worse in my chest.

Where are you, Ace? Just stay safe.

“Emerald, listen to me. Stop wherever you’re going. Ace is going to be all right—”

“You don’t understand!” I snapped, frustrated. “He’s in danger—”

My phone buzzed.

Checking it, I found a message from an unknown number.

Desperately, as I opened the message, a small text awaited me.

You got lucky. But he didn’t.

I stomped on the brake. The car came to the screeching stop in the middle of the street. Something churned in my stomach. An ill feeling rose in my throat.

My mobile vibrated again. This time, a video message.

With trembling fingers, I played the video.

It was a video shot from a distance. Across the open field, a car passed through the empty street.

Ragged breath came out of me. My palms turned clammy as perspiration rolled down my forehead. My heart pounded in my chest.

I knew the car very well.

A huge truck sped through the field out of nowhere and drove directly to the black car, hitting it from the side. With the severity of the hit, the car

flipped and rolled over the road, the center of it got crushed with the blow. A fire immediately set on the back. Black smoke surrounded the car.

My heart stopped. Breath caught in my throat. The mobile slipped from my hands as I went numb.

A feeling of nothingness swept over me.

My world spun, and my vision blurred while a deafening silence rang in my ears as darkness slowly consumed me.

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SEVENTY-TWO: THE MASTER PLAN



*A*cross the open field, a black car I knew all too well passed through the empty road.

Then a truck sped through the field, going directly to the car.

I tensed. The rate of my heartbeat peaked. I had to stop it.

But when I opened my mouth to yell his name, nothing came out. My body didn't move. Panic set in when I attempted to open my eyes, but they didn't move either.

I watched as the truck neared the car at full speed. It was going to hit it!

A desperation to stop it rolled inside, making me restless. I wanted to move, but my body was paralyzed. I couldn't move no matter how much I wanted to.

I wanted to scream, thrash, to be set free from whatever that held me back. I wanted to stop that truck. But all I could do was watch as the truck hit the car with such force that it flew across the road, flipping over, a fire immediately set on it.

"Ace!" I shot my eyes open, my vision blurred with tears. "No! No, no! Ace! Please no!" Jolting up, I tried to get up, but a pair of arms held me back as I thrashed in their hold.

I didn't know where I was. I couldn't see or hear anything. All I could think about and see was the accident. The horrible car accident, the same car my Ace was in.

"Ace needs me! He needs me! Let me go!" I screamed, continuing fighting.

"Rosebud, Rosebud, calm down! I'm here. I'm here with you, baby, just calm down!" A voice reached my ears, but I couldn't concentrate on it.

"Let me go! My Ace needs me! Please—"

"Rosebud, look at me!" Cupping my face, he made me look at him.

"No..." My voice caught in my throat as his stormy gray eyes met mine. They held concern and the same affection they always bore for me there.

Then I realized where I was.

I was in the arms of my Ace.

"Ace..." a whisper left my lips, eyes not moving from his beautiful face.

He nodded, kissing my forehead. "Yes, baby. Your Ace, I'm here with you. I'm fine, and so are you. Everything is all right now, sweetheart. Calm down. Everything is fine."

"You... you're here. You're here with me. You're all right." Touching his face, shoulder, and chest to make my heart believe that he was really there, I let out a sob and wrapped my arms around him.

Taking me in the cocoon of his arms, he held me close, nuzzling my neck.

"I thought I lost you! I... I was so scared. I-I saw the video, I..." I stuttered in between my sobs.

But the tightness of my chest was slowly dissipating as I had him in my arms.

He was safe. Alive. I didn't lose him.

Clutching him closer to me, I hid my head in his chest. His intoxicating scent filled my nostrils, soothing my chaotic mind. I took some more greedy inhales.

"I'd never leave you, baby. Never ever. I'm here with you. I didn't go anywhere. You know I can't leave my Rosebud alone." Tightening his arms around me, he rubbed his hand over my back gently. His deep voice murmuring in the crook of my neck was like an ice to my burning soul.

With my lips trembling, more tears fell. I pressed my lips against his chest. "Promise me you'll never leave me again like that."

"I promise. I'll never leave you alone again, Rosebud. I swear to you that." Determination ran deep in his tone. The way his grip only tightened, and his shoulders were stiff, I could tell everything that happened equally bothered him as much as it did to me.

But I was too tired to think about anything else. Latching onto his words, I closed my eyes and slumped against him, taking a deep breath. It felt like I finally found oxygen after such a long time.

He was here with me...

I didn't want to think of what happened earlier. I was exhausted. Mentally, physically, and emotionally. Now that my Ace was in my arms, I wanted to sleep.

"Don't leave me..." I murmured as my eyelids became heavy.

"I won't. Sleep, baby. I'll be right here when you wake up," I heard him murmuring before exhaustion completely engulfed me.

* * *

HE KEPT HIS PROMISE. The next time I opened my eyes, I found his strong arms wrapped around me while he kept me against his chest. We were on our bed.

His gentle strokes through my hair and possessive grip over my waist had me sigh in content.

Sensing me awake, he looked down at me. “Rosebud?”

The husky and rough texture of his voice sounded pleasing to my ears.

I thought I’d never be able to hear his voice again...

My heart clenched painfully. Tears burned my eyes as the ominous memories flooded my mind.

“Rosebud? What happened, baby?” A crease set between his brows as he moved me slightly and sat up, placing me on his lap. “Did you have a nightmare again?”

I shook my head, sniffing. “I just...”

“Listen to me, Rosebud.” Cupping my cheeks, he locked our gazes. “I’m here with you, aren’t I? Nothing happened to me, baby. I’m absolutely fine and alive, without a scratch.”

“B-but how? I watched that video. The way that truck hit the car, the severity of it...” I shook my head, closing my eyes. Goosebumps crawled up my arms at the recollection of the sight.

“I know. But I wasn’t in the car, baby. I got out mid-way. So unfortunately for them, they couldn’t succeed in their plan.”

My eyes snapped open. “Y-you know who did it? Who was behind the conspiracy?”

A muscle of his jaw ticked. Gray eyes flashed with wrath. “Very well.

I've known it for a long time now."

I gasped.

"You knew? You knew Arthur was planning to kill you?" Something inside me burned with fire.

He knew everything? Why didn't he do anything about it? Why did he let him do all this shit?

He shook his head, rubbing his hand over my back. As if he was aware of my suddenly dark mood.

"I didn't know what he was exactly going to do until this morning. I found out about his whole plan after the meeting, when he went to meet Ivanov once the contract was signed," he explained.

"Then why didn't you do anything about it? Why did you let this happen?" I asked, perplexed. He shouldn't have signed the contract and got into his car if he knew Arthur was betraying him. "And what do you mean by the whole plan? How do you know Arthur went to meet Ivanov?"

Endless questions swirled around my head, but I had no answers.

