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A NOVEL

FALLING
for my
HUSBAND

PAMELA ANN

Falling For My Husband

By

Pamela Ann

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Niko,

Life is so much brighter with you in it.

I love you.

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Prologue

Callum

“Son, here’s your present. Enjoy your transition from a boy to a man.” My father patted my back and then pushed the doors open, leaving me in ultimate heaven. “Thirteen women to celebrate your thirteen years of life.”

That was how my father, Charles Kensington, brought me up. My father was a fine connoisseur of women, in all shapes and sizes. He once told me that marriage meant nothing because all it ever did was merge money for both families; it was a tool to build dynasties, nothing more. Marriage was a façade that people crawled behind in order to unite two powerful families and form a stronger bond which would produce heirs.

Legacy was everything; without it, nothing mattered.

We were, after all, The Kensingtons. At a young age, I was groomed and schooled to marry a well bred woman; someone from my stature who would mingle amongst my social strata easily.

All of these ingrained idiosyncrasies and pompous ceremonials left me when I met a man named Richard von Berg. We went to Cambridge and were on the rowing team together. Richard was in the same class as I was, but he was a free man; a man who was allowed to grow without his parents’ having shackled him to their own beliefs. He didn’t live the way I did. Richard was a unique man; a man I admired and loved like a brother. He taught me to follow whatever and wherever my gut directed me.

With his guidance and support, I was able to find the woman that I could finally say I loved. It was a dire day when that love was not returned. On that day, I found out that my father married the woman I had wanted to spend the rest of my life with. When I confronted him, it left me in shambles.

“I did it for your own good! *Love!* That word is for cunts. You’re being

fanciful. You're a bloody Kensington and *love is not part of our lives*. Get that through your skull, you dim-witted fool." My father's green eyes struck me with their anger as his words sent me to hell.

I walked out of his home, vowing never to speak to him again.

Vowing to destroy him and his young bride.

No one was going to make me a fool and go unscathed.

As expected, the confrontation left me gutted, but the world had another lesson to teach me. When I got a call from Richard, asking—*no begging*—me to see him at St. Lucia at once, I couldn't ignore it.

That call changed my life.

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Chapter 1

Callum

Approximately three years ago

The flight took a little over eight hours. The whole time, I was anxious about what Richard had meant with his “I need your help, brother” statement. Richard von Berg didn’t ask for help. He was very much capable of doing anything and everything; he would rather keel over than ask for help. I knew this man well. For him to ask for help in that desperate tone was more than disconcerting.

Whatever it was, I knew it wasn’t going to be good. I had been there once, a couple of years back, before his parents died. I had spent my Christmas holiday there and it had been the best—the only—Christmas I had ever had. At first, I thought it odd how happy and tight-knit Richard’s family was, but as the days progressed, I saw what a truly loving parent meant; his parents were the storybook kind.

Being envious wasn’t really a normal feeling for me, however right then and there, I’d have wished all of my inheritance away merely to have what Richard had. It was tragic when I found out they had died in a plane crash. The bodies were never found. Even then, though the mourning and pain was evident in Richard’s eyes, he took charge and carried on as he slid into his father’s shoes. I knew how much his parents meant to him, yet he didn’t even crumble then.

Never had this man asked for help. *Never.*

When I arrived at his home and was let in, I made my way back to his study where I softly knocked on the door before pushing it open and letting myself inside. “Richard?”

The study was dark, so it took a good minute for my eyes to adjust. As my eyes finally became used to the dimness, I could see that there was a small desk lamp alit next to a leather wing chair with Richard sound asleep in it.

The sight of him sleeping in his study was shocking, however what took me by surprise the most was his appearance. He looked simply gaunt, almost yellowish, and the man had truly lost a significant amount of weight. My stomach plummeted further when he softly coughed, giving me a glimpse of his dire condition. This wasn't a sickness that would go away after a few weeks of Paracetamol. This was more serious.

“Richard?”

Richard—my best friend, my mentor—slowly pried his eyes open and then his weary, gray gaze met mine. “You came,” he whispered while slowly trying to shift himself on the seat. “Thank you.”

“Of course, I came. Why even doubt it?” I murmured as I strode towards him, steadying myself before I sat on the couch next to his chair. “You're unwell. Why haven't you said anything?”

“I didn't know I was until six months ago.” Richard looked thoughtful, appearing almost sad. “I'm dying. Unbeknownst to me, I was infected with Hepatitis B. The infection turned into liver cancer. Since I was young and healthy, I never thought any of my pains and symptoms were anything serious. Had I known, I would've hired the best to cure me.” Richard held my gaze, pausing for a few seconds before coughing mildly. “I have weeks, a few months max, to live.”

It seemed so surreal. Richard couldn't be dying; how could he when he was one of the strongest men I knew? To me, he was family. My brother. I respected this man so much. Now, he was terminally ill.

“We'll get someone to cure you. I'm sure there are doctors who are

undergoing some trials that could help—”

Richard held up his hand to stop me from talking. “I just got back from a trial they were doing in South Africa. Why do you think I’ve been gone a while? I was looking for a cure.” He sighed, full of melancholy. “My time is running out. I’ve accepted it. There’s no cure out there for me—, but this is not why I called you, Callum. I have a favor to ask of you. It’s a very important one and I would be forever grateful if you could help me. I don’t want to die with worry. I hope you can help me.”

The feeling of helplessness was so profound that I’d do whatever he asked of me in a heartbeat. I needed *something* to do—*anything*—to help him.

“Anything, you don’t even have to ask.”

Richard gave me a small, weak smile that broke through my composure.

My best friend was dying. Yet here he was, trying to give me a smile because I was going to grant his dying wish. Life was perverse and I hated it.

“I know you will, but I want you to hear me out and think it over.” Richard reached out and tapped my hand. “I won’t hold it against you if you decide not to agree with it. I would completely understand, so don’t even go there.” He drew a labored breath, as though he was desperately trying to sort his thoughts out before handing it over into my hands. “I need you to marry Stella. I know you’re in love with Zara, but I can’t leave this earth knowing my baby sister is unprotected from vultures that will take advantage of her. You’re the only man I know that fits the bill. On top of that, I trust you completely. In your hands, my sister is safe. I can die happy knowing that, Cal.”

Stella, the young, shy, brunette who couldn’t even look me straight in the eye the last time I met her? Well, it was the only time I had met her, I suppose. Marriage. It was meant for the woman I loved, but now that my

father had swept in and taken that away from me, there was no one left that I could imagine spending my life with. Besides, I would shoot myself before I would decline Richard's request.

It was unfathomable to even consider turning back on him.

"Then, I'll marry Stella. There's nothing holding me back from helping you get what you wish, Richard." I paused, nodding towards his somber form. I truly was devastated. Although I was doing a splendid job of not shedding a tear or going into a raging outburst, inside I was barely holding up. Maybe I was still reeling from the lethal heartbreak Zara had dealt me, or maybe life had fucked me quite well so many times before that I felt the need to be composed. Whatever the reason, I held it together and managed to convey my thoughts to my friend. He needed to know that he could trust me with Stella. "I'll marry her until she's of age to marry a decent man. I can promise you that I will make sure she is well provided for; her assets secured and safe from men who are after her money."

Richard had already outlined everything, right down to having his lawyer draft up the agreements before I had gotten there. I was going to marry and be her conservator at the same time. She couldn't divorce me until she was at the age of twenty-six. I was also provided with all the to-do lists once Stella had chosen someone to marry. He had everything prepared. Now all he needed to do was tell his sister about this arrangement. Richard promised to tell her during teatime and I would meet her for dinner tonight to discuss what was to happen; amongst other things.

* C *

Dinnertime was set for seven tonight, though by five-thirty, I was restless and needed to clear my head from recent events; so I decided to leave the villa and slowly stroll towards the shore. The more my life went on, more

disaster unfolded before my very eyes. It was beginning to look like a Greek Tragedy.

My father. Zara. Their wedding. Richard dying. This impending arrangement with Stella...

Without a doubt, my father's betrayal was deplorable, yet somehow, deep down, I had sort of expected this due to knowing how controlling he was by nature as well as how emotionless he could be. Richard's illness and the knowledge of him biding time until death finally made its last call, on the other hand, was killing me. However, Zara's treachery went far and beyond everything else that had been put before me. Her unfaithfulness eviscerated me completely.

It was a lot to take, but it was what life had handed me.

I was losing people that were important in my life. They weren't merely fixtures like my father, Zara and Richard were people that I considered my best friends, my family; those who were going to be there beside me through thick and thin.

Losing Zara to my own father had been quite enough; why must I also lose my best friend to cancer? I wanted to scream that he was too young to die, however it didn't matter if you were young, fit and healthy. Cancer wasn't picky. Once it staked a claim on you, you'd be fighting for dear life and, most likely, not just once; it would be a battle for the rest of your existence. Some got lucky and survived.

I barely made it back in time for dinner. Since I was too absorbed with my own misery, I hadn't bothered to change for the occasion. My rugged attire would have to suffice.

Rounding to enter the dining area, I was momentarily struck the second I entered the room where I was met by still, clear, grey eyes with gold flecks; a long, wavy brunette mane; delicate facial features and the longest lashes I had

ever seen.

Stella von Berg definitely had grown into a lovely woman. Well, lovely was putting it mildly.

Automatically, I strolled to her side, expecting an even greater attraction from her in close proximity. I was not disappointed, she was even more lovely this close.

“Good evening,” I murmured, slowly inhaling her perfumed scent as I kissed both of her cheeks. The scent was sultry yet not too intoxicating, simply enough subtle, sexiness to evoke the male senses.

“Callum, it’s lovely to see you again.”

Her voice was husky... definitely not the sixteen-year-old I remembered. This Stella was beyond mildly captivating. She paused while I cussed at myself inwardly. What was wrong with me? Richard was dying and here I was *thinking about his sister’s scent and how husky her voice was?* For fuck’s sake, I needed to get my head checked.

When dinner was served, I contemplated if I should bring up the subject now, or after whilst having a nightcap. I decided that it would benefit us both if we were in the salon. It was a serious matter to discuss and not some inessential subject that could be easily thrown about during lamb chops and veal.

“What are your plans for the future, Stella? Career wise.”

Stella carefully chewed her food before washing it down with a sip of her Sauvignon Blanc then delicately dabbed the sides of her mouth with the silk napkin. “My best friend, Lucia, and I are thinking of setting up our own PR firm. She and I are enrolled for a two-year course in London before we venture out in that area. It’s a competitive field, obviously; so even with the right amount of knowledge and wisdom, we both understand experience is vital in understanding the ins and outs of running a real firm.”

Impressive, she truly was. Most women with the likes of her pedigree were usually twits that cared about social stature and the bank account. Women who were born in wealth were usually groomed to marry a wealthier man and it was a given that one should know how to run a household. For example, which silver and china should be used to a certain party or how to mask things with fake smiles. This woman, who was sharing a meal with me, was the genuine kind. What did I truly expect? She was Richard's sister, brought up levelheaded by both loving parents; one of the many things I had always envied about Richard.

“If you need help with looking for a PR company that could help you and your friend, do let me know. I'd be happy to help.”

Her smile was genuine as it lit up her sad face. For a few seconds, I let myself appreciate her beauty before I commanded myself to put it aside.

“One of my best friends, Mark, actually has a brother who owns a company and he gladly took us on board until we are ready to go out on our own, but thank you for the offer.”

Male best friends, such things were non-existent no matter how progressive a male proclaimed himself. It was either this Mark fella wanted Stella for himself or he fancied the other friend. Looking at her face now, I was hoping it was the latter.

Whoa! Hold it there, fool.

My sudden trail of thoughts was surprising to me. Was it because Richard told me to marry his sister? Yes, it had to be my protective side, nothing more. Of course.

We never spoke about Richard's illness nor did we speak about the impending nuptials, instead Stella found lighter subjects to discuss. She was rather chatty. I doubt I had ever been that engrossed in conversation with an eighteen-year-old before. *Eighteen! Christ, Callum!*

Once we entered the salon, we waited until the staff served us coffee before I finally took the lead and talked about what was to come. “Have you spoken with your brother?”

Stella graciously stirred her sugar in her cappuccino then calmly placed the teaspoon down and took a careful sip. “Yes.”

She spoke like she had already decided. “And?” I pressed, needing to know her thoughts and opinions immediately.

“I trust his decision. If he thinks this is the wisest thing to do, then I will do it without question. The only thing I’m worried about is *you*. This will put a halt to your life, Callum. I mean, what happens if you want to marry in a few years?”

“I won’t,” I assured her.

Stella looked thoughtful a moment, measuring. “How can you be so sure?”

Because my father beat me to it, my brain blurted out; making me feel all the concealed hatred once again, afresh and volatile in my mind. Hell on earth had replaced my once fun, carefree, optimistic life.

“Let me tell you something about me, Stella. I don’t lie when it comes to important matters and I’m telling you now, I won’t be marrying anyone in the next few years or decade because I don’t want to. Marriage is a blasted farce, one I certainly don’t fancy. There was a time that I did, but all the inkling to marry has been undeniably lost on me, forever.”

Those sharp, grey eyes looked at me shrewdly and I didn’t back down from the heat of them. Finally, when she thought it was time to concede, she obliged. “This is very generous and truly kind of you to help us. I promise that I will stay out of your way. You won’t even remember I exist.”

I truly doubted that, really, because a man would be blind not to see her gentle beauty. One day, she would find her fire, and when she did, she would

be fatal to any man.

Just like that, we made a silent pact; one where we would carry through Richard's wishes.

Five days after I had arrived in St. Lucia, Stella and I took our vows in a tiny chapel on the estate grounds. I wasn't even fazed when I was declared married, though Stella repeatedly apologized for being such a nuisance to my life.

She truly didn't need to because I welcomed her nuisance. She might not have known it then, however I was more than happy to help. Even though I had only met Stella once before this whole thing happened, I had spent a great deal of time with her parents when they visited Richard in Cambridge. After my Christmas visit, her parents treated me like one of theirs and, for that, I would forever be truly grateful. It might sound odd, but I considered Ella and Richie von Berg like parents. Those two truly were the best couple I had ever met and, when they'd died, I mourned for months alongside Richard.

Yes, Stella might not be aware, but in my heart, her family had become my family long ago. This marriage had merely made that feeling more of a reality.

~C~

Life had made me see how helpless a mere mortal was against forces that were far greater than any of us; their strength and capacity were boundless, immeasurable. When those forces finally chose someone's fate, one would always remember the battle because it was a battle where one's survival was uncertain. It could leave rancid, ugliness in its wake as it slowly suctioned you down, cruelly breaking piece after piece of your armor until you were fully bare. From there it would lead you to uncharted territory, drawing you

to the place where it had all begun. The circle of life would then be complete.

Everything we had was temporary. The joys of love and the gutting pain were a treasured experience that would be all too brief.

Your heartbeat, your thoughts, your love, your strength, your faith and your fight were all quintessential crumbs that merely led you to a path which paved the way to the battleground.

There would be countless times where life would test our limits, strength, power and perseverance. Most of us learned from these small skirmishes, but those were all simply calculated steps to prepare us for the grandest battle of all; that one fight where everything was all on the line. It wouldn't ask kindly for permission to oppose you in an all or nothing duel; no, it would *demand* it of you. A duel where we had everything to lose and it had the power to gain an incredible advantage.

It would be an unforgettable battle. *The fight of your life*. A head-on assault which would riddle you with scars, marring you deeply. Although many had survived it, they would never be the same again.

Sadly, my friend didn't survive the attack when it came for him.

Richard passed away on a Thursday morning—two weeks after the wedding—at the young age of twenty-five.

A few of his staff commented that Richard probably needed to see his sister secured before finally giving in to the relentless demand of the cancer; a condition that his frail body could barely register before it had eventually taken over, running him into the ground and ultimately claiming his life.

Not only was it heartbreaking to bury my best friend, but it was also wretched to see his sister softly sob as she tried to hold her tears at bay during the burial. Stella von Berg, the last of the direct heirs to the von Berg inheritance. A young, impressionable, eighteen-year-old heiress that held an insurmountable amount of money. Richard's passing was kept private—*for*

now—however once the news spread that he had died, the vultures would flock in droves.

Glancing at Stella's pained state, it was obvious that she could easily be drawn in with sweet words, a fake sense of security and the comfort that any stable, functioning man could easily provide. She would be, undoubtedly, one of the top targets to con and extort money from.

Yes, now I truly saw how vulnerable she'd be without me in the background.

Richard had been right in making the decision to wait until she was at the age of twenty-six to release half of her estate and allow her to be a free woman to marry of her choosing. Until then, she'd have me.

I wouldn't limit her when it came to her dating life because I truly believed a woman should learn how cruel and selfish men could be. So that when she finally married one day, she'd know she found the best man standing beside her. A man who would protect her from harm, at all costs. A man who would love her the way her mother was loved by her father. Most of all, a man who would appreciate her wholeheartedly, no holds barred, because he only had eyes for her and no one else.

Quietly, I moved towards her sullen body, wrapping an arm around her to let her know that I was here for her even though she might consider me a stranger. Her crystal grey eyes were awash with fresh tears when I crooked her neck to face me and then softly kissed her warm forehead.

“Don't ever think you're alone,” I murmured tenderly. “I'm family, too.”

Little did she know that she was the only family left for me.

Chapter 2

Stella

Present

“What’s with the sour puss expression?” Mark eyed me with mock concern.

How many times did I have to go through this humiliating experience in one lifetime? “Not today, I beg of you. I haven’t slept yet.” I slid on the opposite chair, gracelessly as ever, before I took a careful sip of my coffee. Lucia and I shared an apartment where Mark, most of the time, crashed because he loved to mess with our lives.

“What gives?” Mark pressed on, knowing my embarrassment had doubled by my reddening cheeks.

“Derek dumped me. He said waiting on me was taking forever. A year with fringe, semi-benefits isn’t all that bad, is it?”

“No, but we’re men and we love to own everything we touch in its entirety.” Mark winked at me before he bit into his buttered toast, washing it down with his cappuccino before adding to my misery. “Why don’t you take care of the problem with a dildo? Or better yet, you’re already married; why not make the very man himself do the bloody deed?”

Good question, but the thought of asking the infamous playboy, who I barely knew, was stupefying. “It’s not real, Mark! Besides, I don’t think Callum goes for the virginal type. I mean, I’m experienced, but not as a whole, *you know?*” In Callum’s eyes, I was probably laughable. He didn’t do women like me—ever. The whole of England knew that.

Mark smirked, brown eyes dancing with amusement. “Callum likes his ladies a tad blatant. Say, on the experimental side? I do admire the man. One of these days, you should introduce us. I want the inside digs as to where he

gets those captivating felines he usually toys about with.”

Rolling my eyes, I stole the tiny bit of toast he had left before slipping it inside my mouth. “Shut up. You have the hots for Lucia, you just have to admit to it,” I muttered, shaking my head at the stubborn fool I’d known since I moved to England three years ago.

I had been born in England, however my family moved to St. Lucia when I was two when my father purchased a sprawling estate for his surprise present to my mother on their wedding anniversary. It was my favorite place on earth. I had been saddened when I had to leave my home, but once a year I went back to remember what life used to be like. What life had resembled before my family was taken away from me. As much as I loved living in London, St. Lucia would always be my home.

Being British, I had always had an accent that spoke of that heritage, however my accent had a slightly different tone to it. Some couldn’t really pinpoint what the difference was and I always ended up saying it was Australian. I did sound similar to one and I loved that so much, but now I was starting to sound like a proper Brit. Each time I caught myself, I was reminded of my family.

I was alone. If not for my friends, I really would have no one.

My reverie was broken, when I heard Lucia muttering about some project that was due today before she entered the kitchen. “Mark, get me coffee.”

Mark glared at her, yet did it anyways. Lucia was *Her Highness* when Mark was around. Their dynamics were odd, but it worked perfectly well for them.

“I think you two should have sex and get it over and done with,” I murmured, smiling.

“Oh, shut it! Mark is gay. Did you not know?” Lucia raised her brow.

“Coffee.” Mark slid the mug toward Lucia. “How many times do I have

to emphasize the fact that I am not gay? In fact, I had the most gorgeous Italian in my arms last night and mind you, she loved every second of it.” The man had a thing for Italian women, hence his major crush on Lucia.

“I would love to meet her.” I grinned towards a still Lucia. “What do you think, Lu?”

Her gorgeous, tan face and green eyes masked the fakest of happy smiles. “Sure. Bring her over. I would love to meet one of Mark’s shag buddies.”

I hid back a smile because she was stung and failing at hiding the fact.

Mark eventually left when I announced that I was going to get ready for work. I went in early and left a little early. Lucia, however, went to work late and didn’t leave the office until dark.

We worked great and we balanced each other quite well. If a friend could be a soul mate, Lucia would be it for me. Actually, I suppose I would call her my soul-sister at this point.

The Italian knockout kept me sane.

After an hour, I was striding towards our office building that was located in St. James Square.

Alec, Mark’s older brother, called in to see if I wanted to join him for lunch, so I agreed to meet him at our usual favorite. It was a cozy, French gem of a patisserie that served breakfast all day long. Not to mention, the treasures the place produced were my idea of Heaven on earth.

After working as his intern for over three years, Alec and I had gotten close. At first, he was a total ass because, let’s face it, he was doing his baby brother a favor by hiring us, however that didn’t mean he wanted or needed Lucia’s or my help.

Alec’s brashness ebbed away as we worked closely together almost on a daily basis and proved myself on every task I was given. Where my friendship with Mark was all jokes with easy laughs, parties and the

mandatory BFF heart-to-heart once every six months, my friendship with Alec, on the other hand, was on a much more mature level. I appreciated his honest opinions if I needed consulting with any of the projects I worked on.

Where Mark had the boyish good looks, Alec was charming, polished and looked like he had stepped out of a designer suit advertisement. Okay, so I wasn't immune to his looks. It was a harmless crush, one I kept to myself.

We were in the middle of our lunch when my phone vibrated on the table.

Callum: *Are you busy this afternoon?*

Callum, texting me during lunch, let alone texting me at all, was odd.

My interest piqued, I quickly typed away on my screen.

Me: *It's manageable. What's up?*

I was about to place it down when it beeped again.

Callum: *I have something important to discuss with you. What time are you free?*

Okay, now I was beyond curious and slightly alarmed.

Me: *I'm actually having lunch somewhere close to your office. Will you be available to talk, say in an hour? I can drop by.*

As expected, my phone received his reply in a flash.

Callum: *I'll make time. See you then.*

What was so important that he needed to contact me? If there were any financial troubles when it came to my money, he usually took care of it immediately. Was it about a new business venture to invest in? Quite possibly. The last time he contacted me was to talk about putting twenty-five percent of my inheritance in the technology sector. Or maybe it was more serious? I sure hoped not.

Even though I barely saw Callum, he was the only person that was a connection to my past. With him, I got to be reminded of good memories with my brother. Even if we weren't close, I cared for him.

So whatever was plaguing him to prompt a visit to his office, I prayed to God that it wasn't anything serious because the last time someone told me that they had something important to discuss with me, my brother told me he was dying.

My stomach churned as the seconds ticked away. I had better get to Callum's office around St. Paul's without puking my way into his polished, swanky building.

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Chapter 3

Stella

“Mr. Kensington is expecting me. My name’s Stella von Berg,” I gave my name to the receptionist. She then gave me directions as to where to find the private lift.

“Peter will be there to greet you,” she added before bidding me a good day.

Murmuring my thanks, I proceeded to follow her directions without a problem. Peter was a bulky Irish man who had big, mean, green eyes. I suppose it was because of the scowl he was wearing, which seemed as though it was there on a permanent basis. Whatever the case, Peter didn’t waste time with chitchats. He simply kept to himself while I nervously dwelled on my thoughts about what the meeting with Callum might pertain to.

Once the lift halted to a stop, the metallic doors quietly opened to the top floor where Peter gave me a quick nod and then pressed the button to return to the lobby.

The floor was bright from the light brought in by the sun. It seemed that the theme on this floor was white and bright because it sure as hell was blinding for the few seconds it took my eyes to adjust.

Moving forward, I noticed there was an older woman coming out of one of the smoked glass doors. She immediately greeted me with a smile. “Miss von Berg, I’m Eleanor. Mr. Kensington is on a call, but he insists that you go ahead and join him in his office whilst on it. I did try to warn him that it’s rather disrespectful, but who am I to say, really? I’m just his assistant.”

I liked this Eleanor. She had spunk. “Thank you, Eleanor. I don’t mind, really. Callum’s an old, family friend, so you shouldn’t worry.”

“Yes, dear. I did meet your brother Richard once. It’s unfortunate that the Lord took him away from us at a very young age.”

She had? I thought Callum took over his maternal grandfather’s business after he died, which was about eight months after Richard’s passing. I didn’t have to wonder at that for long, though, because Eleanor easily supplied me with answers.

“Callum brought his friend here once to meet his grandfather. I’ve been working here since I was eighteen and now I’m in my fifties, therefore I know quite a bit about our little Callum here.” Eleanor proceeded to walk towards Callum’s office as she explained herself. Once we reached it, she reached for my hand and patted it. “I’m sure your brother is glad that you and Callum found each other. Give him time, he’ll eventually grow up. He’ll grow out of his playthings soon, just you wait.” Eleanor didn’t give me chance to correct her. She simply winked and left me to my own devices.

I didn’t know what was more surprising, the thought of her insinuating that something was going on between Callum and I or that she treated the man like a little child. One thing was for sure, though, it was funny to have a serious businessman like Callum paired with his grandfather’s assistant who did not take him seriously.

However, I didn’t have to see the two interact to know that they had a good relationship. Somehow, it warmed me to know that he had someone like Eleanor to brighten up his day.

Since everyone was being all undaunted by normal civilities here, I proceeded to open his door without bothering to knock. His office was the total opposite of the floor that contained it; it was dark and the only light in the room surrounded the boss, who was pretty engrossed in a heated conversation, complete with a deep scowl on his face, too.

I wasn’t sure what to do, or maybe I simply needed a valid excuse to ogle

at his dark, sexiness, so I paused and stared at him awhile, hoping that he'd notice I had entered his office.

His roguish handsomeness was one of the main things that attracted people to him. Callum commanded attention whether he was in a suit or in his ripped jeans and leather jacket; a naughty playboy that didn't do the whole pompous spiel, instead he did his own thing. Scandal rags adored his antics because he didn't care if the media portrayed him to be a less than angelic man.

Callum Kensington was pure sin. When you were around him, you were bound to be a sinner... his sinner. The rumors of his stud abilities and capabilities were monumental and quite documented. Some of the women would make ghastly confessions of what a night with Callum entailed for a fee. Did he care? No, he simply went on as if nothing had happened. Did that stop him from engaging with models, actresses, hangers-on and climbers? No. In fact, he showed it off more.

For three years, I followed his life through those headlines. For the first year, I had cringed a lot after reading the stories being printed about him. Now, I didn't even bat an eyelash because, once you read one scandal, you had read them all. Married women? Check. Bar fights? Check, check. Having three girlfriends at a time? Triple check.

None of those things mattered, though, because I knew—deep down—Callum was a good man. Sure, maybe he was going through some rough times, didn't we all?

In some ways, I did admire his audacious personality. He was the true sinner; unapologetic, charismatic, sharp-minded and he had the deadliest smirk a man could ever sport.

My heart jumped in my throat when his eyes lifted and connected to mine. For a second there, I thought I had been caught gawking at him

because his eyes seemed to know too much when they met mine. My lungs finally started functioning again when he gave me a welcoming smile.

Mother hell, this man should be arrested for making me feel guilty... of what exactly? Who the heck knew? All of my hard work in learning how to compose myself whilst he was around, somehow slid off and I was having a tough time garnering it back.

How long had it been since I had seen him last? I thought back and realized that it had been a little over a month ago, when I had been having dinner with Lucia and Mark. He was there, along with two women, enjoying a meal. He didn't see me, but I found myself glancing his way for most of the evening. I had seen the playboy in action and I wouldn't admit this to anyone, but I somehow continued to find him mesmerizing. Magnetic.

"Give me a minute. I will be with you shortly," Callum rushed out, covering the mouthpiece. "My assistant will get you anything you like."

"I'm fine. Take your time. I'll just reply to some emails while I wait." I gave him a reassuring smile before I situated myself on the sofa and pulled out my phone.

Callum groaned, so I looked up and found him with an intense frown as he toyed with his pen, shifting it from finger to finger.

How could such a man look so arrestingly beautiful and still look completely dangerous and provokingly sexy? My mind wandered to the day my brother had brought this British man home and my sixteen-year-old heart had thumped like never before in my life. I had been in awe of that man, to the point where I would literally shake each time our eyes met. Callum was, of course, distant and annoyingly polite, which did little to assuage my fascination no matter how much it should have. Years later, the man was not any different towards me. He continued to not find me engaging enough.

My thoughts wandered around Callum and I was too deep in my

daydreaming to notice that the man himself wasn't on the phone anymore. In fact, he was sitting across from me, possibly wondering if I had early dementia since I was spacing out in the middle of a working day; hell, I couldn't help myself from zoning off whenever he was concerned.

"Stella?" Callum frowned at me, eyes questioning.

Oh, drat. If he only knew my thoughts, I wondered as I hid a smile. "Excuse me? My mind was elsewhere."

"You did look it. Can I get you something to drink? Pastry?" Callum leaned against the singular sofa chair with his elbow planted on the armrest, his fingers cradling his shin and his eyes glued to mine.

Yeah, a tranquilizer would help.

Instead, I pushed my mischievous thoughts aside and focused on what I came here for. "I'm good for now. I'm on pins and needles, so please tell me what this is about? Is it bad news? If it is, how bad is it?"

"Well, this matter actually concerns me and, by association, it affects you." His legs shifted before he continued on. "My family wants me to marry a family friend."

And? I thought impatiently. *Fucking hell.*

"As I have stated to you years back, I don't intend to marry anyone. Besides, I'm already married to you, therefore it's not really an option either way," Callum calmly stated, clearing his throat and, I knew, watching my every move. "I'm calling in a favor, if you will. I need you to be my pretend fiancée for the time being. I need to reassure you that this engagement will be under wraps, so you need not worry about the media finding out."

Like I'd decline it. I was more than willing to be his pretend whatever. "Of course I'd help you, Cal. Come on, you've done so much for me. This is the least I could do." On top of other things... here's a window for you, Stella, grab onto it.

I was half a second away from blurting out a question when he interrupted me. *Drat.*

“I was recently informed that you’re dating a man named Derek? Is he treating you well?” Callum looked at me directly, those razor-sharp, dark eyes pinned me on the spot.

Derek. Huh. Where did I even begin with Derek? *I could lie*, I thought wretchedly. “Well, no. Derek actually broke up with me because—” Dot. Dot... Dot... And dot.

Hell! Shitty, mother hell.

This was humiliating. I bit my lip before looking away, contemplating. *Oh, for fuck’s sakes, this is Callum Kensington!* I was sure nothing was bound to shock this man.

“I’m a virgin and he couldn’t wait any longer. So, uh-huh, I’m better off. Who needs a man like him, really?” I bit my lip, trying to stop my rambling. God knew what else could come out of this loosened mouth of mine.

“A virgin, you say?” Callum asked, flabbergasted. “Huh.” He blinked at me a few times before shaking his head. “I didn’t know such things still existed.”

Yeah, in your world perhaps they didn’t, but they sure did in mine, mister.

Blushing, I tried to ignore the heated look he was giving me. It was as if I was a space alien that had landed on earth; unusual, extrinsic and strange. “Well, you’re looking at one. So I would appreciate it if you don’t ever repeat it again.” I was highly embarrassed, knowing how inexperienced I must look to him. Even though I wanted to be rid of it, I couldn’t—for the life of me—break the promise I had made to my mother.

“Apologies. I wasn’t trying to mock your vaginal purity.”

Seriously, shut up, Callum! *Vaginal purity?* Fuckity-fuck. “Please, just drop the subject.” *Before I die of blushing and embarrassment*, I silently

added.

“Don’t let men like Derek hide you from yourself. You know better than that.”

Oh bugger! I bet now he was probably feeling sorry for me. Well, I was done with that complication. “Since we are on the subject of favors, I was hoping you could do me one as well.” I peered at his stoic form. “I’d like for you to take it... erm, pop my cherry.” Blasted fuck. How in the world did I just utter those words? *Pop my cherry?* How embarrassing.

Callum’s frown deepened as he shifted in his seat again before he cleared his throat and gave me a sexy smirk whilst shaking his head. “How much alcohol have you had for lunch?”

“None.” He leaned forward, scrutinizing me further. “I’m sober, Cal. Not to mention, one hundred percent serious about this.”

“Hold on a second. Walk me through this. I mean—” He scratched his barely-there stubble, looking confused as ever. “You know my reputation, don’t you? I date women for six weeks only, Stella. From that fact alone, I sure as hell am out of the running for taking someone’s innocence. Besides, you should wait for a worthy man, like your husband-to-be. I’m sure he’d appreciate that... that is, if he was into innocent women.”

Goodness, I was practically offering him sex, but he was putting me down mildly. WTF! I was not a little girl anymore. I craved to be in a committed relationship more than anything, however how the heck did I go about it when I couldn’t go all the way through? I mean, there’s only so much hand and blowjobs one could do before it became a dull, tedious chore.

“Let me clear something up for you, okay? I would’ve let any of my boyfriends take it. Heck, I’ve been in so many close calls and there is nothing more that I want right now than to be rid of it. As much as I want to get it over and done with, I can’t for the life of me break a promise.” I licked my

lips, looking at him to see if he was getting my drift. Sure enough, he was waiting for me to go on. “Mom gave me the whole safe sex spiel when I started asking questions about when I could start dating. I wasn’t sure what prompted her, but she made me promise that it’ll be my husband who I gave it to.” I sighed, remembering that memory. “She died two months after, so I hope you understand. If this were the last thing I could do to keep that promise, I’d stick to it. So, now I hope you understand my position. I’m sure it’s easy, Cal. I mean, if it’s *me* in particular, then I wouldn’t mind doing it in the dark.”

“I’ll think about it,” he finally rasped at me, eyes intense.

Sex with Callum...

Fuck.

Yes.

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Chapter 4

Callum

“I’ll think about it,” I heard myself say. Was I truly losing my mind here? Richard would torch me alive if he saw where my mind was taking me right now.

But Christ! Could anyone blame me? Stella came in here, looking like an uptight executive with the tight matching skirt suit outlining everything. She stood there, whilst I stared, half hoping she’d rip her clothes off and seduce me with some thigh-high stockings and bustier.

My reaction to her was normal, but still, it wasn’t a good thing. I wasn’t going to take her as I’d usually done with the women I dated and ravished on sight. I could go with the detached, somewhat clinical route; awkward and uninteresting. Or maybe I could even go in, break it open and then that would be it.

Surely this problem wouldn’t be such a big deal, right? Then why was I sweating profusely when I thought of her underneath me, writhing... legs hooked on my hips...

Really, I needed to think this through before I let my dick decide for me. I mean, it had done a lot of the deciding in the past, yet in this instance, I needed my top brain functioning properly. This was Stella and I’d cut my finger off first before I hurt her.

If this was what she wished in order to have a better chance at healthy intimacy with her boyfriend, then surely I was doing it for a good cause?

“I’ll let you know my decision this weekend. I also forgot to mention that we’re to leave this Friday afternoon and won’t be back until a week after.”

“A week?” Stella squeaked.

“Tell your friend that I’d be more than happy to find a replacement in

your absence. This was, after all, unplanned and I don't want to jeopardize anything for you. You worked hard to get where you are." I genuinely smiled at her, eyes roaming appreciatively. "I'm proud of you, Stella."

"That's very sweet of you, Cal. Thank you. That really means a lot to me." She slowly stood up, purse in hand. "I'll let Luciana know about your offer as well as looking into whether I can take some of my work with me. What time will you be picking me up?"

"I'll be there around four," I responded before getting up from my chair and moving towards her. "And Stella, I need you to pretend that we're madly in love. So, expect that I will be practically glued to your side."

Stella nervously smiled. "Yeah, I sort of knew that. You know, newly engaged and all; so it'll going to be a lark," she rambled, blushing more with every word that came out of her lips "Shit, Cal. I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm nervous. Blaming coffee here; I had over three already."

I arched my brow at her, amused at her reaction. "You sure it's not because you'd be spending a week with me?"

"Love the sense of humor, Cal."

Stella, you are far too lovely for your own good. "See you in two days." I softly brushed my lips against her cheek and then delicately whispered into her ear, "We'll be sharing a room together. I'm sure we'll have a lot of things to discuss."

Stella didn't even say a thing, but instead, she bit into her lip and tried as calmly as possible to leave my office.

"Stella is off-limits, you worthless swine!" I muttered, half hoping that I'd get this under control in two days time.

Clinical route it was. It was the only way possible.

Sexual thoughts in regards to her should be vanished. I wasn't going to succumb to my body's reaction. Heck, I might need to have a healthy dose of

a warm woman's body before I leave in two days. This had to stop and I was damn well going to do it.

Richard and the von Berg's didn't deserve such disrespect.

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Chapter 5

Stella

“My mother and grandmother will be interrogating you, so I apologize in advance,” Callum said as he slowly pulled to the curb. “It just occurred to me that we’re almost there and you haven’t said much since we left London. Are you feeling unwell?”