"You remember when we had a board meeting about someone leaking information about our company and working with Antonio?"

I nodded.

"I had a hunch it was someone from inside, someone very close to us, just as you said in the meeting. And after the drug incident, I was sure of it. I knew Liza couldn't do that alone. To know that the CCTV camera outside of the Valencian mansion wasn't working was possible for only the people from inside the house. Or someone who regularly visited." His hand ran up and down my leg, making me realize that I was in one of his T-shirts, not in my

morning clothes.

He must've changed my clothes.

“The people who worked there were our old and loyal staff. I knew they wouldn't betray us, but still, I had a close observation of their activities. And they came out clean. Tess wouldn't do that to Caleb, either. So that left Arthur.” He met my gaze. “I didn't want to doubt him, as he had a huge favor on me by handling my company in my absence years ago. I had no idea of his running illegal businesses in the UK until I got a call from the cops.”

I frowned. “Cops?”

He nodded. “Yes. After the drug incident, I had Antonio investigated discreetly. And the man I hired was a police officer. He was involved in the case. According to his report, the drugs that were found in Caleb's car were from a drug dealer whose shark client was Antonio. He got them from that man. It was a very expensive kind of drug that only this drug dealer supplied to the states through Antonio. It was Antonio's foolishness to use the same drugs to frame Caleb. And once looked closely into it, the drug dealer was connected to a company based in the UK. And guess who was the owner of the company?”

With my eyes wide, I whispered, “Arthur.”

“Yes,” he hissed. “It was him who actually delivered drugs to Antonio. He just used that man to run his business while remaining in the shadows.” He gritted his teeth. “The cops weren't supposed to investigate further after knowing about Antonio's involvement. But to stop the drug supply in the states, they dug out that man's history to grab his neck. And when they found out about Arthur, they immediately informed me. But I asked them not to take action against that man and Arthur right away, as I didn't want them to

get alert.”

“But why did you do that? If they had arrested him earlier, this wouldn’t have happened today. You could die!” My voice rose with each word.

His shoulders went rigid. “So could you. If I had known he was going to go after you even after knowing what I had done to Antonio, I’d have killed him even before he could think about harming you.” There was a storm brewing in his gray orbs that indicated someone’s demise. Arthur’s demise. “You were nowhere near my plan to catch him red-handed. But still, to be sure you were miles away from him while I executed my plan, I kept the guards outside. But you still left, and I had no fucking idea of what danger you were in. If it wasn’t for Duncan…”

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath.

I ran my hand over his chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what was running in your head. I didn’t know about your plan. All I knew was I needed to stop you from signing the contract. I knew Arthur was going to do something.”

“You shouldn’t have gone after him to that floor. Especially when you had no one there to protect you. What were you thinking?”

Duncan must’ve told him what happened out there.

The edge of his voice told me he wanted to snap or yell, but he suppressed his anger not to raise his voice on me.

“I wasn’t thinking,” I admitted. “I know it was stupid of me. But I wanted to know who his partner in crime was. If you had told me earlier about your plan, then I wouldn’t have done that. But like always, you didn’t feel the need to tell me anything.”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t know you were aware of his double crossing. I didn’t want to stress you out. I’m sorry. But

why didn't you tell me you had doubts about him? When did you find out?"

I shrugged. "Well, I didn't like him from the beginning. There was always something in his eyes whenever he looked at me. A negativity. And then I saw him with Sierra."

He cocked his head at the side. "Who?"

"One of your employees. She was Liza's close friend." Then I explained everything to him, from seeing Sierra with Arthur in the hotel garden, to him threatening me. Well, except the fact that I took Warner's help. I didn't want to ruin his mood more than it already was.

He stiffened. Those gray eyes flashed as his nostrils flared. "He threatened you?" His voice came out low, danger laced with each word. Grabbing my shoulders, he asked, "Did he hurt you? Did he try to do anything?"

I shook my head. "He didn't hurt me. He just tried to scare me by using your past. And thinking he might have something against you for real, I kept quiet. That's why I wanted to know everything so desperately to find out if he really had anything against you. But when you finally disclosed your past to me, I knew that even though he knew something related to that night, he didn't have any evidence. And when I decided to tell you everything in the morning, you weren't there. You already left for the meeting."

His jaw clenched. "You should've told me earlier, Rosebud."

I placed my head on his chest. "I was scared to ruin what we had by telling you something against your uncle, who was so close to you without any strong proof. I didn't want to create more rifts between us. I thought you wouldn't believe me."

He kissed my head. "There's no one in the world I trust more than you."

You're my world, Rosebud. Why would you think I wouldn't believe you?"

"I thought you trusted him blindly. And when I finally decided to tell you after Liza's confirmation, his threat stopped me. I just wanted to be sure if he really had something against you before telling you everything. Because I feared that if I would tell you about him, you being you wouldn't be able to control your rage and confront him about it. And that would lead him to use your past against you. I know it's stupid. But I didn't want to take any chance."

"I'd have killed him for threatening you like that," he hissed, his tone was deep.

"That's why I didn't tell you. I wanted to sort everything out before taking any steps. If you had told me everything, then all this wouldn't happen in the first place." I glanced up at him. "Why did you stop the cops from arresting them, anyway?"

"Because I wanted to punish them by myself. I wanted to make them believe they were winning and then watch their own fall with their own eyes, especially when they were on the verge of winning." Venom dripped from his voice. "Nothing hurts more when you lose after having all the confidence that you were going to win."

He played with my hair as I listened to him silently.

"After getting out of the jail, Antonio thought nothing would happen to him again. But he was wrong. I couldn't let him live peacefully when he tried to hurt my Rosebud. So, I destroyed him to pieces this time. This time, no one in the world can save him from his doom. And today was Arthur's turn. I knew he was going to do something after the final signing. And I was just waiting for him to take the step so I could grab him by his neck and catch him

red-handed, ruining him with his own strategy.”

“You said you knew he was going to meet Ivanov. How? And when did Antonio try to hurt me?”

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SEVENTY-THREE: A JEALOUS MAN



*H*is pupils darkened in rage. “You remember the accident when we were returning from the house I bought for us? The first time I took you there?”

My eyes widened. “H-he was behind it?”

He nodded, a muscle of his jaw ticked. “It was him. Even though I was his target, he shouldn’t have involved you in this.”

I let out a breath.

So that was the reason behind his intense hatred towards Antonio. That’s why he was so mad at Tess’s wedding when Antonio came to meet me.

“When Arthur brought up the Russian’s offer to me, his desperation for me to sign it and let him become the head of this project had me suspicious. So, I had his phone tapped. To know what was brewing in his shrewd head. And I was right. I found out about his intention for the project while he discussed it with Ivanov on the phone. But as cunning as he was, he never unfolded his whole plan to him. Until this morning, when everything in his path was clear for him to go ahead.”