“What if they don’t like me?” This was one of the things that was eating inside me, but most of all, I didn’t want to disappoint Callum. This was his family and I knew it might sound idiotic to some, yet I wanted him to be proud that I could pull it off without a hitch.

Callum’s eyes danced before he opened his car door and spun around the vehicle towards mine. He pulled my door open and carefully guided me out of the car. I didn’t know what was going on, but we were in a quiet street, with barely any cars passing by.

My thoughts turned into nothing as Callum pressed me against the side of the car.

“You will be fine. We’ll be fine. Take my lead and have fun. There’s nothing to be nervous of. I won’t pull any tricks, Stella. You can trust me that I will always try to be honest with you.”

I knew that and I appreciated that he was trying to soothe my nerves. “You’re a good man, I know. No need to show me twice.”

Callum smirked, making me ogle his darkly angelic beauty. “I’m not all good. I’m sure you know the usual bits I get myself into, but with you, I’ll give it a shot.”

Was I really swooning? Bugger.

“Oh, by the way, I thought we might need this.” Callum pulled something out of his pocket. A ring. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, but I had noticed that

you weren't a fan of diamonds, so I got you an emerald instead. I noticed that your mother had a sapphire one, so I thought this was the closest thing I could get you."

My head simply nodded, speechless at his thoughtfulness.

The drive to his family home was a mere five-minute drive from where he had pulled over. If I thought I was nervous before, I had been wrong. Because the moment his mother appeared in the foyer to greet us, I was thoroughly inspected before she gave me air kisses.

How the hell am I to survive a week here if I was being scrutinized like a specimen already?

~S~

Okay, maybe I overreacted a bit. His mother, Bernice, wasn't as terrifying as I thought at first. She actually had an odd sense of humor; it was off beat to say the least. I found it endearing that she would even try. Doris, his grandmother, was simply over the moon that Callum had actually found a woman to settle down with. Callum was minimal on the touchy feely side, however he was attentive and didn't leave my side once.

Our first night together... let's just say that he and I both got drunk and immediately passed out the moment we saw the bed. I wasn't sure if it was intentional or not, although at this point, I didn't want to sit and ponder on the subject.

My nerves were already strung out as it was.

Now, it was our second night together and I was working when I heard him enter. I didn't even look up as we both said hi to each other. I suppose we had gotten comfortable rather quickly.

"Are you up for a dip in the Jacuzzi?" Callum yelled out somewhere in the room.

Was I? I was working to put together a Fashion Show for Lucia's

mother's annual charity event. It was in three months time and there was still a lot of work to be done.

But...

Though it was our second night, he hadn't said anything about my 'problem' and I suppose a quick dip in the hot tub would help. I really needed to convince him; not in a sexual way, but more on the argument side of things. After all, how hard was it for a man to just shove his darn thing in and get it over with really? I wanted my damn chastity gone. It seemed like it was the culprit for my unlucky strike in the boyfriend department.

Sliding off the chaise lounge, I strolled towards the closet. "I could possibly join you for a bit." My upbeat confidence took a nosedive when I saw him walk out of the bathroom donning navy Armani swimwear. *Bugger.*

"Lovely. Do you prefer indoors or outdoors?" Callum asked, confusing me even more.

I bit my lip, trying not to blush from his question. He probably was thinking about the tub, but I sure as hell wasn't. "Outdoors."

"What do you fancy? Champagne? Wine? Or are we hitting hard liquor tonight?"

"Hard liquor and champagne, please." *Moving to the dark side*, my mind butted in.

If he was surprised at my choice of alcohol, the man didn't even blink twice. Instead, he smiled at me wickedly. "Sounds like my kind of night."

Something better happen tonight or I was going to die of wonderment and frustration.

It didn't take me long to change into my black two-piece swimsuit. Walking outside, I grinned at him while he was lounging in the jacuzzi, both hands stretched out while his head tilted back, stargazing.

"It's a beautiful, warm night," I commented as I dipped my toe in the

pool of water.

When I cocked my head to the side, Callum had his tongue curled on his bottom lip, slightly biting it as his eyes lingered over my body.

Yeah, think of sex, why don't you? I needed this over and done with, I wickedly mused.

My eyes caught the bottle of champagne and vodka, amongst the others. I went to get both before I finally let myself sink into the water.

“Feel like sharing a shot with me?” I was smiling when I offered the shot to him, however when I saw his face, my confidence immediately declined.

He looked menacing.

Volatile.

Predatory.

“What should we toast?” he asked, sounding like a man out for seduction. “Here’s to us, Stella.” Callum lifted his glass, toasting mine. “May the next coming days *fill* you with an extraordinary experience.” He took care to make emphasis on that word.

Oh yeah, this man was onto something. Hopefully, he was onto me; on top, preferably.

After two more chilled shots, I was on fire. Well, technically my body was wired... the need to be touched was getting acute as the seconds ticked by.

“Cal...” I licked my lips, thirsty for him. “I’m waiting,” I whispered, heady and intoxicated as much from the alcohol as from the images of our naked bodies touching.

Callum looked like he was debating, but finally managed to give me an answer after a full minute of silence. “We ought to take this slowly.”

That was a good start. “How *slow* is slow, Callum?”

He shrugged, brushing his hair to the side. He was the epitome of sexy,

disheveled hotness. “Couple more days?”

That was going to take forever! “You’re not serious? What’s the delay? I could pretty well do it myself! Just pull your boxers down and I’ll do the bloody deed.”

I wasn’t bluffing, either, because I was at the tipping point.

Callum gave me a scathing glare. “All right. I’m a *tad* reluctant; petrified even. I’ve never had a virgin before. As I stated to you last, these things are alien to me.”

He was... *scared*? Hell. “Well, fuck.”

“Oh, don’t be daft! I will do it,” Callum grunted, sipping his drink awhile. “I just need to get used to the idea. We might need to practice or something.”

Any ideas, I was open to try. “Okay... *like how*?” I wondered out loud, dragging the damn question out until the rogue playboy got his wits about himself.

His dark eyes twinkled. “I have to see what I have to tackle here.”

I could do this. This was a piece of cake.

“Sure.” I stood up out of the water and ambled towards him. I took a deep breath then pulled my bottom swimwear down without looking at him. I then sat, splayed my legs wide open to his prying eyes. “Do take your time to investigate, Callum.” When I finally managed to look at him, he was simply drinking more of his brandy, not even glancing towards me.

“Richard will haunt me for this,” Callum muttered before gulping the last of his drink, slamming the glass back down on the side.

Before I knew it, he was in between my legs, staring straight through me, serious as hell. “I have to make sure this is what you want, Stella... your brother—”

I had to cut him off because the last thing I needed was for this night to be plagued with guilt or to be centered around thoughts of my brother. He

needed to know that it was more than okay. “I want this, more than anything. I want it done, Cal. *Please.*”

Callum gave me a determined nod and then his thumb touched my parted lips, initiating a slow caress. “Tell me when I’m being too invasive or when it’s painful.”

“Yes.” My breathing caught, willing my body not to succumb to the fluttering in my stomach.

When his thumb finally circled my entrance, Callum suddenly took his thumb out. “Christ, Stella, this hole is tiny.” I felt his thumb apply a light pressure to the outer wall of the entrance, seeking passage. “Am I hurting you?”

Biting my lip, I gave a quick shake of my head. I was nervous, yet out of my mind aroused from the look of wonderment I saw on Callum’s face. Though we were being all technical, I didn’t feel strange at all. Callum touching me intimately felt... right.

“Stella...” he whispered against my ear. “Stop me when it gets to be too much, I mean it.” His finger deepened; exploring, stroking.

Like hell I would. Not in this lifetime. I loved it far too much to even think of the possibility.

“Don’t stop. You feel good.” My hands clutched against him while my legs were on his sides, drawing him into me. “Callum,” I choked out, needing more. When he bit into my ear lobe, I cried out his name as my hands effortlessly pulled his trunks down, freeing his cock. When I was about to reach out and grab it, Callum moved my hand away.

“Do you want to take this to the bedroom?” Callum murmured, now scrutinizing me.

“Yes, I’d like that.” I was breathless.

I needed more of him. It was insane, but when he untangled himself from

me, I felt somehow distraught, saddened.

Shaking myself of the confusing emotions, I took his outstretched hand. In a comfortable silence, we immediately left the jacuzzi and went indoors. The journey seemed to take forever as we ascended the stairs and sought our bedroom. Before, I was brazen, however as the seconds passed, I was becoming nervous. I knew he wasn't planning on doing it yet, but the thought of him touching me intimately again, merely having him close to me, sent delicious shivers all over my body.

Fuck, I was going to be in big trouble. *Please, please, don't let me completely fall for him*, I silently begged. Knowing Callum's record, I didn't have a chance in hell of surviving if I did. So I had to look at this from a non-romantic vantage point because, if I didn't, I was on my own. I knew how Callum worked, therefore I had better get it together and enjoy what he was willing to gift me.

As chaotic and riotous as my thoughts were, they immediately drifted off the moment we entered the bedroom chambers.

My body was strung out, alert and ready to be raided.

I was far too ready for this.

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Chapter 6

Callum

My eyes raved all over her now naked body on the bed, legs partially parted, indicating that she was a tad shy but yet willing to pull through if I asked her to spread wider.

I wasn't sure if it was because we were in the bedroom that she seemed so reluctant to open herself to me, because she didn't seem shy when she was urging me on a less than ten minutes ago.

My initial plan to be indifferent was certainly out of the question now as I watched Stella look at me with questioning eyes—probably wondering why I haven't moved an inch and take that innocence she's offering to me.

That's the thing about me that I knew so well... I don't fuck slow. I fuck hard and fast. Slow was for love making, which was not part of my agenda. So if I had to go through this ordeal, I might have to go beyond than what I was normally comfortable with, which was another thing that daunted me starting this whole process.

Two days, I said, but how sure was I that I could hold off for that long a time?

Tonight was about her...pleasing her while I tested her body, pushing it further so that it could easily take me when I did finally take her. I didn't want to overwhelm her with my size, especially for a virgin, because I could easily rip her apart.

Hell it was her first time, so I wanted this experience to be memorable, but most of all, I wanted her to enjoy it too.

“Open your legs for me.” I commanded, still rooted on the spot, eyes not leaving her now spread pussy, glistening with temptation. My dick was begging to be released from its confinement, but I wasn't having any of that.

“Touch yourself, Stella.” I heard her sharp intake of breath. “Are you toying with me, Cal?” she questioned skeptically. The last thing I wanted was to toy as she put it, because the fevered way my body was responding to her was feral. So no, I didn’t want to toy. I wanted to fuck our brains out, but I knew I couldn’t because *this* was Stella.

“No... I am not.” Since my urgings were far more damaging than pleasurable considering her virginal state, I had to be creative. After all, the main goal here was to get Stella well stimulated, energized and...wanting.

When she didn’t do as I asked, I had no choice but to settle next to her and part her legs with no resistance. Her pussy was stirring all kinds of things in my head. With the use of my thumb, I reached out and rubbed the clitoral area, focusing on that little button that seemed to evoke the sexiest moans from her.

“Do you touch yourself, Stella?” She pressed her lips together before nodding. “Sometimes...” Still rubbing her clit, I looked into her eyes and not down south. It

was a fight not to, but I had to play a role here—well, for as long as I could keep it up. “How do you like me touching you now?”

Her breathing hitched. Her rosy buds looked too inviting, but I knew I had to take my time, much to my throbbing dick’s disapproval.

“You feel good, Cal—”

Fuck... “Open your legs further apart, I want to taste you.” What? How the heck did that come about? I was planning to play with her clit, but my mouth seemed to have a mind of its own.

Desire pooled those crystal eyes and I yearned to see the heat burn into her eyes—burning for me.

My trail of thoughts was shocking to me, but I wasn’t going to lie, the

thought of taking her virginity kept my blood boiling. The animal in me—the possessive part—rejoiced at the thought of being her first man.

She was pure, untouched and delectable. What more could I ask? I was sure, from here on out, each time I thought of Stella, I would always be transported to the time I took her purity.

Stella splayed into this position was pushing my limits. Her hymen—the tiny skin—was evident from my view.

Moving onto the bed, I situated myself on my knees in between her thighs. Her heady musky scent made my senses sing. The sight of her pink, *untried slit*, was epic beauty for my eyes.

“My God!” Stella yelped as my tongue took a long swipe against her sweet cunt.

It all went a little crazy from there.

Her moans took me to the edge of my resistance as I devoured her juicy pussy. Stella writhing, lifting her hips, offering it more as I sucked on her essence, was the hottest thing to witness.

I didn't know what was more of a torture: Stella's moans or her body's reaction to my ministrations.

But I knew I had to do something to relieve myself, so I had to pull my cock out of my swim shorts and stroke it slowly. A few minutes

later, my hips started to grind on their own accord, humping the sheets of the bed as I paid homage to her sweetness.

“Callum!” she panted out, eyes closed. “Shit! I'm coming.” And did she just that...exploded into my mouth. I was a blue ball of racketing pain as I eyed her slit. I hated myself for giving in, but I had to ask her...or I wasn't going to be able to sleep tonight. A quick stroke in the bathroom wasn't going to do the trick, I knew that much.

“Would it be okay if I penetrate you with the head? I’m not going all in. I’ll stop before I break the barrier.”

Eyes still closed, she whispered her response. “Anything you want from me, Cal take it.”

This woman was divine. I didn’t need to be told twice, I was going in. “Hell. *Christ*, Stella.” I groaned out, while I watched as the head of my shaft pressed against her small entrance, forcing its way in. I felt her tight muscle give in, springing it open as I slid into her, ever so gently.

Stella immediately tensed, but didn’t say a thing, so I kept pushing in until I felt her barrier. My head expanded, throbbing inside her. Her wetness and tightness got my hips rolling, surging for more—for my own relief. Pulling the head back out, I watched again as it pried her aching entrance.

A few more times like that and Stella was already begging me to get it over with. As much as I wanted to get it over with, I knew tonight wasn’t the time.

Stella writhed as she watched our semi-adjoining sexes and went simply livid. “Take me, Cal—just fucking take me!” She demanded, lost in the paradise of euphoric sensations as I upped my speed. Before I knew it, I was readying to come.

A torn pained sound came out of me as I fucked her harder. I was panting hard as I pulled out my cock, stroked it and came all over her pussy, covering it with my white essence.

Fuck, I barely made it out. Fuck! I collapsed on her side, a small smile forming on my lips. “That was amazing!” Stella murmured sleepily. Stella had no idea just how amazing it could get... we barely just started.

~C~

The next day, I watched as Stella strolled towards the gardens, deep in

thought. My family's persistent questioning might be a big part to her sudden somber quietness. My grandmother, and most especially my mother, certainly didn't hold back tonight.

To an extent, this was my fault because I had asked for a favor. All I have to do now was to figure out a way to put that stunning smile back on her face. The blatant way I admitted that I found Stella beautiful brought something out of me, like a sense of protectiveness to the calm, always composed beguiling beauty.

Stella may not be the prettiest woman I know, but there was something about her that put me at ease. Her presence alone soothed me. The reasons I could think were: that she was Richard's sister. Her sunny presence was infectious. Lastly, I was extremely comfortable and at ease with her. Not once did I feel like I had to pretend to be someone I was not, and I liked that a lot.

In some ways, her presence never failed to make me feel...happy, perhaps?

After all, her family treated me with love and kindness. For that, I will always be grateful and I would do anything to protect the only thing that was left of them here.

After last night's taste of what was yet to come, I couldn't look at Stella the way I used to. I was looking forward to how she was going to be when I fully broke her in, tested, oiled and gunned to the hilt.

No matter what happens after tomorrow night, I will always treat Stella with kindness and respect.

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Chapter 7

Callum

After ten minutes of waiting for Stella to emerge from the garden, I got impatient, went outside and followed the route she walked through.

It was dark, but there was solar lighting surrounding the area. I saw the back of her figure, staring out the lake with the moon high above her. I should've stayed put and left her alone in peace, but I couldn't.

After last night, something shifted in me and things became...*different*.

As I approached, Stella looked back and gave me a small . Once I reached her, my arms encircled around her stomach as I slowly pushed her back against my body. "Feel like having some company?" I murmured against her ear.

Stella tilted her head to the side, smiling. "I like your company very much, Callum."

"Everything okay?" I asked, now worried that she might have second thoughts.

Stella gave a small sigh. "Work. It's stressful sometimes."

Very much relieved by her answer, I whispered against her ear. "Press your back against my body." She did. "Relax." She let out another sigh when my hand massaged the back of her neck, where her head and neck connected. I started out slow but with deep pressure, just enough to release good blood circulation. "Now breathe."

Stella was now limp in my arms as she gave out small pleasurable moans. "What's in your thoughts now?"

"You."

You...the way she said it turned me on, badly. After last night, each time I glanced at her, my cock twitched. Even when she was discussing the news

during dinner, my cock twitched underneath the table, because all I could think about was her, *like this*.

She was hypnotizing me and I couldn't, for the life of me, hold back some of the pent up frustration. I wanted a taste of what was to come tomorrow night.

Since her eyes were shut, I weaved into her thoughts. "Listen to my voice. Hear the deep note. The heavy timbre." My hand rested against her belly, slowly tracing it in circles, as my nose breathed her neck in. "Learn my sound." Foreplay was vital in sex and I wanted her panting for me.

Beg for me.

Stella's breathing became ragged, as did mine, but I continued on. "This way, we understand each other's needs by listening." Her lips were now parted when my hand trailed on her breasts, my thumb grazing the valley before it vanished inside, cupping one breast.

"Feel my touch." I kneaded it, before my thumb and finger found her rosebud and made a small tug at it. Stella yelped at the slight pressure. "Know its warmth. It's presence on your skin." I nibbled on her lobe as I pressed my hardened dick against her bottom. "Through touching, we are aware of each other's desires."

My other free hand roamed, past her stomach, towards her parted legs. "The most important one to commit into your memory *is my smell*." I shifted my shoulder a little so her face buried into my neck, eyes still closed and lips slightly parted as she listened to my voice. "There's no man out there that will smell exactly like me."

"Nor will I ever forget yours," I rasped out. I almost lost my bearings when I found that she didn't have any knickers on. "I've ingrained it in my memory. My body knows you." My dick definitely acknowledged her presence. "It's all based on instincts, to alert one of its mate."

“There is nothing much more powerful than the beauty of your mind. Once I have been programmed into your memory, you will always remember my touch, my voice and my smell.” I rubbed her clit, making her delirious with need. “There is nothing more erotic than a woman who knows its mate by these animal instincts alone. I’m imbedded, consciously and subconsciously.” *And I was one animal ready to pounce on her.* Her wetness, the musky scent that I laved on last night made me want to taste a drop of her nectar; but Stella was making it difficult for me to think because her hand reached inside my trousers and started to stroke me, hard.

“You’ll feel and see me in your dreams.” I was now burning with fierce desire as she pushed my pants down.

We were busy touching each other as I pulled us towards the nearest tree and took her dress off her body. Her breasts were high, aroused and begging to be kissed.

I trailed kisses, but my cock kept nudging and sliding around her entrance.

“Callum, fucking Hell, just take me, please.” She whimpered, pulling and raking my hair as she grinded her hips on my length.

“I’m not going to take you until you learn this skill. I need your absolute surrender. Only then, I will take you. I want this experience to be entrenched in your memory, because I won’t let you ever forget it...nor will I let you forget me.”

“I promise...please.”

I wanted to...fuck! But we were around the damn lake. Not to mention it was her first time...my thoughts left me when I felt her guide my cock in her pussy and pressed down, hard.

My cocked expanded as I stilled, looking down on her yelping face from the pain. I felt the wall of her purity, and I felt it break open—it felt like it

was peeling my cock due to its tightness—and it still felt like it now even without it. She was wet but her walls weren't used to a man, and she was squeezing me leaving me breathless. And my God, it was too beautiful to even describe.

I understood now...why men chased virgins back in the day.

I was so caught up with the feeling of her pussy that when Stella finally opened her eyes, her gray orbs held me in place.

“Fuck me.” She demanded.

My eyes never left hers as I did what she asked of me. I watched her come apart in my arms.

I knew after tonight, I had just found something new—like a newfound drug—that could easily put me in harm's way. But like new drugs, one always keeps coming back to it, telling himself that this would be the last time.

That was me.

One night wasn't enough, so I had to take her again the day after...and then the next.

Before I knew it, the entire week passed us by...and now I had to think where to go from here.

Chapter 8

Callum

“Let’s make this as an arrangement.” I nipped around her nipple, readying for round two.

Okay, I wasn’t planning on this kind of proposal, however the words left my lips anyway, and now that I thought about it, since we were both enjoying each other a lot, why not make the most of it? As long as we kept it plain and simple—and *strictly about physical satisfaction*—then I didn’t see a problem with it.

“An arrangement?” Her brow furrowed.

The one I always had, the very same one. “I can only do six weeks when I date women, Stella. If I go over that time frame, women tend to fall in love with me and I simply can’t have that.”

No. Love definitely was not part of any deal. Zara had taken all the love away from me. She wrecked me. Guted my heart, stomped on it and made it bleed until it was all dried out. I was never going to get over her... nor was I ever going to get past what she’d done to me.

In some twisted way, I was still hers because I wasn’t able to move on away from her memory. Each time I wanted to try and get past it, her betrayal would resurface.

Stella’s soft hand brushed against my cheek, bringing me to the present. “That must be difficult,” she observed, not responding to my imperative question.

Six weeks with Stella... she definitely would come out experienced because I could teach and show her a lot of things, if she’d let me. “Yes... but what do you think?” I pressed on, growing hard inside her again as I slowly rolled my hips in and out of her.

My dick was insatiable when it came to her. She milked me too well. A man was bound to be addicted to the tightest, wettest pussy he'd ever had, right? She was all I could think about. Her with me buried ten inches inside her.

My excitement turned into worry when I saw hesitation in her eyes.

“Cal—should I feel flattered that you even want me for six weeks?” She'd given me a grin, an uneasy one. “Let's stick to the plan, okay? We leave everything here and we'll go back to how we were before this happened.”

I knew the plan well, I truly did, yet this was something to be explored... well, for me anyway. I suppose she didn't feel the same. Maybe she was ready to explore her sexuality with someone else. Well, whatever it was, I wasn't pleased at all. In fact, I was bothered.

“*Is there a man?* I noticed Derek's been calling you quite a lot.” I wasn't jealous or anything because that was just not me... but I was getting royally irritated for some reason.

She looked to the side, avoiding my gaze. “Derek wants me back.”

Of course he did, I knew the jerk was going to. Men tended to go ballistic when they couldn't get something they wanted so badly. He had probably manipulated the entire breakup to make Stella realize that she'd have to give it up to keep him happy. If that were the case, he was a soddy bastard. The big question was, what was Stella going to do about Derek?

“And?” I frowned, wanting for her to elaborate. “Are you going to?”

“Derek... well, I'm not so sure. I liked him a lot.”

Ahhh, there it was, she still liked the man. Still. After what had happened between us... she *still* liked Derek. “That's understandable.” I tried to sound convincing; however I wasn't even fooling myself.

Grey eyes sought mine. “This has been amazing, Cal. I can't thank you

enough, but I might see Derek again...”

Derek. AGAIN. The sound of her saying another man’s name pushed me to go in deeper, harder, as though I needed to make a point about who was in charge of the situation. However, what troubled me was that I didn’t like the feelings her statement had evoked in me. It truly was disconcerting. So I reacted like any other man would, insecure and a tad irrational.

I had to make her scream my name as my dick fucked her to the deep end. Her pussy was the greatest I’d ever graced. As disappointed as I was to leave it, I knew I had to respect Stella’s decision.

One offer. That was all.

I never gave out a second invitation, even though Stella was the first woman to decline it without thought. Her immediate rejection was new to me, true, but I wasn’t going to risk being declined twice.

My ego couldn’t take it; not from her.

It stung. It shouldn’t have, though for fuck’s sake, it fucking did.

Sleep completely left me because my mind was bombarded with questions.

Tomorrow was a new day, one where I had to put this past week aside; leave it where I couldn’t remember it often or, better yet, forget it completely.

Yeah, I had to forget about her come tomorrow.

When dawn broke in, I was wide-awake and contemplating if I should enjoy a last taste of the woman who was lying right next to me, naked. We were leaving right after breakfast and I there wasn’t much time to consider it.

Finally, I decided to hold off.

Sex was something I could get anywhere, but I shouldn’t take advantage of her when she was thinking of going back to her ex-boyfriend.

Rolling to my side, I reached out to gently trace the curve of her breast, her bottom lip and her arm. Stella looked so peaceful and simply

breathtaking. Her gentle beauty evoked something in me.

Stella, my ephemeral wife.

We consummated the marriage after three years. In the eyes of the law, she was mine.

I had to mentally put the brakes on where this train of thought was heading. Going there wasn't a feasible idea.

I had to stay in this secured circle because once I ventured out of it, she could potentially get hurt.

No, Stella deserved a good man, a great man.

I surely wasn't one.

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Chapter 9

Stella

The first few days of waking up alone in my bed was weird, but after the fourth day—thank goodness—I was almost back to normal. A week wrapped in his arms and I was reduced to being a sentimental idiot.

Yeah, the first week was difficult. Since we both agreed that we were going to go back to how things had been between us. I somehow still expected something, though. Maybe a text or a phone call, possibly even flowers selected by Eleanor; something. I hadn't expected this nothingness. When I insisted on going back to our normal life, I wasn't completely expecting the *usual* normal. Okay, did that even make sense? Yeah, I was dwelling on Callum for reasons I couldn't even understand.

Or maybe it was because I declined his arrangement proposal... when I had desperately wanted to say yes. The major thing was, I was reluctant and scared to say yes. If it were any other man, it wouldn't have been difficult, but this was Callum; the man who I'd had a big crush on since I was fifteen. Not to mention the blatant fact that I always ended up getting all hot and bothered when he was around. It was great and all, yet I didn't want to risk falling for him. My first boyfriend was a playboy, too—much like Callum—and I had ended up getting my heart broken when I caught him cheating.

Besides, Callum had done so much for me already. I couldn't risk ruining our friendship, or what was left of it anyway.

It had been almost two weeks since he dropped me off in my flat... and still he lingered in my thoughts. Yeah, I'd been counting down the days, wondering when this feeling would subside. I was giving myself another week, two maybe, a month total to get back to normal. If there was no improvement by the end of the month, I was going to be in big trouble.

Unfortunately.

“Hiya, sweet cheeks!” Mark knocked before letting himself into my office, carrying coffee with him. “Thought a good caffeine boost would do you a world of good, sour puss.” He slid the lidded cup towards me, grinning like mad.

“Don’t get a habit of calling me that, Mark. I loathe it,” I muttered, sipping from my hot beverage.

“Your loss.”

I rolled my eyes as I got up from my seat and strolled towards the comfortable sofa I sometimes took naps on. “Aren’t you supposed to be working with Alec or something? What are you doing here at two in the afternoon?”

Mark plopped next to me, tickling my footpads. “Well, I came to remind you about the dinner reservations we have tonight and the cocktail party afterwards for Alec’s birthday bash?”

“Stop it.” I tried to kick him, but he was too quick for my own good.

“Tickle fight!” he declared.

I was making a lot of “squees” and a lot of giggling because he was attacking me relentlessly.

Our little foot and fingers war halted when we heard the sound of a throat being cleared, as if to try to get our attention. Mark looked up as I twisted my neck to the side to see who it was.

It was Lucia, looking furious... next to a stoic-looking Callum.

“Are we interrupting?” Lucia raised her brow, green eyes murderous.

Mark casually shook his head. “We’re just relaxing a bit. Anything we can help you with?” He darted Callum a steady gaze. “Kensington, right?”

Duh. He knew who Callum was, so why pretend like he didn’t? Mark was such a wanker.

Callum, however, was detached and completely ignored him. “Stella, may we have a moment?”

Not looking directly at him, I blushed. “Yeah, sure,” I grumbled, shifting my skirt that had ridden upwards.

Shit.

“You can let go of her foot now,” Callum demanded, voice chilly and with an underlying threat evident in how he said the words.

Mark, the total teaser geezer that he was, seemed unfazed as he eyed me with amusement. He even had the gall to kiss my big toe before he whispered into my ear, “Looks like big bad wolf is the jealous type. I love you, but please be cautious with him? He’s not like Derek. He’ll annihilate you like the rest of them.” Mark then kissed my cheek and then stood up. “See you tonight. By the way, don’t forget to look smashing hot.” He departed with those words, not even making an effort to greet Lucia.

The woman was sending me murderous glares as she looked at the open door and then back at me. She made a scary growl before she walked out of my office, slamming the door with her.

Fuck, she was mad.

Mark and I always fooled around like kids, what was the big deal now? Was I missing something here?

“*Was that Derek?*” Callum broke through my thoughts.

Still not glancing his way, I shook my head and tried to compose myself as I slowly stood up and placed my foot into my shoe, one after the other, with care. “No, that was Mark, the other man in my life.” I always referred to my best friend as such, but when I finally met his gaze, I began wondering if my words were taken in the wrong context.

Seeing him now, it seemed like I had reverted back to the woman I was when we had been together. I wanted to fight the pulling power he had over

me, but the images of him touching me explicitly in the garden—his touch, his seductive voice that lulled me into a deep sexual coma and the power this man exuded—placed me back in a capsule, one where I could only see him. I couldn't hear anyone except him.

I bit into my bottom lip as I recalled the first time I felt him nudge inside me. My body had reacted in a manner that was of a nympho, but God help me, the images were driving me insane and I couldn't help other than to clench to prolong the heated memories in my mind. It was arousing. Intoxicating. Titillating.

“How many are there?”

Wait, what? Blinking a few times, I frowned at him. “Excuse me?” Did I miss something? I didn't notice him speak at all... in fact, I was almost sure he was having the same thoughts as I was. Guess my imagination was getting the best of me... I was clearly seeing things.

Callum remained close to the door, not bothering to move or greet me ‘hello’. “You said Mark was the other man in your life. I'm asking how *many men* are there.”

“Um, not a lot.” I smiled, trying to lighten the mood in the room. “My number is not like yours. Not that I want it to be, of course.” My smile flittered away when I noticed his jaw had locked together. “I mean, your numbers must be impressive, but I'm not planning to run around London and match yours... well, um, I wasn't trying to insult you. Goodness, that wasn't my intention.” Fucking shitty hell. I was rambling on and I knew I should've stopped when I saw his jaws pressed together. Why, oh, why did I always act like a fool when he was around?

“Can I get you anything, a drink perhaps? Sorry, but I forgot the reason for your visit, Cal.” Strolling towards my desk, I was about to get ahold of my phone to call for refreshments when he interrupted me.

“I don’t need a drink or anything else, I’m not staying long. We haven’t spoken in days and I was already around this area, so I thought I should drop by and say hello. It was a momentary lapse; I apologize for interrupting your working afternoon. I’ll see you around.” Callum paused for a moment, eyes penetrating into me before he spun around and left my office.

“*What the fuck was that?*” I whispered into my silent room, bewildered.

If he wanted to say *hello*, then why was he acting all standoffish? Confused, I darted out of my room and quickly strode towards the elevator to see if I could catch him, but Luciana blocked my way.

“Is there something going on between Mark and you that I should know about? We’re all best of friends. I would greatly appreciate it if I was informed first.”

Whoa, where was she going with this? Mark and *me*? Was she serious? The guy was practically salivating at her feet. “This is a stupid joke, right? We both know he loves his Italian women. I have to go.” I tried to move away, but she darted me a scathing glare. AGAIN.

“You two looked too comfortable. More like intimate... lovers.” Luciana looked pained when she uttered the last word. I was about to argue with her when I noticed that her eyes were getting teary. “Please, just tell me if there is or if he’s trying to get into your knickers. Italian fetish or not, you’re a gorgeous woman, Stella. Any man would be blind not to want you.”

Oh my God, she was practically crying. Fuck. I cupped her cheeks, pleading. “Sweetie, I don’t fancy Mark that way, nor does he feel that towards me.” I paused, letting all the words sink in. “He wants you and yet you have rejected him for the past few years. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think your feelings for him are changing and if they are, don’t you think it’s time to tell him that?”

Luciana shook her head. “I can’t. I’m frightened. He might laugh at me. I

don't know," she murmured, dabbing her eyes carefully. "Don't mention anything to him. Maybe in time, I just might. For now, though, let's keep it between you and me."

"Of course." I nodded before I watched her slowly walk away.

Luciana paused mid-way, giving me a small smile. "Thanks for being honest with me, S." She walked a few steps as did I, but whistled at me again to catch my attention. "By the way, I forgot to ask, what did one of England's most notorious players want from you? FW is no more?"

FW. Fake Wife.

"Ha! Still am and I doubt it will ever change. So don't get any ideas," I blurted out.

As I watched Luciana retreat back into her office, I was left wondering about Callum's visit.

Calling him would not be enough. Maybe I should stop by at his home and what? Talk... about how awkward it was this afternoon?

I sighed, dejected as I shook my head, retreating back into my office.

No. I should let bygones be bygones and have fun at Alec's party.

Chapter 10

Stella

Luciana decided to skip dinner tonight and went on a date instead, promising to meet me at the party later on. When I tried to argue that she needed to talk to Mark about her feelings, she gave me the evil eye. “I’m not ready for that. He’s going to be all over the woman he’s dating. You know, the one he’s been yapping about non-stop? So, why the hell should I pull him aside and talk about my feelings when he’s pretty much over it?”

Why was she being difficult? I groaned, wanting to hug and shake her good. “You won’t know until you’ve done it. Why don’t you want to risk it, Lu? Mark’s worth it.”

“I’m just... I don’t know, *okay*? No more about him for tonight. I can’t take it anymore.”

I nodded, understanding her situation. It was obvious that she feared Mark’s rejection. “If you say so. You’re the boss.”

Luciana flung herself through the air and hugged me. “And you’re the best!”

Almost an hour later, I was on my way to meet them for dinner in Notting Hill when I found myself telling the driver to change route and head towards Callum’s house in Chelsea.

It was drastic and unplanned... but I couldn’t get him out of my head. If I had to go on all night long wondering if he had dropped by my office because he might have wanted to ask again about his proposal, I couldn’t get past it.

You see, had he asked, I would’ve said *yes*, right then and there.

I was now standing on his doorstep, buzzing on the doorbell. It had been three years since I had been in his home. I had stayed in a hotel suite before I went into finishing school, but I remembered his home fairly well.

Half expecting to find Callum opening the door, I was relieved to find Nancy, his housekeeper who had been working for him for over a decade, greeted me with a toothy grin. “Miss Stella, lovely to see you again. You promised to visit me, yeah? But not once did you come and share teatime with me.” She gathered me into her warm embrace and patted my back, hard, before she took hold of my hands and admired me from head to foot. “You’ve grown into a fine young lady, Miss Stella. Now, how many hearts have your broken since I saw you last?”

Dear me. I grinned at Nancy. “You’re still as lovely as ever. I promise to drop by often.” I cleared my throat. “Is Callum home? I wanted to speak to him.”

Nancy snorted, grinning wickedly. “Boss is a tad busy, love, but you can wait in his study. He always hides in there after.” She closed the door behind me. “Let me show you the way.”

“It’s all right, Nancy. I know where it is, there’s no need to trouble you,” I offered, knowing that Nancy was going to retire for the night. She always left after dinner, she told me herself years ago. “You have a goodnight.”

“You, too, love. I’ll see you soon, yeah?” She hugged me again and then left me in the foyer.

Nancy knew the story behind Callum and I. She probably thought I was here about my funds or something related to my estate.

Nervous and jumpy, I strolled towards his study while I took in the paintings and my surroundings with newfound interest. His study was situated on the left wing, facing the gardens. I was about to turn left and head straight, but something halted my step.

My stomach recoiled.

My body tightened.

My heart thumped.

Eyes alert as they took in everything, moving towards the god-awful noise I had just heard. It was a faint sound.

So faint, in fact, that I wouldn't have heard it if the house hadn't been all that silent, but it was and I had heard it. It was a woman moaning *Callum*.

I was a glutton for punishment since I already knew what was going on, but something inside me needed reaffirmation, the need to see it—hear it again—was too much to even consider walking away. I needed evidence to convince me that it was truly happening.

A crashing sound came from the formal dining room as I slowly walked towards it.

The moans were getting louder now.

I bit into my bottom lip when I heard a familiar grunt. The grunt was an indication that he was about to finish.

And there it was.

Callum had the woman atop the antique dining table, obliterating the redhead to a pulp.

Move, Stella. Move.

However, I seriously couldn't. I gasped loudly as he got rougher, but I suppose my gasp was loud enough for him to hear because Callum looked up, just as he was about to orgasm, shooting me those dark depths as he thrust for the last time. "Stella!" he groaned before I saw him surrender to his body.

Pressing my eyes together, I spun around and quietly left, headed towards the door, wanting this moment to vanish from my memory.

I was shocked. I was disappointed. I was a lot of things. Most of all, why did I feel hurt?

Callum and I were nothing.

I was out of his house in a flash and had to pause a few steps down to calm myself. My hands were shaky and I was breathing erratically. Then my

heart jumped into my throat when I noticed someone was behind me.