But he did tell Ivanov about killing him. Ivanov knew it except being aware of how Arthur was going to pull it off.

“You knew he was going to kill you after the signing? I thought you told me you weren’t aware of it.”

“I knew, but I didn’t know how he was going to do it. What his exact plan was. But I found out about his stupid master plan when he was with Ivanov this morning. We were listening to everything he was saying from the conference room.”

“We?” I raised my brow.

“Me, Duncan and Mr. Balakin.”

“Duncan and Mr. Balakin?” I was shocked. They knew everything? That explained why Duncan was there.

He gave a nod. “It was Duncan who I asked to tap Arthur’s phone. Besides being a successful businessman, that bastard is also an expert with computers, hacking and all. He also did something to Arthur’s phone for us to hear every conversation when his phone was with him, even when he wasn’t on a phone call. As he is a partner in some of my companies, when I told him about Arthur, he was more than willing to throw that leech out of the business.”

Though he showed that he didn’t really like Duncan, I knew they were good friends.

“When Arthur was planning to get rid of me, Ivanov also wanted Balakin out of his way to have their company all to himself. When I made him listen to Arthur and Ivanov’s conversation, he agreed to help us. I knew the contract would be beneficial for both of us, so I wanted the contract, but without Arthur’s plan in it. And Mr. Balakin wanted the same. So, he agreed to sign the contract as per their plan. Not for their benefit, but for our gain. And it would also let Arthur believe he was winning. So he would play his next

move and face defeat.”

Suddenly his demeanor changed, those strong shoulders of his tensed.

“When I left in my car with Mr. Balakin as per their plan and Duncan stayed back to keep an eye on them until they left the hotel, I found out you were there.” His breathing came out deep as he tightened his hold on me. His eyes watched me as if he feared I’d disappear at any moment. “Duncan sent a recording of Arthur’s phone call to Mr. Balakin’s phone where he was talking to you and then giving orders to his dog to...kill you.”

I ran my fingers through his hair to calm him down, pressing my forehead against his.

“You don’t know how I felt at that moment, Rosebud.” He gulped, staring into my eyes. The redness in his eyes and the moisture in there made my heart clench. “I felt my heart stop beating the moment I heard him giving orders to kill you. I...”

I squeezed his hand. “I know. I’m sorry, even I was scared. Terrified actually. I thought I could sneak out quietly before they would even notice me, but unfortunately, they did. Thank God Duncan got there at the right time.”

“It should have been me. I should’ve been there to protect you rather than trying to proceed with my plan to defeat him. I should’ve protected the most precious person in my life. But...” His hands curled into fists. “I failed. I failed to protect you.”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself for that! It was my fault, I took that risk. You put those guards outside the house to keep me safe. But it was me who didn’t listen to them. So, whose fault is it? Mine. Stop torturing you for something you didn’t do, again.”

He shook his head, his eyes held pain. “I should’ve known you were there. I should’ve listened to your voice messages and picked up your calls. But my phone was fucking dead! I forgot to charge it last night. It’s my fucking fault!” He slammed his fist against the headboard of the bed.

I gasped. “Ace! Stop! I said it wasn’t your fault. And nothing happened to me, right? I’m fine. It was my stupidity that I followed Arthur without taking anyone with me.”

“But anything could have happened! I could have...” His jaw ticked. “I could’ve lost you. If Duncan hadn’t reached there in time...”

I cupped his face, kissing his forehead. “But he did. I’m all right now. You couldn’t have known I wouldn’t listen to the guards and leave. Stop blaming yourself,” I murmured. “Anyway, what happened then? What happened after you heard the recording?”

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, calming himself down.

“I got out of the car and went back to the hotel as soon as possible. But Mr. Balakin wanted to continue it. He was eager to see the shell-shocked face when his partner would get arrested after he realized how badly their conspiracy failed,” he replied. His shoulders were still tense.

“But I saw the car getting hit by the truck. Was he in the car when...”

He shook his head. “No. He and the driver also got out of the car, turning the autopilot mode on a few minutes before they reached the spot Arthur’s men were waiting for us.”

Taking his shaking fists in my hands, I uncurled them and kissed both of his palms.

“How did I get home?”

“When I reached the hotel, you already left with Carter’s car. And after following your phone’s location, we found some people moving you out of the car because you lost consciousness, stopping in the middle of the road. Then I got you home.” He caressed my cheek. “Are you okay, Rosebud?” Concern and regret echoed in his voice. I knew how the thought that he couldn’t be there to protect me was torturing him. And knowing him, he’d continue to blame himself, no matter what I said.

I nodded. “I am.”

His hard eyes fell on my cheek. “You’re hurt.” His jaw ticked. “Who did this to you?”

“One of the guards. He’s dead now. I’m fine, don’t worry.” I assured him.

“I promise, Rosebud. Arthur will beg for death, but he won’t get it. He will suffer for the rest of his life. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Where is he right now?”

“Behind the bars.”

My brows shot up in surprise.

“After the accident, he and Ivanov went to the spot to be sure we were dead. They wanted confirmation before they cheered over their success. That’s when Balakin got there with the cops and caught them in the act before providing the cops with the phone recordings.”

“Damn, I missed the look on Arthur’s face. It must have been worth watching,” I muttered.

That got a small chuckle from him. “So did I. I was waiting to see that look in his eyes. But I had much more important things to do than being there. I needed to bring my Rosebud back into my arms.”

Sighing, I snuggled against his chest again. “I’m glad he’s finally behind the bars, and out of our lives.”

“It’s just the start of his punishment, baby. A painful future is waiting for him.”

After a long time, I finally felt light. As if a huge burden had lifted off my chest. I no longer felt the suffocation of Arthur’s threat dangling over my neck. He was finally out of our lives.

Stroking my arm, he asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m relieved he’s finally out of our lives. I just hope he never returns.”

“He won’t. He’s going to rot in the jail for the rest of his life.”

“Good. That’s what I want. Make sure he suffers.”

“My queen’s wish is my command.”

I smiled, looking up at him. “I love you.”

He leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. “I love you more.”

Pulling away, he tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. “Your family is waiting downstairs for you. Do you want to see them now? If not, I’ll just tell them to come see you later.”

I sat straight. “You mean Mom and Dad? When did they arrive?”

“The moment they heard what happened to you. Even Tess and Caleb returned from their honeymoon, cutting it short.”

“How did they know about it?”

“Tobias told them. He got your call this morning but couldn’t talk to you. He heard what happened. Those guards didn’t cut the call.” His voice hardened again.

Oh! I remembered calling him, hoping he could help me in some way.

“Wait, they’re already here? So soon? How long was I asleep?”

“It’s past eleven at night.”

I gasped. “I slept for that long? Why didn’t you wake me up?”