“Stella?”

I registered the surprise in his voice.

It’s fine.

I can do this, I silently urged myself to be a civilized woman. *Paste a smile then all will be well*, I chanted in my mind before I had the capacity to turn around and face him.

Him.

All bare except his trousers on, zippered and unbuttoned. Hair in his usual disheveled state. Even if the urge to cry was high, I still noticed how gorgeous he was. This was truly quite out of character.

Huffing out a tiresome sigh, I spoke, as calmly as possible. “I hope I didn’t interrupt your night. Of course I should’ve thought that you’d be entertaining, but I wasn’t thinking properly.” He was still looking at me strangely. Great, fuck. Here comes the grandest excuse, but it was ingenious. “I came here to invite you to the fundraiser the Pisano’s are throwing.” My clutch purse was semi open so it was easy to take it out and hand him the invitation. “It’s two months from now,” I continued. “Uh, I really should get going and let you go back to your friend. Have a goodnight.” A tiny strand of hair fell off my loose chignon so I had to curl it behind my ear.

Our eyes clashed. His looked confused while I remained undisclosed as to why I really came here in the first place

Just when I was about to hail a cab, Callum finally found his vocals. “You came here at eight at night to drop me an invitation? *Are you fucking with me?*”

If only. “Yes, I came here specifically about the invitation, and no, I’m certainly not fucking with you. The woman inside is.” The redhead, who was probably still naked on the table, readying herself for dessert ‘cause the main

course sure looked like it was a bloody success.

Angry, I hailed a cab, needing to get away from here. Luciana better come through tonight because I needed to vent or simply party and drown myself with great amounts of alcohol. Maybe I might even fancy a hot bloke to get hot and heavy with.

“You’re dressed to party.”

Oh, he was still standing there? The cab was now parked, waiting for me. “Yes,” I responded before heading towards it, not bothering to say goodbye as I opened the door and went inside. Just before I was to close it, he came up to me again.

What now?

“Wait!” Callum was now holding the cab door open while I sat there, bothered and speechless. “Stella—I—” he paused, seeking my face. I suppose we both mirrored each other quite well. Confused. “Stay safe tonight.”

“Always.” I nodded and then watched as he slammed the door shut and retreated inside his home again.

How many times will he be spending time in between her legs tonight? I thought rottenly as jealousy ate me whole. Truly, why should I be jealous? He did me a favor. A favor I practically begged him for. I should be grateful.

Callum never wanted me in that sense. He did as I asked, so I shouldn’t be even sulking when he had now moved on. He was fucking Callum Kensington for fuck’s sake! Women like me didn’t have a chance to compete and satiate the likes of his kind.

I should be feeling celebratory. I mean, after all, I wasn’t a virgin anymore. Wasn’t it time for me to explore sexuality and maybe find a great man to lose myself in? I wanted to be in a relationship and, well, tonight was as good as any to start prowling for one.

Chapter 11

Stella

“Are you ready to accept my invitation yet?” Clive Barrington kissed both of my cheeks, lingering by my ear a tad longer than anticipated. I had barely just gotten here and the first person to see me arrive was Clive, another bloody playboy.

He was good friends with Alec, but his family was making the round in the news because his cousin, Blake Knightly, had recently gotten hitched to Sienna, one of my interns. Knightly was known for being the hottest man to walk on earth, but apart from that fact, the man was a genius in the business arena. Now, if I could get a passionate man like that myself, a man who fell hard—so hard for his woman that he was willing to risk his life for her—then I would be the luckiest woman alive.

Knightly’s cousin, on the other hand, was without question *not* that man. Don’t get me wrong, Clive was a handsome man, but he was one who always liked everything in twos, including women in his life.

“Don’t worry, Clive, the second I realize I’m into ménage à trois, you’re the first on my list to call.”

Blue eyes sparkled at me, trying to work his devilish playboy charms on me. “Hey—hey, now you’re hurting my ego. I can very well manage one woman at a time. Have dinner with me. I won’t let you down.”

Playboys were into games. I wanted a regular man. “Clive—”

He pressed closer, lifting my chin up to him. “Let me be really honest with you. I do like you, Stella. I think you’re stunning, but most of all, you’re easy to talk to. I like that about you, but there is another motive, perhaps as to why I’m being such a pest.” He paused, gathering courage. “My parents want to see a healthy dating lifestyle. I was hoping if you could show me—help me

even.” Clive held up his hands. “I swear, on my honor and all of my cousin’s, I will not attempt anything sexual.”

“Are your parents trying to make you like your cousin? I doubt that’s possible. You’re too wild, Clive.” I grinned harder when he appeared to look hurt.

“I love my baby cousin, but for fuck’s sakes, I’m fucking done being compared to him. Too bad I’m not a genius whizz. I don’t fucking speak five different languages or flip failing businesses into successful ones, but I’m a good guy inside. I may like sex for far too much most nights, but I have a compassionate heart. I’m not selfish. Besides, I make the best goddamned cupcakes in all of England.”

“*Cupcakes?* The chocolate kind?”

“Any kind you like.”

Goodness, Clive. I adored cupcakes. “You’re joking.”

He cocked his head to the side, flirty. “A little. I confess I get the boxed ones, but I do add some more chocolate in and make it my own. Hell, all that matters is that I made them. The rest is just useless details.”

“Impressive.”

He laughed. “You haven’t seen me in action yet.”

Hooking my arm around his, I led us inside the bar where everyone was celebrating. “Start impressing me, Barrington. I’ll let you know my answer by the end of the night.”

“Game on, heiress.” Clive winked at me.

Was it just a little less than an hour ago when I had been with Callum, feeling like the world had practically collapsed on my feet? I was teary and beyond saddened when I realized he was moving on. Yet, look at me now, I might have been feeling hurt deep inside because I missed a good chance of being with him when I declined his offer, but here was another opportunity

for me to get to know a potential man. Clive was still questionable based from his reputation, but honestly, the man was funny and didn't take things seriously.

Maybe I needed a fresh start.

Who was I to judge? I had begged a man to take my v-card.

Pathetic didn't fit me.

Sad did.

~S~

The next day, Clive surprised me by picking me up from the office and taking me back to his home. Mind you, the man was serious about his baking capabilities. The cupcakes were divine. I had such fun with him that I forgot tomorrow was a working day and I consumed way too much champagne and wine.

I was knackered and beyond ready to call it a night.

“You can stay the night here. I can guarantee that I won't even cop a feel until you beg me a few times. Then, I'm afraid, I'll have to give in.” His blue eyes mocked me while I simply rolled my eyes at him.

It was time that I lived a little. It was time to have fun. It wasn't like I was going to shag him. No, of course not... but I missed being held. A lot. “I need a spare toothbrush and a shirt I can sleep in.”

“You're quite sure that you'll be able to resist me all night?” he teased as he helped me to my feet.

“I will be in a coma soon, so you can forget about any of that,” I muttered, yawning.

He led us upstairs while his arm comfortably rested on my hip.

“There are clothes that are new in the next room. You can get whatever you need so you can go straight to work tomorrow.” He pointed towards the room on the left. “I remember you mentioning that you always went to work

early so I have to ask what you eat for breakfast? I'll make sure I have it ready before you're even awake.”

This was a different side to Clive—the caring, attentive side of him—and, even though I'd barely spent that much time with him, I found myself liking the man.

It might not be on the same scale as Callum, but still, it was progress.

I did get what I wanted, though. I was held all night long. For me to even admit that he acted like a true gentleman, truly surprised me.

Clive didn't even dare attempt once. That alone placed him in my top list. However, when I woke up the next morning to a full English breakfast and freshly brewed coffee, I was swaying towards him.

His persistence to drive me to work as he acted like the man in my life, really made me think long and hard.

Yeah, I definitely liked Clive Barrington. Now, what did I plan to do about it?

Chapter 12

Stella

Patience was one of the key ingredients in running a PR firm. Today, it seemed, that I didn't have any tolerance for spoiled debutants and their holier than thou mothers.

We were planning to have a ball with ten princesses turning eighteen. The event was in three weeks time, and yet, they wouldn't let me make a decision without consulting them with every single detail. They had to have their own caterers chosen or how they wanted each waiter to look like Abercrombie models. Did they know how difficult it was to find twenty perfect looking male specimens in less than a month? On top of this specific dilemma, they had a steep budget.

It was only ten-thirty in the morning and I was ready to go home and sleep the day away.

"Do you need me to get you some coffee and aspirin?" Sienna Richards—now Knightly—my intern/assistant for the day, offered with sympathy in her eyes.

I could tell she was drowning with me.

"I need a vacation. This is killing me," I muttered under my breath. Listening to the mothers discuss about tidbits when we were supposed to be done and over this subject weeks ago was making my survival difficult.

After another minute of high-pitched idiocy, Sienna and I excused ourselves to get some refreshments. Once we were at the table laid out with refreshments and snacks bar, I sighed with relief. "This job can be taxing at times. How do you find it so far? Is this what you want to do for the rest of your life?"

Her gold-green eyes lit up. "Honestly? I like putting events and parties

together, but right now, I'm not all that sure."

"Yeah, these are far in between, but when they do come up, it's very draining." I studied her beautiful face, wondering how she got to nab a man like Knightly. "Congratulations, by the way. I wasn't aware you were dating Blake Knightly."

Sienna blushed. "Thank you. I don't normally name-drop him. He was a friend before things shifted into something serious."

"I met him a few times." I grinned. "I admit, I was tongue-tied for the most part. The man is bloody gorgeous! How do you even function around him, let alone marry the man himself."

"He can be very intimidating." Sienna took a china plate and placed mini cakes on it before she glanced at me with a raised brow. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but are you dating Clive Barrington? Blake's cousin? There were photos on the internet of you and Clive leaving his apartment this morning."

My eyes bulged out. Internet? *Me*? Fucking shit. "You're joking."

She shook her head, biting her lip, serious about this information.

"Bugger. Bugger. Bugger," I groaned. "How in God's name did I forget that he was a pap favorite? *How? How!*"

Shitty shit. This day was getting worse.

For some reason, I had an inkling that my day was just starting. The worst was yet to come.

An hour and half later, I was back in my office, nursing a throbbing headache when my phone beeped, indicating a text message arrived.

Derek: *You're dating a playboy? You'd be better off with me! I feel insulted that you would rather be with someone like Clive Barrington than be with me!*

I barely finished reading the text when my door opened. "Stella you're all

over the internet!” Luciana breezed through my office, iPad in hand as she showed me clips and articles about me. “Everyone’s talking about you and how you didn’t come out of Clive’s house until the next day and how he dropped you off to work. They even have a countdown to see how long it’ll last!”

How rude. *And mean.* Did these people have anything better to do? “Wow, news spreads fast around this town, huh? Four fucking hours and I’m an instant celebrity.”

“They’re dubbing you as the Lonely Heiress.”

I made a sour face. “How fitting.” I gave Luciana two minutes before I kicked her out of my working space.

This wasn’t fun at all.

I huffed out a frustrated grunt and then placed my forehead against my desk. “*Aaaand it keeps getting better!*” I muttered, closing my eyes as I took deep breaths.

“*For you maybe.*”

I immediately shot to my feet when I heard the familiar voice. “Callum,” I whispered, breathless.

He strode before me, just a few inches apart, before he inserted his hands inside his pockets. He had his poker face on, assessing me thoroughly. “Is Clive one of your many men, Stella?”

“We’re getting to know each other.”

Why was he interrogating me? I caught him fucking another woman two nights ago. I inwardly flinch when I recalled the humiliating experience of getting caught watching them go at it like rabbits. “Who I date is seriously none of your concern.”

“You were a virgin two weeks ago! Now you go around town dating a man who is notorious for having two girlfriends at the same time! Not to

mention that he greatly enjoys the two in and out of the bedroom. Together.” His dark eyes flashed. Dark. Primitive.

He was angry. Great, ‘cause I didn’t care.

I wasn’t going to sit back and wait until kingdom come to enjoy my sexuality. “I’m twenty-two, about to turn twenty-three soon. It is a prime age to experience, experiment or what of it.” I raised my brow, goading him. “*And your point is what exactly?*”

“My point?” He charged towards me, pushing me backwards until my butt cheeks hit the edge of my desk. “*My point, Stella?*” he gritted out. “Had I known that you were going to ‘experiment’ with the likes of Clive Barrington, I wouldn’t have granted your wish.” His heated eyes dropped lower, noting the erratic pulse in my throat as his eyes slid lower, watching my breasts rise and fall in quick succession. “Experiment with me.”

No. Not after what I’d witnessed with that redhead. “Not with you.” I shook my head.

“Decline me again.”

I already did. “I don’t want you, Cal. Please stop this.”

He pressed his hips against mine, making me feel his epically solid state. I almost convulsed at the feel of him *this* close to me. It certainly muddled my brain function.

My breath caught when I felt his thumb making circles on my belly button at the same time that his hot breath in my ear sent tingles everywhere. “Are you quite sure?”

Callum was pressing his hardness directly above my pussy and I was panting, excited and yet, needing to prove a point that I wasn’t like that redhead on his dining table.

“Still am.”

He caged me with his body, unyielding. “How many men have you had

since me, Stella?”

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Chapter 13

Callum

“Still am.”

Her breath caught as I softly blew air on her ear, as I let my bottom lip caress the side of her neck. The weakening woman slightly shook, like an unbidden prey; she anticipated my attack, to be wholly consumed by me, by my touch.

Clive Barrington.

The name alone brought bitter taste on my tongue. He lured Zara once and I wasn't going to let him do the same thing with Stella.

Two weeks.

It took everything in me not to contact her because I was busy trying to convince myself that she was young, and thus needed to figure out her feelings for Derek. I was also constantly reminding myself that had her feelings changed; she was going to come to me. How wrong was I? Apparently, I was off by a long shot. “How many men have you had since me, Stella?”

It was a crass question, but if she was prancing around town with Barrington, which could mean only one thing... that she got a healthy dose of exploration herself.

“Enlighten me, Callum. *How many have you had since me?* Then you might just get what you're demanding from me.”

My nose flared. “What you witnessed, was the only time.” Not that I wasn't interested it about sex because I surely was, the problem was the woman I had to do it with. The redhead was a test I had to go through, to convince myself that I wasn't losing my manhood over a virgin who no longer wanted, or needed me. It was to show that I was in control.

When things started heating up, I was grateful that I still had it in me, but all those monumental emotions eroded the second my gaze caught hers.

Until then, I was convinced that Stella didn't fancy me, but when she came to visit in my home, though her excuse was plausible, for some reason, my gut feeling was telling me that there was more to it, that Stella was lying about the real reason why she came to see me that night.

When I came after her and along with that expected strained goodbye, I knew I should let her go and let her live her life, like how she planned it to be.

It thought it then that was me being all magnanimous, because I was not one to back down when I was being challenged by a woman. In fact, I thrived on the chase...but then life handed me Stella von Berg, and now I know nothing will ever be the same again.

Reluctant she may be, but I knew her body was responding to me. My problem now was how to grapple the situation without alarming her.

But either way, I wasn't leaving this office building without a successful result.

So, here we were, having a staring throw down.

Stormy gray eyes flashed at me. They were so clear, that the gold around her pupil burned brighter. "Don't tell me you never had the urge before that night. I won't believe you!" Stella threw accusingly at me. Her will to fight me was admirable, but a wise person should know the most important thing when going in for a fight, and that is always know your opponent. Never take on someone who you could never win over.

At this point, I was willing to bet everything to get her. *Anything*, as long as it wasn't falling in love.

But apart from that one solid condition, everything else was on the table, and I was willing to negotiate. After Zara, I wasn't willing to break my six-

week relationship mantra. But times were changing and I needed to re-strategize if I wanted a chance with her. If I hadn't known better, she possibly outsmarted me, because I was like an addict, always craving her.

Had this happened to another woman, I could easily think that she had orchestrated to trap me efficiently, but this was Stella... still, I was somewhat skeptical and a tad bitter that she was making me break my well-oriented plans. "Oh, I had, trust me. But you..." I shook my head. "You're a clever woman." My forefinger reached out and traced the valley of her breasts, heatedly and repeatedly as our eyes sparred war with each other. "You left me wanting, Stella. It was the oldest trick in the book, but it still works."

"Trust me, it was never like that." She licked her lips, quivering. Her pebbled nipples outlined her dress shirt. "We exchanged favors. What you're dealing with *now* is your own business. It's your problem, not mine."

Feisty, wasn't she? I was seeing the real woman emerge amidst the calm poised façade she always portrayed, and I wanted it out.

True, she was right. This was my problem, but now I was bringing this problem to the surface, thus making it *our* problem. "You tricked me. That's my fucking problem!" I blazed on, accusing.

Stella gasp, looking offended. "*Me?* What have I done now?" she searched my eyes. "All because of sex? You're blaming it all on me? If I recalled correctly, you were the one who kept seeking me out after we did it the first time. You brought it upon yourself."

How right she was, but I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction.

I gave her a cutting glance, before I responded to her. "You enticed me with your virgin pussy. Now every god damn pussy is too fucking used for my taste because I just want yours."

Her luscious pink mouth opened, shaking her head before shutting it close. "You're crazy!"

She broke free of my arms and started to walk away, but I was right onto her hell. “You’re being childish.”

I yanked her arm and pressed her to the closest thing available, the glass window. “You’ve been running enough, cowering like a scared little fool. You should know better than to offer a man your body, let him taste heaven and easily take that away from him and pretend as if nothing happened.” My thumb pulled the V of the shirt lower, pressuring the first button to widen and separate.

She fumed while I kept touching her supple breasts. They were leaving light feathered caresses on her skin. “This fucking body is all I can think about.” When she tried to tap it away, I brazenly went further with my ministrations.

Stella tried to move away. Something broke in me and I accidentally popped a few of her shirt buttons, making them fly across the room, one after the other, leaving her chest unguarded and open to my perusal. “You don’t have to lie to me,” I murmured, noting her flushed cheeks and heavy pants she was making. “Be mine and I will be yours.”

Surprise lit her eyes, wondering if she must have misheard me. “For six weeks?”

“For as long we want. We could let it run its course.” This was stepping out of my comfort zone, but I was willing to risk it because she was driving me nuts.

“*Just you and me?*” Stella cautiously asked.

This ought to be an unsavory joke.

“You fucking bet your life it’s just you and me! If that’s what you’re used to now, you better make a quick reform because I don’t share, not now, not ever!” I growled.

“I won’t share you either. It was a question of assurance, not preference

choice.” Stella softly cupped my cheek, surprising me. Her touch sent a deep buzz all the way into my groin. “I’ve missed you too, Cal.”

Something about how she said those words...they simply left a deep panging ache inside my chest. I didn’t do any of these sentiments either. The only thing allowed was *I need you* and *I want you*. But for some reason, I held off in correcting her.

I was too distracted with my reaction to her words that I didn’t realize that she was hiking her skirt up and pushed her thong on the side. Her back pressed on the tinted glass as she hooked her leg on my hip. She was biting her luscious bottom lip as she hastily unbuttoned my trousers, pushing everything down as she greedily sought my cock. I grunted out her name, rocking back on my heels as her hands slid up and down my length. “Stella.”

“Condom?”

Fuck. I didn’t have one. How in the world did I forget to bring one? Oh yeah, because I didn’t fancy shagging anyone after that incident two nights ago. “I didn’t bring one.”

“Shit. Okay. I’m clean and I just started getting on a pill, but it won’t be effective until next week.” She looked at me squarely, eyes dilated with desire. “Are you safe?”

I was. The last time I didn’t wear protection was with Zara, after her, this was the first time I was considering it. “I am, but maybe we should wait until tonight.” Was I mad? Maybe, but the thought of sex *bareback* was daunting. This thing with Stella was getting too complicated. Nothing in my book was being followed. What else was next?

Stella looked aghast at my suggestion. “Fuck.” She hissed as she directly guided my cock into her opening and slowly pressed down against it, purring. “You, Callum.” A deep grumble came from her as she slid in and out on the top of my shaft. “I love this part of you. It’s so thick. I love the feeling of

being stretched and being pried open.”

Christ. The feeling of her tight pussy toying with my cock was marvelous. But the sight of her, pleasuring herself with me, was a sight to behold. It was a beauty I could watch until I die. “Fuck me, darling.” I was holding ground until it was my turn, because Stella was yet to find out how well I could stretch her.

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Chapter 14

Callum

It didn't take that long for her to have her first come on my shaft. It was my queue to take charge and claim her as mine.

My plan was to take it slow, go down on her and gradually make my way from there, but her tiny humping stint made me throw all of that away.

Hurriedly, I rolled her skirt up and ripped the scrap of hindrance that was blocking my way into her channel. "Turn around, hands on the glass, legs apart as far as you can stretch them."

Stella obeyed as I hastily dropped my pants and boxers to the floor. She barely parted her legs wide when I rammed my length inside, making her scream against the glass.

The first thing I thought when I entered her was, *this is Heaven*. The second, *her tight pussy is mine and I'm going to fuck it until I feel like I am blasting through space, blazing hot and ready to come to earth, but until then, I am going to own it*.

"Am I hurting you?" I murmured against her ear as my fingers bit into her ass and reared into her harder.

She panted on the glass. "A little."

"I want to go all the way in, Stella, but your little pussy won't let me," I complained, yet I was already a few strokes from finishing. The more I pushed against her walls, the tighter she got. "I think it needs more cock." My palm connected to her left butt cheek, making her yelp.

"Yes," she groaned. "I want more."

She was so sexy. I loved watching her calm façade melt away and this wanton woman emerge. "Who's cock are you salivating for, Stella?"

"Yours, Callum. The only one I know." Her hands moved a little higher,

putting more pressure down to hold her up. “It’s the only one I want.”

It’s the only one I want. Those words took me deeper into the beautiful abyss as my orgasm peaked, about to spurt out of my dick.

“Cal—don’t come inside me!” Stella screeched, halting me.

“On your knees. NOW!” I watched as she knelt before me. Grey eyes dilated as she looked up, waiting for me to bless her with my seed.

Stella had her mouth open, but the ropes of my essence landed on her cheek, the top of her lips, some on her tongue and some dripped on her neck. “Damn. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything sexier than you covered with my cream.” A pleased grumble surfaced when Stella licked the remaining drop that sat atop my opening.

“Then let me make it more memorable for you.” She grinned as she licked her lips, savoring my essence, before she let her finger scoop the remaining spots and sucked it clean. She then made a satisfied moan. “Your taste is sweet and unique. Just like the man himself, unforgettable.”

I grinned, pulling her to her feet. “How in the world did I ever categorize you in the angelic department?”

“I only get wicked with you, Callum.” She blushed, matching her rose pink lips.

My nose touched her forehead and then I gave her lips a few chaste kisses. I wasn’t one to linger on this particular area. Quick kisses I could do; French kissing, not so much. “It’s a given that you’d only get wicked with me. Your full loyalty is expected; in and out of the bedroom.” My hands gently fixed her underwear before I lowered her skirt down. Our eyes didn’t meet until I somehow managed to pull her shirt together, which was unsalvageable. “Do you have an extra shirt?” I frowned. “I don’t want any men coming in here when you’re all exposed.”

She rolled her eyes and ‘pft’ me. Cupping her breasts together, she

shrugged, nonchalant. "It's fine, nothing they haven't seen before."

I burned, about to hit my limit. "*What the bloody fuck!*" I groaned as I tugged on my hair.

When she started giggling, I gave her a death stare. It was a joke, surely? "Stella."

"Goodness, you're extremely jealous, aren't you?" She grinned, pretending to fix my tie and collar. "I'm going to have a ball with that temper of yours, Cal." Gray eyes looked at me before going all serious and quiet. "So we're really going to do this?" She swallowed and then licked her lips. "You and me?"

She sounded vulnerable just then. Something tugged at me, urging me to hold her closer, to feel her warmth and her soft body against mine. "There's nothing to be afraid of, I won't hurt you. I didn't want to do this, force myself upon you, but you must know... I want you and this need can't be tampered down after a quick shag. I need more." I paused, suddenly unsure where I was heading with this. *With her*. It was all too fast, but I knew I had to have her or I'd go mental. "I need you."

After my epic heartbreak, I never allowed myself to need anything or anyone. So for me to take immediate steps to open myself to need her was a big deal. That's the thing though, I hadn't noticed until it was too late.

I pulled something out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She slowly took it and then stared at it in her palm, like it was strange. "I don't need the key to your house. I'm not one of those women that expects things like that from a guy. I'm okay with what we had before."

She was, but I wasn't. "I expect you to live with me most days. I want to come home to you, eat dinner together and share ghastly work stories."

"You sure?"

I nodded, kissing the tip of her button nose. Yeah, this surely felt right.

More than right. She felt perfect. "Positive."

"So, what time do you expect me for dinner, lover?" She raised her brow, teasing.

"I'll text you," I murmured against her cheek, readying to leave. "I could cook, but I'm thinking of Chinese takeout, bottles of vintage wine and spending some time together. How does that sound?"

"You're like a dream, Cal."

Hell.

Stella looked... as though she was hoping that this was going to turn out like a fairytale. I'd hate to prick her bubble, but I had to do it now.

"Oh, one more thing, Stella. Don't fall for me." It was the only thing I wasn't capable of providing. It was best to have everything on the table now before things got tricky and complicated later on.

She looked taken aback at my bluntness. "What makes you think that I will?"

Women were wired differently. Men didn't relate sex and love in the same formation. Men could easily have as much sex all his life and never really know what love was because, really, falling in love wasn't an easy thing. Men loved to control and possess the things around them. Love didn't come with that option. One thing I knew, though, once a woman captured an impassioned man, she'd most likely have his love for the rest of his life. Whether he'd like it or not, it was bound to just fester there until he took note of it.

"Women always do and I always walk away. So I wanted this to be sorted out beforehand because I don't want to ruin a very good sexual relationship and amiable friendship due to some complicated emotion I'm not capable of providing." My eyes never left hers. She looked hurt, but she immediately recovered, masking it all with a bright smile.

“Don’t worry because whenever I do choose to fall in love, it won’t be you, Cal.” She kissed my cheek, parting from me with a goodbye before she strode towards her desk. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Stella was dismissing me as she took a call from her ringing phone. Had her phone not interrupted us, I would’ve demanded her elaborate what that meant.

Sighing, I strode out of there, but before I did, I stole a quick glance at Stella, smiling to whomever she was talking to. As long as she didn’t cheat, the rest wasn’t my business. Yet somehow, I ended up dwelling about the events that occurred in her office all afternoon.

Later, out of the blue, I decided to text her. A part of me just wanted to and I couldn’t help it.

Me: Dinner at six?

Sent. It sounded nonchalant, good.

Stella: Lovely.

Lovely. One word.

That’s it? After the afternoon we had? Women usually replied with a lengthy response, some even went through the lengths of what they’d do to me once they see me, but with Stella, all I got was one word.

Me: Can’t stop thinking about you.

This was uncharacteristic, but I did it anyway. Impulse was a fiend, but it was the truth. Stella hadn’t left my mind, not after I touched her and made her mine.

Stella: Same goes for me, Cal. I’m already wishing the minutes away until I can jump on you.

Oh, do tell, my wickedness urged on. There was nothing sexier to me than a woman who knew how to arouse a man through words. A man’s imagination was a powerful tool a woman could easily take over. With the

right words, an erotic voice and a heavy dose of sass, men would fall at your feet.

Me: *I like where your thoughts are heading. Any more sexual preferences you care to try?*

Men were simple creatures. Good food, a healthy sex life, successful career and all would be well.

Stella: *You're the Lord and Master. I'm just a shy, innocent woman who's more than willing to be ravished.*

She had yet to learn what pleased me, and I her. For some reason, I sure was looking forward to being with her, waking up to her every morning next to me and coming home to her at night. With her, everything seemed incredibly vibrant. Like there was more to life than partying, fucking and making more money. It was sad in some ways, but I wanted that feeling she gave me when she was around.

From inside my trousers, I could feel my cock responding to the erotic images in my head. It was only two hours ago when I'd had her, but I was ready for a couple more rounds and another few tonight, if she was brave enough to let me conquer her.

Me: *Tonight at six. Don't be late. Please.*

Yeah, I added the *please* in the end. My need for her was getting out of control.

Stella: *Miss you too, lover.*

There was a wink after it, teasing me. She kept calling me lover. I wasn't sure if I liked that nickname yet. It sounded so... impersonal.

My schedule had a few meetings set up for me, but for the first time, I was distracted and kept checking my phone.

This was definitely surprising. I had become, more or less, a bona fide Stella junkie.

~C~

At six-fifteen, with no Stella in sight, I was worried when I picked up and dialed her number. After the second ring, I heard a loud thud of the front door being closed.

I was immediately on my feet, heading towards her. “You’re fifteen past.”

She simply gave me an eye roll. “Hey, lover! How did your day go?” She rushed towards me, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaving tiny kisses all over my face. “Missed me?”

Fucking hell to the yes I missed you. “Very much...” I groaned, cupping both of her ass cheeks. “Indeed.” Aroused, I nuzzled her neck as my hands slowly gripped her bottom to grind against my unmasked erection. “Grind your pussy. That’s it, love.” My hands moved with her motion and I was ready to feel her heat.

I lifted her up while she clung onto me, grinding her hips while I was busy biting and pulling her nipple, driving her mad with frenzy. We finally got to the bar and I placed her on the high stool as I gripped the seam on the side of her skirt and tore it apart. The other side went in the same state.

My cock couldn’t wait to slide into her hotness, but at the same time, seeing her going crazy without it was more satisfying.

Stella looked starved as she lusted after me, panting as she watched me through her lashes, lips parted. Her ass was in the perfect position. It gave enough space to place both her heels on each side.

My gaze immediately darted to the fountain of my ecstasy. Open. Unbarred. Untouched by any other man. This was a high I could live with. Needed and longed for. “You have the prettiest pussy I’ve seen on a woman, Stella.” My eyes took her in, admiring. A virgin-like pussy.

She was wet and ready for me, but I was going to take my time. My

fingers unbuttoned her new shirt, throwing it to the floor. I was sure she threw away the destroyed one I ripped in her office earlier.

“Next time, come home to me without a bra on. I’d love to see your nipples through the shirt. Make sure you have a blazer on because I don’t want any man lusting after you, though.”

I took off my tie and immediately knotted it against her wrist and ankle. I did the same with the other, using my belt this time.

The angle was crucial to the both of us. It would severely hit her g-spot. I wanted her to crave sex with me as much as I yearned for her. And yes, my eager nymph was almost there.

“Callum,” she sobbed, begging. “I need to feel you, baby.”

I was going to give her two weeks tops and she wouldn’t live a few days without my touch. Stella was going to be addicted to me. I needed to see her get lost in my touch, to get consumed by me to the point that she would do anything to please me and wouldn’t stop until I was satisfied and sated. I thought it fair ‘cause I was already addicted to her body—to the woman itself—and how she could easily break my rules with a bat of her eyelash.

“Tell me what you want, Stella.” I bit into her sensitive clit while I watched her tense and hiss. My tongue stuck out, willing to soothe the throbbing pulse in the sensitive area. With the wet tip of my tongue, I gradually teased it by making slow circles. “A woman that knows how to talk dirty is a big turn on for me.” My gaze connected to her grays as I put my lips together, blowing air up and down her aroused slit. I could see her tight opening contract, clenching, needing my thick length to slide into it more than ever.

“I’m so wet for you,” she tried.

Cute. Truly, but it wasn’t what I wanted. “You sound like a virgin. Try again.”

Her eyes flashed at me. “I swear, if I wasn’t tied, I would walk out of here.”

That’s my Stella. Without breaking contact, I pulled down my zipper and took out my cock. “Do you like being slightly choked, darling?”

Her eyes devoured my shaft eagerly. “Yes. It makes me orgasm twice as powerful.” Her body slowly lifted off, impatient.

My dick felt hot and silky, engaged and ready to combust as I took hold of the base and let the mushroom head hit and slap against her moist slit. The sound of her wetness and the hard slaps made me growl like an animal.

“I love the sound of a hungry, wet pussy.”

Stella moaned, delirious. “Do whatever you want to me, please.”

“I am going to anyway, with or without your permission.” After the words left my lips, my cock slid into her. She could only accommodate a little over half my size and a big part of me wanted to rear it all the way in, but I knew she might need time to get used to having sex. I planned on supplementing that problem with a daily dose of my cock, stretching her insides to make some space. I wouldn’t be satisfied until I felt all of her contracting on me, coming apart on my cock.

A quick glance at our joined sexes and I was delighted to see white liquid coated my length as I slid in and out of her hole. Without pausing, I continued to fuck her while my hands caressed her breasts, slowly making circles towards the base of her throat. Pressing both of my thumbs on the front, testing the pressure before I finally wrapped my hands around her delicate throat.

“Callum!” Stella came, sobbing my name in ecstasy.

I growled, watching her beautiful face and the beauty of our mating. “Come some more,” I ordered, relentless. “Don’t let go. Keep tightening around me.” Christ, her cunt was gripping my cock like a vice. The suction it

had against my length was divine.

My body tensed, my back stiffened as I felt the tingles that rushed from my stomach all the way towards my balls then zinging to my combustible dick in lightning speed. I was about to orgasm and it almost killed me to pull out and come on her stomach.

After I milked it to the last drop, my head rested on her chest, panting as I left soft kisses on her breasts. My hands were busy unknitting the belt then the tie. "Sex with you is beyond beautiful."

"Amen."

Smiling down at her, I felt somewhat lighter and then, out of nowhere, my possessive streak reared its face. "This body is mine," I panted, kissing her forehead. "My property." I licked and playfully bit into her pebbled nipple. "This..." I whispered, eyes closed as I breathed in her scent. "This belongs to me, Stella." My tongue made a quick swipe in between her slit before I placed a kiss right above it. "My pussy."

Stella sighed, eyes closed as she let her head hit the back of the chair, smiling. "Your pussy, Cal. Noted. Now it's time to give this exhausted pussy a bath."

A loud bark of laughter roared from me. I liked this sassy side of hers. "What else can I do for you?"

"Foot massage."

"Anything to make the kitty purr, I suppose." Stella wrapped her arms around me as I slowly took hold of her limp body that was ready for her bath and sleep.

It was our first night, but I could tell that this was something I'd love to do all the time.

Stella was half asleep on my chest while I bathed her. By the time I changed and placed her on the bed, she was yawning every few seconds.

After the foot massage, she was dead to the world.

Sliding off the bed, I rounded her side and stared at her peaceful form. *She looks good on my bed*, I thought with satisfaction.

“Goodnight.” My nose inhaled her scent, softly kissing her cheek. My gaze kept directing me towards her softly parted lips, tempting me to kiss them. Instead, I chose to kiss her forehead, not willing to be tempted by something I wasn’t capable of giving. “Dream sweet.”

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Chapter 15

Callum

I was usually downstairs working out in my gym at the crack of dawn like clockwork. This morning, I woke up and hesitated for five minutes, debating if I should work out or not.

You see, I slept on my side with my back to her, but when I woke up, she was hugging me from behind. She felt so good and soft that I didn't want to risk waking her up, so I gave myself five minutes to enjoy her warmth.

She didn't wake when I slowly untangled her limbs from me. I studied her for a couple more moments before I left to go change and get ready to exercise. When I came out of the closet, I made a quick glance towards the sleeping beauty and was greeted with a sleepy smile.

"Gym?" she sleepily asked.

I nodded, pausing before I gently moved towards her. "I am. Want to come and join me?"

Stella smiled, shaking her head. "How about *you* come and join *me*? I'll make you work it good."

That certainly made me laugh. "Glad you learn quick." My thumb caressed her forearm and then I planted a swift kiss on her lips. "Go back to sleep. I promise to wake you after I shower and do another set of muscle stretching before I go to work."

"Deal."

So that's how my day started. It was ideal and how I'd pictured things were going to be with Stella. After my lunch meeting, I was in a bright mood, planning all sorts of things to do with her when I got back home tonight.

I had ideas, but as always, life was much more creative than my own.

My light mood instantly darkened when I saw a familiar form waiting

inside my office.

“Zara? What are you doing here?” Did I sound disgusted? Appalled? Hurt? Shocked? Aghast? Furious?

Double check to all.

Three years passed with not a single word uttered from her. Now, out of the blue, she shows up here without notice. The few years that passed hadn’t eradicated any hateful feelings I had for her, but still, seeing her again took me back to the past, the present and the happy future I had once pictured in my mind.

I could hate her all I wanted, but one thing I knew for sure, my body still responded to her. It clouded my mood some more, however it was a fact I couldn’t deny.

Zara was still the most beautiful woman I had ever laid my eyes upon. I once worshipped this woman, loved her more than life itself, even more than my own. Never did I hold back from showing her just how much because I truly believed that she was going to be mine, my wife. However, she got greedy and threw it all away.

Three years later, she shows up unannounced. I was still rooted on the spot, motionless.

Zara tried to smile, but it somehow looked pained. She was nervous and she didn’t even hide that from me. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I accidentally overheard the news that you were getting married?”

So the news quickly reached my father, how lovely. “Are you here to congratulate me? That’s very kind of you, but I’m busy, so you can show yourself to the door.” It was all a lie, but no one knew that except for Stella and me.