He kissed my forehead. “You needed sleep. Don’t worry about it. If you need to rest more, I can tell them to come tomorrow morning.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m fine. Let’s go downstairs.”

* * *

“MOM, I’m all right. Don’t cry,” I told her for the umpteenth time, but her tiny arms wouldn’t leave me as she kept shedding tears on my shoulder.

“You don’t tell me what to do, young lady! You almost gave us a heart attack today!” she snapped, sniffing. “You don’t put yourself in danger and then expect me not to freak out.”

I shook my head, looking at Dad for help. But he only watched me with displeasure. After I got an earful from Dad, Tobias, Tess, and Cassie, I was now in the clutch of Mom. She wouldn’t leave me for a second.

“Knock some more sense into her head. Because she suddenly got a habit of being overly brave nowadays.” My best friend narrowed her eyes at me.

“I knew she was going to do something. I told her not to get herself into any mess, but she didn’t listen.” This time, it was my brother.

“And yet you didn’t care to tell me what was running through her head about Arthur?” Ace glared at Tobias.

My brother scratched the back of his head. “Well, I didn’t think it was that serious.”

“That’s the problem. You never think anything. If you had told me, then I

could have talked to her. But you just carelessly let it go! Do you have any idea what could have happened today?” Tess accused.

“Hey! I said I didn’t know it was going to be this serious. I also thought Arthur was a good man like the rest of you.”

“That man! I’ll strangle him if I get my hands on him for doing that to my baby girl,” Mom hissed, pulling me more into her hug.

“Yes. And I will assist you in that!” Cassie joined.

“Mom! I can’t breathe!” I complained.

On the other hand, my man shifted from one leg to another, eyes set on me. With a creased forehead, his hands clenched and unclenched. Irritation laced across his hard features.

Then finally, his patience snapped.

“All right, now, Mrs. Hutton. It’s time to feed her something.” He gently pulled me from Mom’s chest to his, immediately wrapping his arms around me.

Only then I felt him relaxing against me. As if it was a torture for him not to touch me even for a few seconds. He hasn’t left my side for a second after I gained my consciousness.

“You okay?” he asked while our family planned how they were going to punish Arthur.

Smiling, I nodded. “Now that you’re with me, I am.”

Pressing a lingering kiss on my forehead, he nuzzled my hair.

“Are you okay?” I looked into his stormy gray irises. They were still dark, swirling like a concealed volcano.

I knew what storm was running inside him. But for my sake, he stayed

calm. But I knew he wouldn't for long. I saw what he did to Antonio. I just hoped he would at least leave Arthur's life. No matter how much I hated that man, I didn't want his hands to be tainted with Arthur's blood.

He just nodded.

I sighed. "Just don't kill him, all right?"

His dark orbs just stared at me silently, without saying anything.

As I opened my mouth, Mom's voice cut in.

"Let's go have dinner. It's late. Then we'll leave. My baby needs more rest."

Taking my hand in hers, she dragged me behind her to feed me the food she made for everyone while I was sleeping.

As much as he didn't like so many people in his home, he didn't seem to complain. All he did was just keep me within his touch and stare at me. Or grunt if one of our family members took me away from him for a moment.

After the dinner once everyone left, promising to visit tomorrow morning, we were left alone again.

"You want to go to the gym?" I asked as we sat on the balcony, watching the starlit night. He told me to go to bed, but I insisted on getting some fresh air. Curling on his lap, I snuggled against his chest.

He looked at me in surprise. A perfectly arched brow of his raised. "I thought you hated the idea of me going to the gym?"

I shrugged. "I don't hate it unless you bruise your knuckles. A little bit of blowing off steam on the punching bag isn't bad."

He needed to get his frustration out, and he always used the punching bag for that. But since knowing how much I disliked it, he wasn't going for it

tonight.

I liked that he wasn't practicing his unhealthy exercise anymore, but if a bit of that could reduce his anger, then I was okay with it.

He shook his head. Hugging me closer, he kissed my forehead. "I'm fine, Rosebud. I'm saving it for someone else. So don't worry, the storm inside me will get unleashed, but at the right time."

The coldness of his voice sent a shiver down my spine.

I didn't want him to take any wrong steps out of rage. But I'd talk to him about it later. I had my Ace finally in my arms now. I didn't want to ruin this moment.

"I want to go to Greece. Where Tess and Caleb went for their honeymoon. I loved the pictures they sent me. It has such amazing places!"

His lips curled into a smile. "When do you want to go?"

My eyes went big. "You'll take me there?"

He pecked my nose. "Whenever you want to go. I promised you a vacation, right? If you want to go to Greece, then Greece it is. Whatever my queen wishes."

I giggled, squealing like a small girl on Christmas. "Tomorrow! I want to go there tomorrow! I had even planned the places I want us to visit when Tess sent me the pictures."

A musical chuckle vibrated through his chest as he cupped my face and watched me with unconditional love and adoration.

"Tomorrow it is, then. Where do you want to go after that?"

My smile only got bigger. "We're going on a long vacation?"

He nodded.

“Turkey! I want to go to Istanbul. The city of dreams!” I gushed. “I love their lifestyle and food. I can’t wait to visit there!”

“And I love you,” he rasped, nuzzling my neck. His rough stubble raised goosebumps across my skin.

Hot sensations rushed directly to my core. I squirmed against him. A husky groan left his sinful lips.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I brought his mouth to mine. “I love you more.”

Gripping my ass cheeks firmly, he pulled me closer and asked for entrance. And I opened my mouth eagerly.

The moment his tongue met mine, a jolt of electricity ran through my veins. It was addicting. My core clenched in want. A moan left my lips as he ravished my mouth like it was his salvation.

As his hand slipped under my dress, making every nerve of mine burst with excitement and lust, his phone interrupted.

Groaning when he cut the call and got back to me, it started to blare under the night again.

Cursing, he pulled away and received it.

“What?” he snapped. Hearing what the other person said, he clenched his jaw. “What do you want? Get to the point!”

I frowned. “Who is it?”

He threw a glance at me but didn’t answer my question.

“She’s all right.” His lips pressed tight. “Why do you want to talk to her? I said she’s okay now. Isn’t that enough?”

I raised my brow. Who was it?

Letting out a grumble, he passed me the phone. At my questioning gaze, he huffed.

“It’s De Sylvano. He wants to talk to you.”

I rolled my eyes at his antics. I didn’t know why he was grumbling about it. Was he jealous Duncan wanted to talk to me, or he was annoyed because he interrupted us? Well, I was on his team if it was the latter.

But I needed to thank Duncan for what he did. He was a big help today.

“Hey!” I said, pressing the phone against my ear.

“Emerald, how are you doing?” Deep voice with thick Italian accent.

Cassie was always a goner for Italian men for their sexy accent.

“I’m good now. Thank you. I’m sorry you had to take so much trouble for me today.”