Zara tried to step closer, but changed her mind the last minute. “Please, don’t marry anyone. It would kill me to see you marry someone else.”

That's all it took really.

I cracked and was ready for battle. "*Who I marry is my own goddamned bloody business! You walked away from me!*" For three years my spite for her had been brewing and I wasn't going to stop it from flowing out. "You're a filthy cunt who went after a man who had more money than I could've offered you then," I bellowed, uncaring at her flinching face as if my words were hurting her.

"How fucking dare you come in here as if you're a welcomed guest! You left me two weeks before our planned elopement. Two fucking weeks. I had my vows written, rings ready and honeymoon booked. You didn't even have the decency to inform me that there was no wedding. You simply up and left me, vanished through thin air. I even reported you missing for fuck's sake!" I laughed as I recalled the painful memories I went through. "But father sent me straight to hell, just like a loving father should. Apparently, he acquired himself a new wife. YOU." I threw her a hateful, scathing glance. "As far as I know, you're dead to me. You mean nothing. So don't come in here, expecting shit from me because you will be sorely disappointed."

Zara gently wiped her tears away, sniffing. "Your father blackmailed me. What was I supposed to do?"

Was she lying? "What blackmail?" I demanded.

"My family was on the brink of bankruptcy. Your father offered a way out. My parents begged me to consider, stating that I had to put my selfishness aside for a few years and help them get out of the rotten financial ruin." She sniffed, bracing her arms around her body. "Your father made me sign a contract that I would be married to him for three years and never contact you in any shape or form, but I swear to you, on everything that I believe in, your father didn't touch me."

And she expected me to just what, believe her? No. I wasn't going to play

an idiot when it came to Zara... or to any woman for that matter.

“You should’ve come to me and told me everything. I may have not had the money then, but I could’ve easily spoken to my grandfather. I was his only heir after all, but you didn’t even give me a chance. You simply threw me away without a second thought. If you’re having any regrets, then that’s all on you because I’m done with you, Zara.”

“I’m so sorry. Everyday I regret not going to you. Forgive me. In two month’s time, the contract will be null and void. I’ll be a free woman.”

Oh, she regrets it now? Good for her. I wasn’t going to lie; a big part of me wanted to explore the option that she was telling me the truth. If she hadn’t had any other man... that ought to prove something, right? Either way, she violated my trust and broke me apart. The lacerating pain I’d gone through was something I would never forget. There was no point in dwelling on the “if” side. She hadn’t given me the option before, so why should I even give her that leniency?

“I wasn’t as rich as my father then, but I am now. I’ve since tripled my inheritance in folds. Had you waited then, you’d be my wife by now.” I shook my head, impatient. “It’s all over now. Go home to your husband, Zara.”

Dark, soulful eyes looked sad, awash with fresh tears. “I still love you, Callum.”

My chest tightened. Somehow her words continued to affect me. I stilled, speechless, not knowing what to do. A part of me wanted to hold her and make her stop crying, but a huge part of me argued that she deserved to be unhappy. After all, she betrayed me. Big time. There was no going back. She did what she had to do, what she felt was right. Zara threw away our love. Pity was something I shouldn’t be even feeling right at this moment.

She came closer while I froze, heart thudding as I got to see her up close.

It somehow felt as if she still knew me because she was undaunted when I felt her hands rest on my chest at the same time my eyes trained upon her, conflicted.

“Your heart still belongs to me.” She gave me a sad smile. “It doesn’t matter what you tell me because one thing I know, Callum, is that your heart knows the truth.” Zara pressed her lips to mine. “I’ll be waiting for your return.”

My eyes didn’t even follow her when she let herself out, but I knew she’d left because the energy in the room felt empty, draining.

It hurt to see her. It truly did. Now I was at a loss because I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about what she had told me.

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Chapter 16

Callum

Stella had a working night and wasn't going to be home until later. So here I was, in my study, nursing my second bottle of brandy, still feeling sober.

Frustrated, I took out my phone and pressed a button on my speed dial.

“Kosta.”

It was rather lame, but hearing a familiar friend's voice somehow felt comforting. “You sound like something's up your arse,” I muttered, smiling.

“And you sound like shit,” Dimitris retorted back.

As usual, I didn't even bother to do the usual to and fro. I just went and dived into the damn problem. “Zara came to see me.”

Dimitris stayed silent awhile. “I have an hour until I pick up my wife from the airport. So go ahead, I'm all ears.”

It was great to see him happy, really. After what his ex-wife put him through, he deserved this happiness. “Unofficial wife. Unless you're planning to marry her again? Your family must be happy to have her back.”

“It's Lindsey's first time back, so she's nervous. We're taking one step at a time. I don't want to scare her away the way I did the first time.” He paused. “Do you *still* love her?” he asked, referring to Zara.

I had no idea. “I don't know. It's been a few years. It was shocking to find her in my office, yeah, but as far as how I'm feeling right now, I can tell you, I feel a lot of hate and anger.”

“But that's not what I asked you, Kensington. It's either you love her or don't,” Dimitris argued, making me even more confused.

I grunted and grabbed the side of my head, pulling my hair out. “It's not that easy.”

Dimitris sighed. “Well, friend, I have another hour to drag this out of you, so do go on.”

This was madness.

“I’m dating Stella—” I spilled the information that was making it difficult for me to see the real problem with Zara.

“*The child?*”

All of my friends that knew about Stella, referred to her as “the child” since I had called her that from the very beginning. The woman was far from being a child, however. Truly. “Yes—no—*fuck!* She’s twenty-two! She’s no longer a child.”

“I get it. You’re in love with Stella,” he suggested, making things worse.

I groaned, getting more agitated as the clock ticked away. Fucking hell! “No. No. It’s nothing like that, but I do care for her. Very much, yeah.” I made an exasperate sigh, confronted. “Should I tell her about Zara’s visit?”

That’s another big question.

“Well, hell, that’s really up to you. If you both are forthcoming with these things in a serious committed relationship, then yes. Although, if it’s a casual buddy fuck, then I don’t see the point.” He paused. “It’s all up to you.”

Stella and I weren’t in love or anything... but we did enjoy each other, very much. “Exclusive, casual.” We were, weren’t we?

“Either way, you’re digging yourself a grave.” Dimitris sounded thoughtful. “You can’t have both. You have to choose. Trust me, it’s not fun to be with a person who doesn’t feel the same for you.”

With Zara, I had an idea... but with Stella, I had no sense where she stood with me. All I knew was that I liked having her around... and as for the rest, it was all up in the air.

~C~

“Jesus! Are you okay?” Stella slightly shook me, trying to pull my face

off the desk in my study. Apparently, I had fallen asleep on it.

My head pounded like mad, throbbing as though it had been jack-hammered or something. After two bottles of brandy, I shouldn't expect any less. She gently situated my back and body against the leather chair.

"I come home late and you're a big mess." Stella brushed the hair off my forehead before kissing it gently. "What am I going to do with you and your drunken self?"

Her scent filled my nostrils and I buried my face in the crook of her neck, wanting to drown in her softness. "Pain killers, a hot shower and some good sleep then I will be good as new tomorrow."

"All right, let me get you some pain killers." Stella tried to move, but my hands were wrapped around her waist. "You need to take your hands off me, you know."

I moaned against her skin, softly kissing it. "Need another minute of you." I held her tighter. "Your smell calms me down."

"Let me give you a massage or something..."

A 'hmm' came from me as I nuzzled on her before then murmuring against her ear, "I'll take the 'or something', darling."

God, how was it possible to feel this sense of calmness when she was around?

Stella lightly tapped the back of my head, groaning. "I'm being utterly serious here."

"So am I, love. I'm so bloody, fucking hard for you." My hand skimmed over her bottom, all the way to the side of her thigh before circling it in between her hot crevice where my middle finger rubbed against her pussy. Moisture seeped through the thin fabric and coated my finger. "Shower with me."

She sighed. "I will as long as you promise to take some pain killers for

your headache first.”

My bossy nurse, I mused through the throbbing ache in my head. “Okay. Whatever makes you happy.”

“That’s my good boy.” She giggled, playfully patting the top of my head before she stood up and fetched the medication. She was back in a few minutes, taking charge in popping the pills into my mouth. “See; it’s not that hard, is it?”

“You’re adorable, Stella.” I stood up and circled my arms around her waist, pulling her close to me. Looking down on her blissful face, it seemed surreal that she and I had barely started getting to know each other because, right now, she felt like she’d been around for far too long. “Can I keep you?”

Her eyes twinkled and then her left hand reached out to the side of my head, caressing my hair. It was a subtle move—intimate—a lover’s touch. “For as long as you want me, Cal.”

Will I be the one to mar her brightness? For some reason, I didn’t want to be the man to cause her any pain or hurt. I knew our arrangement was all sexual... but it seemed like we’d crossed the line towards emotional intimacy.

I felt torn about Zara’s visit earlier. Should I dare mention it? It was a subject that needed to be addressed.

It was a situation that needed to be handled with care. One thing I vowed, too, that I would have to be honest. This wouldn’t be such a big deal if she didn’t feel anything for me. After all, didn’t she tell me that she wasn’t going to fall for a man like myself? Then, I suppose, I was safe.

We were safe from each other.

Chapter 17

Stella

“Callum.” His large frame ensconced my body as I regulated my breathing back to normal. We showered, but we hadn’t had sex whilst in there. In fact, I had never been so erotically charged as I’d watched him soap my body, avid with curiosity.

“Stella.”

Call it a gut-inkling or what of it, but the moment I came into his home and found him passed out on his desk, I knew something was wrong. A person wouldn’t intentionally get that inebriated unless something had happened; a critical matter. Especially having an idea of what kind of man Callum was, something was going on behind those guarded, dark eyes.

When he took me this time, he was the same. His usual hunger was apparent, but it somehow felt less passionate, more like he was being haunted by something. I felt like he truly was *fucking* me then. The shift was monumental. Don’t get me wrong, he was still dynamite in bed, but it lacked meaning.

The thing was, I didn’t know how to approach the subject without sounding like a nosy person. Whatever was bothering him, I wanted him to know that I was here, too. Apart from sex, I could be here for him to lean on. Like a person he could use as a crutch if he needed a friend to be there for him or simply because he needed to vent it out.

“Do you want to talk about what’s bothering you?” I took a deep breath before I pulled away a bit, needing to watch his reaction. “You can talk to me, you know. Whatever it is.”

Callum instantly looked guarded. He took a quick glance at me before he blew out a deep breath. He looked discomfited before his gaze concentrated

on the wall across the room, deep in thought.

I was now on my side with my knuckle against my head, holding it up as I waited for him to speak.

“I loved a woman once. Zara. She was everything I wanted, needed. If she had just given me time, I could have given her everything she’d ever hoped for.”

Shit. I was almost sure it was work stress. My father used to be this way when things at work became too heavy for him. So for Callum to speak about someone he loved once was a massive throat punch for me. I didn’t know the woman, and yet, I was already jealous. She’d had Callum in a way I never could, but sometimes I had let myself wander off towards that route and imagine what life would be like if he did love me. However, hearing how he was talking, this woman had been a significant part of him... and still was, presently.

In the calmest voice I could muster, I tried to speak without sounding like I was demanding more information because, let’s face it, I was dying to know what the hell was going on. For him to drown in two bottles of brandy, it must’ve been of epic proportion. “What happened to her?”

His throat bobbed a few times, as though it was difficult for him to speak. When he finally did, I was gob smacked. “She married my father.” His arm flung across to cover his eyes, conflicted. “She came to see me earlier.”

Damn.

Fucking damn. Was this the end of us? We’d barely just started and I really enjoyed being with him, but if he loved her still—which I was almost one hundred percent sure that he did—then I was just a tiny blip in his history of women.

“What did she want?”

“She came to tell me that she was going to be a free woman soon. That

my father offered her family a way out of bankruptcy as long as she married him and never contacted me for three years and, after that time frame, they'd divorce." He took a moment, thinking. "She heard about our engagement. Knowing that she'd be a free woman soon, she thought it was time to warn me off, so that I didn't marry anyone because she wants me to wait for her." He sounded quite torn, like he was having a hard time what to believe anymore... but there was a part of him that wanted to believe Zara.

Deep down, I knew what I had with Callum wasn't cheap or sordid, but right this instant, it kind of felt like it was. I was here, sharing his bed, his home, all due to our sexual needs. That's merely a minor problem because, somehow, I had only just realized that what I was feeling was way past jealousy. Through our odd back and forth banter, I was falling for him; my fake husband.

This unnecessary complication, I knew, would never be told to anyone else. Not even Mark or Lucia. This was information I would keep hidden because the second Callum found out about it, he'd be gone from my life in flash. Even if this wasn't going to survive, I'd at least treasure his friendship and I wasn't going to risk being a besotted fool over us being friends.

I'm not some girl who would fold when the going gets tough. I could very well do this. Who knew, maybe someday I'd date and fall in love again. Somehow, out of the blue, Clive's face surfaced out of nowhere.

Really, who knew what the future held for me? It seemed that mine was full of surprises. I had to take everything in strides; the black, white and the gray.

I was, after all, the only von Berg left. I was a tough cookie. My mind was on a good roll of pep talk, but my heart was plummeting and, like any woman, we always had to know the answer to the most important question of all.

“Do you still love her?”

It was a nail to puncture my heart.

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Chapter 18

Callum

“Do you still love her?” she whispered, voice low and unfaltering.

Honesty. It was the only way I could answer her question. “I don’t know how to answer that because I don’t know how I feel for Zara right now. I’m not ready to peel all the hate and anger away and check if there is some love left in there.”

In truth, I was scared to see what lay in there. What I had with Zara, before it went to the shitters, was precious; one of a kind, special. Of all the women, she was the only one who caught my eye and, even years after her, no one came close because I didn’t let anyone get a glimpse of the man inside; until Stella.

She and I were far from in love, but when it boiled down to having her in my arms as I surged into her heat, I felt that jolted connection. I suppose this was why I became focused on her and didn’t want her associated with any other man, especially with Clive Barrington. She deserved far more than what that man could offer.

I realized that it had been quite some time since Stella had said a word. When I did lift my arm off my eyes and twisted my head to the side to check on her, she had her back to me.

The sheet draped on her form, riding low on the back, and was just an inch above her nicely shaped arse.

Since I was dwelling on my thoughts and far too engrossed in rehashing the past, I felt bad somehow. Maybe this was her way of letting me think in peace. I was almost sure. Stella was that considerate at times.

Before I knew it, my hand reached out and caressed her back. “Callum,” she moaned my name, reacting to my advances.

I took her rough earlier and I wasn't going to be such an animal twice in one night. My cock was fevered for her, but I knew a measured fucking wouldn't do. My need went far and beyond that. It wanted the roughness. The possessed dominant within me needed to seize everything in her, crush her nice, tight pussy and orgasm inside her wetted walls.

Yeah, taking her after what I had just confessed wasn't the wisest of ideas.

"Let me hold you tonight," I whispered, reaching out and pulling her warm, naked body against mine, spooning. My hand brushed her hair to the side so I'd have access to her neck, my favorite spot. "Dream well." I kissed her neck once more before I fell asleep, feeling at ease again.

~C~

A trickle—slow and nerve tingling—made its way downwards on my shaft and jolted me awake.

A deep, guttural groan matched my fevered cock, desperate for one thing, for Stella to keep going. When she noticed that she had woken me up, she moaned sexily as she sucked harder. The sound vibrated from the tip all the way through my shaft, making it more sensitive.

She was on my side, leaning over to get better leverage and more access. Stella looked like she was having the time of her life, but as much as I wanted her to go on, the need to be inside her was dominating everything.

"Slide down on me." My hand skimmed the curve of her bottom, sliding further into her slit. My middle finger hovered above her hole, circling it to gather her silken juices before I teased her sweet button. "Stella, I beg you," I grunted out, sounding beyond desperate. "I need you, darling."

She might've sensed my despair because she was instantly on her knees, placing each on the side of my hips. Stella then lowered herself on my cock, the tip pressing against her opening. She was biting her lip as she started to

rock her hips in slow agonizing circles, teasing us both into oblivion.

“God, you feel amazing, Cal.”

Just when I thought she’d had enough, Stella proved me wrong. I howled in frustration when she shifted and sat on my hardness, hands everywhere as her lips directly went to bite on my left nipple.

“Bloody hell! Be gentle.” She bit it so hard, I almost thought she took the tiny skin off me. Okay, I was hard still, but fuck... no one dared messed with me this way.

“Be gentle, Mister Kensington?” she purred, her tongue sticking out as it tried to soothe the injured nipple by licking it back to health.

Dear God, what had I done? This woman was beyond sexy... her sexual confidence was the hottest thing. Her transformation, completely astonishing.

She was gliding up and done my shaft, making sure her clit was grounded hard on it. Stella had a cat-like smile as her face hovered above mine. “Earlier, I noticed something different,” she started, thoughtful. “You took me... really rough.” Tongue sticking out to wet her lips, suggestively teasing me. My eyes were hypnotized, taking her in. “It was the kind where a woman should feel like she’s being robbed of her dignity. Her virtues. Morals.” She pressed her breasts against my chest, lips on my left ear, breathing hard on it. “I liked that animal in you.”

I barely had time to register anything because the nymph bit into my neck, driving me mad—madly aroused and ready to fuck the living hell out of her, but at the same time, I wanted to see how long she could hold out. Stella excited me... amongst other things.

My eyes shut closed when I felt my cock graze her entrance. She was still relentlessly rocking upside down. “Can he come out and play, Mr. Kensington?” she rasped out. “I promise, I’ll be good. So good that I’ll let you do anything.”

“I don’t think you’re ready for that, Stella,” I argued, even though my mind ran amuck with images of all the things I wanted to try on her, in her.

She raised her brow, not paying attention to what I’d just warned her about. “I think my pussy can take what you can dish out, Callum. You shouldn’t underestimate me.”

In a heartbeat, I had her on her stomach before I slid off the bed in haste. Stella barely had the time to protest when my hands clamped on her ankles and dragged her to the end of the bed as her body easily slid down to my demands. I had her upper body on the bed, feet on the floor. Her pert arse called upon me, so I gave it a few teasing smacks before I grabbed my dick and slapped each cheek with it.

My blood thrummed in anticipation.

There was nothing that could keep me from taking what was mine—*this*—her supple body was mine to do with as I wished. Spreading her firm arse apart, I sandwiched my throbbing shaft in between and then pressed it tight together and started fucking her that way. It was a delirious intent, an indication for what was to come.

“Didn’t anyone tell you to be careful for what you wish for, darling?” I gritted out. Stella was panting hard. So I placed both of her hands on her butt. “Keep them together.” My lips pressed against the base of her spine, trailing upwards with soft kisses as my cock kept up its rocking motion. She felt marvelous. Beautiful. Magnificent. My teeth grazed her ear lobe, biting into it before I gently sucked on it. “We’ve only just begun.”