My Greek god’s eyes narrowed at that. He didn’t like me apologizing to anyone.

“Nah! It was my pleasure I could help you. As much as I didn’t expect our second, technically third meeting to go like that, I’m glad I got the chance to get you out of that situation. Even though your man didn’t appreciate me with words. Tell him he owes me big.”

I laughed. “Oh, he knows it very well.”

Ace tried to take the phone away from me, getting irritated second by second, but I pulled away.

Chuckling, he cleared his throat. “Anyway, jokes aside, I hope Valencian told you everything?”

I sighed. “Yes, he did.”

“Good. Now don’t worry at all about anything. Arthur is out of your life

now. So, cheer up! And yes, make that moody man of yours a little less stressed. I have never seen that man that anxious and disturbed in all the years I have known him. He was terrified, you know?”

I nodded, even if he couldn't see me.

Grabbing Ace's hand, I kissed his knuckle, making his clenched jaw relax.

“I know. Thank you so much for helping him through all this, and for saving my life. Thank you, Duncan. You really did a big favor on us,” I said truthfully. And this time, Ace didn't show any displeasure.

“Nah, it was nothing. I know if Valencian was in my place, he would have done the same for me. You don't need to thank me. It was always a pleasure! Anyway, I won't hold you for long. Your caveman must be planning to kill me right now for keeping his girl busy for that long. You take care, Emerald. I'll see you later.”

“Yeah, see you later. Goodnight.”

“Night.”

Once I returned his phone, I slumped against him. “He seems to be a nice man. Why do you dislike him?”

He snorted, wrapping his arms around me. “He's always a gentleman to the ladies he thought was decent. Otherwise, he wouldn't even look at you twice.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever you say, he helped us a lot today. We should personally thank him. Maybe invite him for dinner?”

He grunted, muttering something under his breath. Something like, “I owe my life to that bastard now.” When I raised a brow, he said, “Maybe. But

not now. After we return from our vacation.”

My mood instantly brightened remembering our vacation.

“So? What do we do now?” he asked, nuzzling my neck.

Pressing myself against him, I whispered in his ear. “You make love to me.”

He growled, standing up with me in his arms.

“My queen’s wish is my command.”

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EPILOGUE - PART 1



“*R*osebud?” His deep voice murmured in my ear, followed by a lingering kiss on my neck. “Wake up, baby. We’re here.”

Groaning, I moved on his lap and made myself more comfortable against him, snuggling against his chest. “Let me sleep.”

His husky chuckle sent a shiver down my sore body. Well, the reason behind my tiredness was him. After our twenty-five day trip to Greece and Turkey, we were supposed to meet my family at dinner directly after landing in LA. So here we were, outside my parents’ house. But I could barely move without wincing.

Because this man just can’t keep it in his pants.

Just because a male flight attendant flashed me his biggest smile, he banned that man from his private jet and took me to the posh bedroom of his like a rag doll, claiming me again and again as his.

As if I wasn’t already his.

Not that I didn’t beg him for more and screamed in ecstasy at his rough touches.

But now I had to endure the consequences. I didn’t want to do the funny walk before my parents.

“They’re waiting for us, Rosebud. If your father didn’t insist, I wouldn’t force you to get up. I would’ve loved to go home and have you all to myself again,” he rasped, brushing his lips against my cheek.

I slapped his chest, opening my eyes to glare at him. “Don’t you dare touch me for at least a week! You’re banned from sex until I’m walking fine again.”

Horror drew on his features. “What? You’re joking, right?”

“I’m not.”

Then he pulled me closer, biting on my lower lip. “I don’t understand why you’re punishing me, my rose. I thought after I thoroughly satisfied you, you would give me a reward.”

I raised my brows, leaning away from his sinful lips.

“Who said I’m satisfied? I didn’t like it at all.” Moving in discomfort again, I pouted.

“Really?” His voice came out low. “I clearly remember someone moaning and begging me to go harder.”

Heat crept up my cheeks as I hid my face in the crook of his neck, making him laugh.

“You’re so mean!”

He placed a kiss on my head. “Does it hurt, baby? I’m sorry. I should’ve gone a little gentler. You should take a painkiller.”

I shook my head. “I already took one. I’ll be fine, don’t worry. Let’s go now. Otherwise, Mom will blow up our phones again.”

She has been doing it for the last two days to make sure we attend the family dinner. Even Tess and Caleb would be there.

“What are you doing?” I squeaked as he scooped me into his arms as soon as we got out of the car.

“Carrying my Rosebud so she doesn’t have to walk.” He walked inside with me in his arms.

“What? No, put me down! I can walk myself. My parents will be there!”

He raised a brow. “So? I’m taking care of my girl. I don’t think anyone should have any problem with that.”

“But—”

He pressed the bell. “No buts.”

Then the door opened and appeared my beaming parents. Tess, Caleb, and Tobias strolled behind.

My cheeks flamed at their amused looks. But Mom and Dad held concern and curiosity in their eyes.

“Hello, everyone,” my caveman greeted, walking past them.

“Sweetie, is everything okay? Why is Ace carrying you?” Mom queried.

I opened my mouth when he butted in.

“Jet lag, Mrs. Hutton. She was tired.”

“Ah, all right then. Come, let’s go to the living room.” Smiling, Dad led us inside. He had a glint in his aged eyes, giving Ace a look of appreciation.

Mr. Valencian didn’t have to try to win my parents’ heart. They always loved him as their own son. And now they welcomed him as their family with whole heart.

Once we were all seated in the warm living room, Dad took Ace aside to talk about business along with Caleb, while Tess teased me about how I had her brother-in-law wrapped around my finger.

“I thought he was your best friend?” I raised my brow.

She slumped against the couch. “He still is. But he’s also my brother-in-law now. You know, I’m trying to feel this new relationship between us. Because I don’t have any freaking in-laws here except him. To think about Arthur and Ophelia, one is in the jail and the other is in Italy. And I don’t even know if my future children would get to have any kin from his father’s side except an uncle and...” she winked at me, “aunt.”

My heart skipped at her suggestion. I glanced at him from across the room, only to find his eyes already fixed on me, turning me into a deep shade of red. The intensity in those stormy gray orbs made me avert my gaze and twirl the bracelet he gave me.

Did he hear what Tess said?

“So? How did your meeting go with his mom?”

I let out a sigh. “It was good. She was nice. Just was a little uncomfortable, as Ace said she would be.”

We went to meet her in Italy before leaving for Turkey. Ace wasn’t up to meet his Mom as he wanted to focus only on us during the trip and he knew she wouldn’t be happy to see us. She only allowed Ace and Caleb to meet her on her birthdays. But I wanted to meet her. I wanted to know why she still maintained so much distance from her son. I understood she had issues with this place, but she could at least let Ace see her over there.

But I didn’t get any answers from her. She wouldn’t talk much other than some basic conversation. Though she was nice and happy to meet me, the girl her son loved, she was closed off. She had a boyfriend over there, so I thought she moved on. But clearly, she didn’t. It still affected her if she met any person related to her past. Including her own son.

I saw how Ace wanted her to talk more, or to show more affection, but she just sat afar. As if we were some strangers. The disappointment I saw in Ace's eyes made me feel guilty. I shouldn't have taken him to her. I wanted to know his mother, but I only hurt him in the process.

"That's why I didn't try to meet or talk to her. I knew she wouldn't take it nicely. Maybe she needs more time," Tess said softly.

I nodded. Even though I understood her situation, I didn't like the way she kept pushing Ace away.

"Come on, kids! Dinner is ready. Hurry up!" Mom called out from the kitchen.

"Let's go. I'm starving!" Getting up, Tess gave me her hand.

Once I gobbled up the delicious food Mom made for dinner, I had a sudden craving for blueberry ice cream. I never liked this particular flavor, but I needed one right then. I demanded Ace to take me to a nice ice cream parlor and get me blueberry ice cream. Even though he said I shouldn't have something cold in this freezing weather, after some pouting and batting my eyelashes at him, he finally agreed.

After bidding my family goodnight, we went for my desired dessert and left for home. It was already late, and he had to go to bed early so he could wake up soon the next morning. He had somewhere important to go.

An important meeting.

* * *

"PLEASE BE SEATED, Mr. Valencian. He'll be here in a minute." The man in a blue uniform walked out of the door.

"You shouldn't have come here. I told you to stay home. You weren't feeling good this morning. Why do you never listen to me?" He turned to me

as soon as the man left.

“I’m fine now. And I need to meet him one last time. I have something to give back to him.”

After the police arrested Arthur, Ace couldn’t finish some paperwork or see him behind the bars due to our vacation. But now that we were back, Ace had to drop by the police station to sign some papers. And, of course, to wish Arthur good luck for the endless misery he’d be facing for the rest of his life.

And how could I miss this chance? Even after feeling light-headed this morning, I got ready and sat in the car with him, much to his dismay.

“What’s that?” He raised a brow.

I shrugged. “You’ll see.”

His frown deepened at my sweet smile.

Tucking a strand behind my ear, he pecked my forehead. “You’re okay now?”

I nodded, leaning into him.

“We’ll go and see Hazel after this. You need a checkup.”

I sat straight, my mood dampening. Hazel was a friend of Leyla. The redhead British girl I saw with him being cozy in that restaurant months ago. The girl he visited quite a few times in the UK. Even at the night of Tess’s engagement.

My doubt was right. He went to meet her.

Though only because she used to be his doctor back in the time when he went for rehab. I was surprised when he told me she worked for a rehab organization. Whenever he thought his past was crawling back into his mind, he went to see her. While handling his case to get him better, she became a

good friend of his and kind of a psychiatrist who would help calm him down by talking to him.

“No. We’re not going to go to any hospital. I’m fine.” Hospital wasn’t the issue for me. The issue was Hazel was Leyla’s friend. Even though I knew she and Ace were just friends and she was married, I saw her gazing at him with admiration while talking to him on video calls. Even that night at the restaurant, her eyes were only on him. She had a crush on my man even when she wore a ring of another. When I told him about it, he laughed it off and said I was just jealous.

Yes, I was. I didn’t want any gorgeous redhead having a crush on my man. So even though it sounded weird, I didn’t want to go to a place where the doctor was her close friend.

It was that annoying for me. I didn’t know why, but lately my jealousy was out of control. Even if a random girl looked at him, I felt like hiding him with a shield so no one could see him other than me.

“No excuses. We’re going and that’s final. I’m not taking any chances with your health,” he spoke with finality.

When I went to argue, the door opened and Arthur strolled in, guided by three cops behind him.

I raised my brow at his state. He was limping. There were bruises and cuts on his forearms and face. The light of the bulb in the room shone on his newly shaved head as he watched us with a murderous glare. The hatred in his eyes shone as bright as his bald head.

“You two! What the hell are you doing here? Came here to mock me?” he sneered.

“No. To give you something.” I stood from the chair and walked to him.

“What?”

At his confused face, I flashed him a sweet smile before slapping him across the already battered cheek of his. Hard enough to have my hand throb in pain. He hissed out a curse.

“This.” My hands were itching to do this since I found out his truth.

His furious eyes snapped to me. “You bitch!”

Snarling, as he stepped forward, raising his cuffed hands at me, I flinched away. But before he could hit me, a punch landed on his cheek, the same one I just slapped, sending him to the ground.

“Keep your filthy hands to yourself if you don’t want me to fucking pluck them out of your body!” Ace bellowed, standing before me, shielding me from any harm. With eyes blazing with fury, shoulders rigid, he glared down at Arthur with wrath.

Spitting out blood, Arthur went to stand up again, but another harsh kick of Ace threw him on his back. A grunt of pain left his mouth.

When Ace went to hit him again, I held him back, at the same time an officer took Arthur away from Ace’s reach. Tugging him up, they held him back.

“You think you won sending me behind the bars? You’re wrong! No one can keep me here for long! I’ll get out and finish what I started. I’ll kill you both, you pieces of shit!” he hissed, struggling in the officer’s hold.

Ace tried to move to him again, but I pulled him back, running my hand on his chest.

“Ace, calm down. He’s just trying to provoke you. You and I both know he’s just barking out of rage. He knows he can’t do anything anymore,” I said

in a calm tone.

“How dare he try to hurt you again!”

He tried to move away from my grip, but I stood before him. “Don’t take the law into your own hands. The police will take care of him.”

“She’s right, Mr. Valencian. We’ll take care of him. You don’t need to get your hands dirty with his blood,” one of the officers agreed.

Then Arthur’s mocking laughter echoed throughout the small office. “What a pussycat! I knew you had become a slave of this bitch the moment you made her an equal owner of everything. Everything that I owned! Everything that should’ve been mine!”

Growling, Ace moved me away from his path and stormed towards him. Arthur’s legs stumbled back as Ace raised his hand. Then he stopped. A chilling smile tugged at his lips. Stepping closer to him, he fixed his orange jumpsuit a little at his shoulders and looked directly into his eyes.

“You know, you’re right. I’m a slave of my Rosebud, she owns me. So, I can’t be mad at you for that.” He cocked his head. “But you’re wrong about one thing. The Valencian empire isn’t yours. It was just a mere company in my father’s hand. I’m the one who made it an empire. It was my hard work. And about your right, the luxury I provided you is worth much more than you would have gotten from grandfather’s property.”

Arthur stayed silent. But the gritting of his teeth was evidence of how much he wanted to disagree.

Dizziness hit me again, causing me to walk close to Ace. But I didn’t interrupt him. Instead, I took deep breaths to keep down the nausea that was rising in my throat.

Leaning in, he whispered in Arthur’s ear. But loud enough for me to hear

everything.

“And you and I both know you can’t get out of here. Soon, you’ll be sent to the solitary confinement.” A malicious smirk tugged at his lips. “And you know what can happen to you behind the closed doors, don’t you? So, I’d be very careful with my tongue and hands if I were you.”

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EPILOGUE - PART 2



The color of Arthur's face drained. With wide eyes, he watched Ace in horror.

"Y-you can't do that to me! I won't let you!"

I grimaced at the feeling in my stomach. The world around me started to spin.

Stepping back from him, Ace wrapped a hand around my waist. "I can and I will. You've seen my respect for you these years, and now you'll see my enmity. You should've thought about it before joining hands with Antonio and deciding to go against me and trying to hurt my Rosebud. You did what you wanted. Now you suffer the consequences. May God send you to hell. Goodbye, Arthur."

"No! You can't do that—"

Unable to contain it in anymore, I clutched my stomach, hunched forward, and emptied my stomach.

"Shit! Rosebud! Are you all right, baby?" Wrapping his arms around my shoulders, Ace pulled my hair back as the officers and Arthur jumped back.

"What the fuck!" Arthur screeched.

Looking up with watery vision, I found his legs covered with yellowish

substances. A look of disgust flashed across his features.

“Rosebud, are you all right? What’s wrong?” Ace’s concerned voice sounded distant in my ears. Everything around me blurred.

The black dots across my vision and the foul stench of vomit made me throw up again, before I slumped against Ace as darkness slowly engulfed me.

* * *

THE NEXT TIME I regained my senses, I found myself on a hospital bed with him tightly gripping my hand in his. The smell of bleach and white walls of the hospital room surrounded me.

“Rosebud?” Shooting to his feet from the chair, he came up and sat beside me. “Thank God, you’re awake. I was going crazy wondering why it was taking you so long to open your eyes.”

“Ace...” The foul taste in my mouth made my stomach clench. “Water,” I croaked.

He didn’t waste a second before filling up a glass from the jug that rested on the bedside table.

“Here, be careful.” He helped me sit up and held the glass against my lips. I drank it greedily.

Then memories of visiting Arthur in the jail and then throwing up on him before fainting into Ace’s arms flooded my mind.

As much as I wanted to laugh remembering his face when I threw up on him, I was confused about getting ill all of a sudden.

“How are you feeling now, Rosebud?” he asked, his tone still held alert and concern.

I gave him the empty glass back. “I’m fine now. I don’t know what happened. All of a sudden, the world around me began to spin and then I had this intense urge to puke.”

He suddenly got abnormally quiet as he placed the glass back on the table. Stormy gray eyes were anxious.

There weren’t any doctors or nurses around. We were alone in the room.

“What happened? What did the doctor say? Did I have food poisoning?” I frowned.

It could be, considering the amount of food I had last night.

He didn’t say anything. Instead, leaning in, he kissed my forehead. “You should rest now. We can talk later.”

My frown deepened. “I don’t need rest. I’m fine. You can tell me what the doctor said. Is it something serious?”

Nervousness now started to rattle inside me. Was there something wrong?

“Of course not, baby. Everything is all right. It’s just...” he trailed off, clearing his throat. “It’s just...”

“It’s just what?” I probed, getting restless.

“The doctor said you—”

“Good afternoon, Ms. Hutton! You’re finally up, I see.” A lady in her early thirties strolled inside the room flaunting a white coat. Flashing a blinding smile, she stood beside my bed. “Your man here was threatening to shut this hospital down if you we didn’t bring your senses back soon. Anyway, how are you feeling now?”

Cracking up a small smile, I nodded. “I’m good.”

“Great! I’m Doctor Hazel, by the way. A friend of Mr. Valencian.”

Glancing at Ace, she checked my nerves while my smile threatened to fall.

He brought me to Leyla's friend, didn't he?

After my nerves, she checked my eyes. "You're good to leave, I think. I thought you'd have to stay here for at least a day, but you seem to be all right now. Be careful though, at this early stage, you'll have to be very careful at least for the first three months. No traveling or taking too much stress. I'll prescribe you some meds you'll have to continue for a week."

"Wait, I'm sorry, but I'm a bit lost here. What are you talking about? Why should I be careful for three months? What happened to me?"

She raised a brow before casting a glance at Ace, who shifted in his place uncomfortably.

"Oh, I thought Mr. Valencian already informed you," she said, before showing her white teeth again. "But no worries, let me give you the good news. Congratulations, Ms. Hutton! You're pregnant!"

I stilled. With my eyes wide, I stared at her, stunned.

"What?" A whisper left my lips.

She nodded. "Yes. You're five weeks along. Because it's a very early stage, you're facing morning sickness and dizziness. But don't worry, it should stop in your second trimester."

Still shocked, I looked at Ace, who sat beside me very quietly. Gray eyes closely observed me. As the doctor left the room, giving us some privacy, not a word was uttered by any of us. We just stared at each other.

"You're pregnant." Her words were still swirling in my head.

But how was it possible? I never forgot to take the after pills.

Well, these pills were never hundred percent safe. There was always a

chance. But I had no choice, as this Greek man never wore a condom every time we made love. He didn't want any barrier between us while he claimed me. And of course, with the speed we were going since we got together, it was supposed to happen. Even on our vacation, we barely left our hotel.

And now, I'm pregnant.

I didn't know what to feel about it. I was too confused.

He cleared his throat, watching me carefully. "What are you thinking?"

"I... I'm surprised. I didn't expect it at all." Subconsciously, my hand went to my stomach.

"Rosebud, look, I know what you must be feeling. Even I didn't expect anything like this so soon. I...I understand if you don't want it. I'll support you in your every decision. Don't feel pressured with anything," he said, giving my hand a light squeeze.

I glanced up to his stormy gray orbs, the eyes I was so in love with. They watched me with tenderness and understanding.

My gaze went back to my flat stomach, where a life was growing. A little baby.

Our baby. We made it.

An intense emotion surged through my chest. The sudden feeling of love and the urge to protect the baby surprised me.

With hesitation, I ran my hand over my flat stomach.

I looked up at him again. Though he said he'd support me if I didn't want it, it didn't go unnoticed how his gaze followed the movement of my hand. How his hands twitched, as if he wanted to run his hand over my stomach. And his eyes, they held... longing.

My heart clenched for him. He longed for a family for half of his life. He always wanted a happy family he never had.

And I'll give it to him. I'll give him everything he ever wanted, the happiness he always deserved.

Taking his hand, I placed it on my stomach. His gaze snapped up to mine, watching me in confusion.

Smiling, I nodded. My vision burned with tears. Tears of happiness. "It's our baby. I can never give up on it. We'll keep him or her."

"Are you sure?" His voice came out uncertain.

"Yes!"

Letting out a shaky breath, he pulled me into him and slammed his lips against mine. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed him back eagerly. The intensity and passion his kiss radiated told me the love and appreciation he had for me.

Pulling away, he rested his forehead against mine. "Rosebud...you don't know what you said. You've already given me everything I've ever wanted. You. And now you're making my world complete by giving me a family. A family where there will be you, me, and our baby. Thank you so much. I...I can't express how grateful I am. I love you so fucking much!"

Grinning, I kissed his lips again. "I love you too!"

He smiled. But it was a different one. There was a light in his eyes, light of felicity and love.

Leaning down, he ran his hand over my tummy lovingly before showering kisses all over my stomach. A giggle escaped my lips as I watched him spooning my belly, as if he was already holding the baby in his arms.

Never had anyone seen this side of Achilles Valencian. So soft and doting. Only I got the luck to watch him like this. And now our baby would experience this rare moment too.

“We made it,” he whispered, looking up at me with a gleaming gaze.

I nodded, smiling as brightly. “I can’t wait to tell everyone. Mom and Dad will be ecstatic.”

Agreeing, he got back to me. Pulling me into his arms, he pecked my temple. “I know. Let’s invite them to dinner and share the news with them.”

“I’ll call them right now.”

When I reached for my phone, he grabbed my hand. “Let’s go home first.”

“All right.” I smiled.

I was so confused and shocked when Hazel gave me the news. And now, I was so excited to share this with everyone that I could barely keep my hands away from my phone to call them and give them the good news.

I never thought I’d be this happy to be pregnant. The thought of giving birth to a baby always had me shuddering. It still did when I thought about the labor pain. But that was nine months away. Right now, the only thing I wanted to think about was our baby.

Once the doctor gave us the prescription, Ace helped me freshen up and got me ready to go home.

During the whole car ride, he kept my hand in his and showered it with kisses from time to time. I have never seen him that happy. And that only added more contentment to my heart.

Once reaching the penthouse, he opened the door for us, letting me walk

in first.

Padding inside, I threw my purse on the couch and turned on the switches. Every corner of the living room lit up with bright lights overtaking the darkness.

I think some fairy lights would look good around the window frame at night. Maybe I'd put some in our bedroom, too.

“Ace, I was thinking of getting some fairy lights—”

Turning around, my words caught in my throat at the sight before me.

Achilles Valencian was on one knee right in front of me, with the most beautiful ring in his hand.

A gasp left my mouth.

“Ace?” I whispered, eyes still lingered on the ring.

It was a simple platinum ring with a gorgeous blue diamond sitting proudly in the center. The tiny sparkling diamonds that surrounded it only made it more marvelous.

“I couldn't wait any longer, Rosebud. I thought to give you a beautiful surprise first, but...” Gulping, he shook his head. “I couldn't wait that long. I needed to see my ring on your finger right now. So, my beautiful rose, will you do the honor of marrying me and make me the happiest man on Earth?”

I was surprised for the second time in the day. And I didn't know which one was more surprising. Being pregnant or having the man I loved with everything I had asking my hand for marriage.

“I know I didn't deliver some unique lines to make it more special. But Rosebud, what I feel for you can't be explained with words, nor can be expressed with acts. Nothing will be enough to justify the endless love I have

for you.” His voice was deep, gray eyes watching me with an intense look that always managed to speed up the rate of my heartbeat. “I’m obsessed with you Rosebud, I’ve been all my life and I’ll be until my last breath. Sometimes I’ve to hold myself back from losing my control and keep you all to myself so that I can have you in my arms all the time. But not to scare you away, I always suppress my urges. You may think I’m crazy, but it’s how I am. I’m crazy for you, my rose.

From the day you asked me to marry you on your ninth birthday, I’ve been dreaming of our marriage. I’ve been waiting since. I’ve waited for so long. But I can’t anymore. Without you, my life is incomplete. I’m nothing. I want to make you mine forever. I want the world to see who you belong to. So, Emerald Hutton, will you marry me and become Mrs. Emerald Valencian? Will you become my other half and spend the rest of your life with this crazy, obsessed man of yours?”

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I stood there. His words were like sharp arrows, arrows of love and promises that hit right into my heart. I had always dreamt of him going onto his knees and proposing to me in my childhood, asking me to become his princess. I never thought my dream would ever come true. But here he was, on his knee, with a gorgeous ring in his hand, asking me to marry him. Not to become his princess, but his queen.

“Rosebud?” he asked, anxiousness etched on his beautiful features. “Will you? Will you marry me?”

Wiping my tears, I flashed him the broadest grin and nodded. “Yes! Yes, I will marry you!”

A breathtaking smile spread over his face as he let out a sigh of relief. Moisture glistened in his gray eyes, making my heart tug.

Taking my left hand, he slipped the ring into my ring finger and rose to his feet before pulling me to his chest and capturing my lips with his.

“Thank you so much, my rose. You gave me everything I ever wanted. I couldn’t ask for more. Thank you so much, baby,” he murmured against my lips, taking my mouth into a hungry kiss again, making my knees weak.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted me up and spun us around, making me laugh against his mouth.

“What are you doing? Put me down!”

Happiness bloomed in my heart as he peppered kisses all over my face, clutching me tight to his chest. Letting out a sigh, I leaned into him once he put me down on my feet.

I watched the ring that shone on my finger.

“You like it?” he asked, tucking a strand behind my ear.

I nodded, looking up at him through my lashes. Heat crept up my cheeks.

I was his fiancée now.

Even the thought of marrying him made me feel giddy.

“It’s beautiful.”

Cupping my chin, he made our gazes lock. “Not more than you.”

Biting my lip, I looked down, hiding my face in his chest. His chuckle was like music to my ears. Wrapping his hand around my neck in a possessive grip, he made me look up at him as he captured my mouth again in his usual demanding kiss.

“You’re mine now. In every way possible.” The deep, dominant yet husky voice of his sent a shiver through my entire body.

“And you’re mine,” I whispered, biting his lower lip, clutching his collar

into my fists.

“All yours, baby. Always and forever.”

I peered into those stormy gray irises as I felt our souls getting entangled, just like our breathing. I found myself getting lost in those dark pools and I never wanted to look away.

“I love you so much, my rose.” He kissed my forehead as I closed my eyes, letting out a sigh. My heart filled with content and bliss.

“I love you too. Always and forever.”

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If you enjoyed this book, I'd greatly appreciate it if you would post a short review.

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Eva Zahan is the author of the new novel THE TRAP OF ACE. Her passion for writing started early on. When she's not writing dominating, possessive male leads, she's reading and traveling with friends and family.

With her breath-taking stories, she hopes to win over every reader's heart.



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