My hand twisted her head so her cheek was pressed on the mattress. With my thumb against her soft cheek, I placed my middle finger against her lips. “Suck on my finger,” I urged, avidly aroused at the sight of her lips parting and doing as I asked without complaint. The tip of her tongue stroked the pad, sucking it as she’d done my dick minutes ago. It was highly erotic. She

was carnally vulgar and I thrived on it. “I love seeing you shameless, Stella,” I hissed, rocking her in between her ass. “You want me and you’re not afraid to show it.”

“I’ve always wanted you,” she moaned around my finger. “Always,” she repeated.

Fuck. The thought of her lusting after me for years brought me to the hilt, unleashing what little restraint I had left into the ether. She might have dated a lot of men, but I was the only one who got to feel her this way.

I was the only one to possess her like no other man could. She brought out the territorial side of me and I didn’t want to share her; not one little bit. It was selfish, but I wanted her for myself. All mine to have. *Just mine.*

Callum’s woman, my partner—my wife.

Zealous and carnal, I rammed into her pussy, grunting at how hot and wet... and dammit, she was excruciatingly tight, but what got me more maniacal was how deep I was into her core.

She yelped a cry when my cock kept pushing into her closed walls, pressuring it to give way because there was no way I was backing down from a request. “Is this what you wanted, Stella? Pain *and* pleasure?”

“Yes, my love. Don’t stop.”

My love. Should I be worried? I’m sure she was merely as delirious as I was. After all, this was all sex, right? Pausing, I drew my dick out and flipped her like she weighed nothing onto her back. I then took hold of her calves and slowly lifted them up until they hit the sides of her face. “Hold them and don’t let go until I’m coming all over your sweet pussy.”

Stella only moaned in response.

Her cunt was exposed this way just as I liked it. When fucking her tight walls, I aimed to go deeper. The feel of her body giving way as I demanded more entrance was one of my weaknesses.

There was nothing more arousing than knowing the woman you're with was in pain and partially pleased, yet took it all like a pro because she wanted you to have whatever you wished for. Now that was a woman I could live with for a long time.

An admirable trait, though I never asked for it. Stella freely gave herself away to me. "You've ensnared the hungry beast in me, Stella. There's no going back for you." My raging cock plunged into her callously. Nothing made sense to me, but I simply knew that I needed her with me... for a very long time. Maybe even forever, who knew? At this point, the only thing that mattered was that I found someone that made me feel different... inimitable.

"Who owns this little, filthy pussy, darling?" I bellowed, panting hard.

Our eyes met. Mine were demanding for more. Hers were at ease, penetrating into my soul.

"My husband," she whispered, not breaking eye contact. "It's yours. I'll promise it to be yours."

Fuck. Her saying that I was her husband out loud while I was fucking her and about to orgasm was the most confusing, and yet, the best feeling I had ever felt in my entire life.

I wretchedly howled her name as if it was wounding me while I watched in an animalistic, possessive manner as I stroked my length, spurting thick white cream all over her mound, mostly dripping onto her clit.

Drained inside out, I fell on top of her body. "Mine," I confirmed for the last time before consciousness took me.

~C~

Last night.

Was.

Phenomenal.

Her eagerness to match my animalistic passion made it easy to bond with

Stella more.

Even though Zara would pop in and out of my thoughts all morning, the uplifting feeling I got from last night with Stella stumped everything else. I wasn't one who counted down the hours until it was time to go home, but I became that man today. Stella... I couldn't wait to get my hands on her, for starters.

I should've anticipated what was to come. I really should've because what came next, seriously threw me off balance.

My office, it seemed, was a place where bad news was delivered.

"I'm sure you know why I'm here," he grunted, strolling towards the bar and pouring himself a drink. "I'd give her back to you now, if you promise to stop attacking my company. You're bleeding it dry."

"Good, that was my goal."

"How can you say that? It's your money, too. Your inheritance."

"You use your money to manipulate people, Father," I delivered, unperturbed. "How does it feel to be manipulated now?" My hands went inside my pockets, observing the old man that I used to adore and thought the world of. "Feels like shit, doesn't it?" I smirked before I slowly strolled towards my desk and sat down. "The best is yet to come so you should scam and scour for new investors because, from where I'm looking, you're reigning days are numbered, old man."

"I'm your father!"

Oh, he had the gall to throw that into the mix. "You're wrong. My father died the moment he tried to fuck with my life. If you were so scared about Zara, you should've come to me. If you had reservations about how I lived my life, you should've spoken up," I yelled at the blanched stranger before me. "You didn't have the right to get to choose for me, but you didn't respect that at all. Instead, you went the cowardly way and betrayed my trust."

Parents shouldn't meddle. They're there to support your decisions, the good and the bad, not fuck you over. I didn't understand how others could think that simply because they were the parents that they could get away with anything. That they could treat their children so appallingly and still appear like they were the good guys. If you treat your children this way, there was only one way it could go... they'll eventually rebel and would try to get as far away from you as possible.

"I did what I thought was best. I did it for you!"

That got me to snort, hideously. "Fuck off, you did it for yourself. For your selfish needs." I shook my head, disgusted. "It all comes down to money."

The old man kept quiet. He knew I wasn't backing down. Now he had to find a different way to salvage his company because I wasn't going to give him the easy way out. Oh no, Charles Kensington needed to learn respect.

It took me three years of careful planning, of hard work and sleepless nights, but I had finally done it. His company was crumbling. Without his money, he didn't have any power to mess with people. Karma was a bitter nemesis.

"You can have her back. I'm sure she'd be more than happy to have you in between her legs again." Charles threw out his last weapon. Zara.

How dare he? HOW FUCKING DARE HE!

"Fuck you! You have the gall to come in here and offer the woman that was supposed to be your daughter-in-law, but instead you took her away from me. *Zara meant everything to me!*" I got up, ready to throttle him by the neck, but I suppose he sensed my damning rage because he immediately went for the door.

"You can get her anytime you want," he parted before he shut the door with him.

Zara. What the hell was I supposed to do with her now?

No, I thought, shaking my head. “Zara was my past,” I whispered. Thoughts of our happy moments flashed through me and I wasn’t going to lie, it still hurt like a bitch. Her betrayal ran too deep to be easily forgiven.

My anger was roaring in folds as my heart and mind recalled Zara. Gripping the closest thing my hand could grab, I flung it across the room, hitting the wall before it crashed to the floor. “Fuck!”

My father’s visit was the last straw. London stifled me and the need to get away was now necessary if I wanted to keep my sanity.

I needed to leave.

I needed Stella.

Now.

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Chapter 19

Stella

Mark and I were on our way back to my office when my phone rang. It was Callum.

“Hey!” I cheerily greeted.

Callum didn’t bother saying *hi*, but immediately shot his intentions. “I’m taking a week off. I was wondering if you’d want to go somewhere with me?”

Random, but nothing out of the ordinary, I thought with amusement. Vacationing with Callum would be a treat I’d never forget. “Of course. How about Maldives?”

“Actually, I was thinking of St. Lucia.” His tone was still a bit serious. “Your home.”

Okay, anywhere except *there*.

“Let’s go somewhere else? How about Positano? I’ve always wanted to go there,” I lightly suggested, swerving away from the prospect of going back to St. Lucia.

Mark wrapped his arm around my neck before whispering into the phone. “I invited her a few months back, but Derek wouldn’t let her.”

I grunted out as I tried to push Mark off, but he was being playful and, when he was in this mood, the only way to stay sane was to wait until he was over it.

There was dead silence on the other line. I had to press on my screen just to check if he’d hung up on me, but no, he was still there. “Callum? You there?”

“Yeah.”

Yeah? “*Yeah, what?*” I snapped. My patience was a bit on the touchy

side. He was acting like an ass because I was with my best friend? While he was possibly thinking about another woman he craved to be with at all times. Hell yes, I was mad jealous.

It didn't take a genius to breakdown that Callum was going through something because, seriously, who would call out of the blue, suggesting we should go on a vacation with a voice that sounded like someone had died?

Not to mention the destination he wanted to visit. Home was too personal. Besides, I wasn't ready to share it with him. I knew Callum had been there before, *but this time*, it would be just the two of us. It would be more intimate. On top of that, I didn't want to bring him there knowing how much that place meant to me.

I never thought of bringing another man with me unless I was ready to share the rest of my life with him. Callum wasn't that man.

Even though my feelings for him were shifting towards the deep end, I wasn't a stupid woman thinking that he felt the same for me. I knew his heart was with Zara. It was sad, but when we had sex the other night—the night he fell asleep on top of me—I heard him murmur her name.

It was the most painful thing I had ever experienced.

I wanted to hold him close, feel his heart beating against mine, but I knew I didn't have the right because his heart belonged to the one he loved. Zara.

Callum cleared his throat. "You know what, forget I ever mentioned this. Good day." He quickly hung up on me, leaving me more distressed than I was last night.

What a double standard swine! I silently simmered, careful not to let Mark know that I was pissed the hell off. No one could know about how I felt with Callum so I had to keep it to myself.

When my building came into view, Mark dropped me at the door, kissing me goodbye. Usually, I ran towards my office and immediately got to work,

but... that feeling was absent.

Glancing at my contact list, I called on someone for a shoulder to lean on.

My time was limited. It was only a matter of time until Callum dropped me. He was known for his six-week discharge and I knew I would be in the same shoes once I hit the time limit.

An afternoon of relaxation and no depressing thoughts of Callum would be ideal.

~S~

How I spent my afternoon was interesting.

I spent a total of five hours in the spa, walked around London, shopping my socks off and then met up with Lucia, Mark and Alec for dinner. When Mark invited me to come and join them, I was reluctant at first, but now that I was laughing with them with a chilled glass of wine, I was glad I did. I was a firm believer of laughter being the best cure for everything.

It basically took us approximately two hours to finish dinner and when Alec wanted to keep the roll going towards a nearby bar, I had to decline the trio's persistent nagging.

"Come on, Stella!" Lucia pouted.

If I didn't know any better, she was rather nervous to be around Mark. Good, because those two needed to talk.

As always, I had the best excuse. "I skipped work this afternoon. I'll be making up for it tonight so I'm not all over the place tomorrow when I get back to my office."

Speaking of work, the portfolio I was going to work on was conveniently in Callum's home. *Now, how in the world do I fetch it without having him know that I came by?* I believe I left it at a nearby settee before I went to go knock on his study that night. Yeah, it was right about there, I was almost sure.

Alec gave me a big hug, kissing my cheek. “See you at lunch tomorrow, S.”

I gave them all a quick farewell before I hailed a black cab and gave Callum’s address in Chelsea. Usually at this time he was in the study, working. Or he could be out on a business dinner or with another woman. Who knew?

Our abrupt conversation earlier left me in a bad place, but as much as I liked to be around him, if he was acting like a cold, detached brute, then I’d rather be doing my own thing. If sex was all he was after, then let’s leave it at that. My feelings were already in the shitters. I couldn’t simply risk going deeper with the pile I had already.

Even if I was hurting inside, no one would know.

Almost half an hour later, the cab delivered me outside his home. I wasn’t nervous, per say. Somehow, I felt like I was doing a James Bond stint, oddly enough. Coming in and out of his house without his knowledge was, well, sneaky.

Callum’s home was a three-story building. The first floor had his study, dining room and kitchen. The second had the sitting room and living room. The third had the bedrooms in it. His basement had been basically transformed into a gym. It was a great, pricey, bachelor pad of meshed antique collections and modern contemporary design.

I had to take a few deep breaths before I used the key to enter his home. My heart thudded wildly against my chest as I slowly and *quietly* tiptoed into the softly lit foyer.

When I got to the hallway, I almost groaned when I found it dark. I had to pause to let my eyes adjust to the darkness before I continued on my tiptoeing quest for my project folders.

From my memory, the settee was between here and the study. So, I

should be there any second now. From afar, a soft glow filtered underneath the door. Callum was working in the study, which was a good sign.

Spreading my hand a little wider as I went along, I needed to make sure I wasn't going to miss the spot. When I did feel the soft, velvety settee, I immediately hunted for it, however it wasn't on it so I had to check behind the tiny pillows. Still, no result.

"Shit!" I hissed out, whispering into the air.

My heart lodged in my throat when the hallway lights immediately brightened the darkness around me.

"*Looking for something?*" Callum spoke from behind me. Suspicious.

Fuck.

My.

Life.

Without turning around, I responded to him. "I left something here last night and I came back to fetch it."

"It's in my study." He sounded calm, composed and very much detached... like the old Callum I knew well.

Spinning around, I pasted on half a smile. "I'd appreciate it if you could get it for me. I need to work on them tonight, if you don't mind."

"Where were you this afternoon?" he asked, clearly not amused as he ignored my fake smile.

Why was he asking about my whereabouts? "I was busy."

"*With who?*" Callum bit out.

Oh, now he was really making me mad! From hearing him utter her name during sleep to that phone call, *to this*; what the hell did I ever do to deserve such cold treatment?

"I wasn't aware that I had to inform you about my every single move. From what I recall, you and I agreed to sex. Nothing more." I held his stare

before I got fed up and darted towards his study with my heels making loud clacking noises against the marbled floor with each step.

Opening the door to his study, I dashed towards his desk and sure enough, I found my folder there. It didn't even take a second before I snatched it and spun around to exit the damning place. It smelled too much like him and, dear goodness, I couldn't inhale anymore of it. I needed to get the hell out of here, quick.

Callum waited on the very same spot I left him earlier; neck veins evident, eyes sharpened towards me, lips pressed together. Even if he looked like he was about to erupt, the man still managed to look like a sex god. Zara was a lucky woman.

"Goodnight," I whispered when I went past him.

An animalistic growl almost made me stop. *Almost.*

"*You're leaving?*" he bellowed behind me. It echoed through the house.

I had a few seconds to think and decided to play nice. Call it guilt, but even though he acted like a complete ass, it didn't change the fact that Callum had helped me with so much. This thought never failed to work on my conscience.

"I'm going home to work on a few things. I've been slacking." I nodded and proceeded to walk towards the door.

"You better not walk out of that door, Stella! We're not done talking!" Callum was still beyond heated.

I was having a hard time balancing the good and the bad in me... but the devilish side of me won out and I was ready to match his temper. "*Or what, Cal?*" I glared at him. "You think I'm easily scared by your jealous tantrums? I think not."

"*Jealous?*" he hissed. In a blink of an eye, he was immediately rooted close to me, face to face. Danger emanated from him. "*Did you say I was*

jealous?”

I did, but if I knew any better, I shouldn't confirm it. "Listen, it's late. I'll see you sometime soon." My tongue darted out to lick my lips as I took hold of the brass handle and pulled the door open.

A sharp yelp came from me when the partially cracked door slammed back shut again with Callum in my way. "You're not leaving until we're done," he said, gritting out. "Who were you with earlier, Stella?"

I meant to respond to him, really, but my voice was lost on me. My throat ran dry as those dark depths pinned me on the spot. Whatever it was, I knew I was in deep trouble.

"I dropped by your office earlier and was told by your assistant that you went out with Mark for lunch and never came back." He hovered above me like a deadly predator, ready to kill when I made one wrong move. "So again, I'm asking you, what the hell have you been doing all afternoon?"

Was it wrong that amidst all this tension and anger that I was getting turned on? He was all male and, dear God, the man was the sexiest animal I had ever seen.

"You gave me your word. Last night, you promised that you're mine." Callum inched closer, his hard, chiseled chest pressed against my heaving breasts. "I don't appreciate being lied to, Stella. Even if your body has been a new addiction for me, I don't forgive easily," he growled into my face, making me quiver from being so aroused with the threat in his words. "If you want to back out on our agreement, then say so. Chasing women was never a thing for me and I don't plan to start one now."

He wanted me to decide whether I wanted this or not. Right this instant. Well, what the heck did I want? My brows furrowed as I contemplated what to do. I'd choose him... but I knew I shouldn't.

"Give me a few days," I finally found my voice, shaky.

The air crackled between us. Our breathing ragged as it synchronized with each drag of our lungs. His dark eyes reached into mine, pulling and twisting into me, sucking me dry as they demanded all of me.

“No. Give me the answer now, Stella,” he barked out, unrelenting. “I’d rather have a willing woman in my bed than someone who is unsure of what she wants. I don’t have the time for these silly games, Stella.”

The message was loud and clear. If I wasn’t happy with our little sex union, then he’d be more than happy to look for someone who’d jump for joy and utmost gratitude that he was willing to share his sexual prowess. Even though I was simmering in blatant anger, I had to ponder if cutting this connection, or what of it, with Callum was the best thing to do.

My main issue was, I simply was falling for him. Apart from that, he actually wasn’t so bad. He could even be sweet at times. Deep down, I knew I wasn’t ready to let him go. It was too early and like a true masochist, I felt like I needed to get my fill of him first before I could walk away for good.

“I’m staying.”

His eyes were unreadable. They neither looked pleased or happy. “Then you’re sleeping here tonight,” he murmured. “Use my study to work on your project. I will have someone make a workroom for you. It will ready when you get back tomorrow.” He took his time looking over me before he kissed my cheek. “Don’t stay up late.”

With that, he simply spun on his heels and left me in an utter fucking mess.

God help me, but I couldn’t walk away. I didn’t have it in me to do so. Not until I knew it was over for good.

Chapter 20

Stella

It was half past midnight when I heard my phone shrill right next to me. It was Callum. “What now?” I sighed as I reached for the device.

Callum: *It’s late. Come to bed. You need to sleep. Work can resume tomorrow.*

Even though I was still a little miffed about earlier, I couldn’t help melting at his thoughtfulness.

Me: *I need a few more. I will be up soon.*

He immediately responded.

Callum: *Anything I can help you with? I can make you a light snack if you like.*

I wasn’t particularly hungry, but the thought of declining him when he was being all nice and sweet was awful.

Me: *Hot coco, please.*

Callum: *Coming right up.*

I grinned like mad, typing back.

Me: *Thank you...*

Callum: *No need I’m taking care of you.*

A light knock at the door made me look up.

“Hey,” Callum greeted after he opened the door. He came in with a steaming mug, wearing fitted, black boxer briefs and a black, ribbed, fitted tank.

Lethal was the word. Mind you, I couldn’t help giving a quick, appreciative glance towards his honed sexiness. “Nice.”

He smirked just as he placed the drink right next to me. His freshly out of the shower scent—clean, crisp, with a hint of sandalwood—filled my nostrils.

He then leaned against the table, facing me with sparked interest. “I didn’t know you wore glasses.”

For some reason I blushed. It might be because he wasn’t used to women like me. As much as I liked being pampered and beautified all day long, working was a good outlet for me. I loved doing what I do. “Contacts are a bother. I prefer these.” I pressed my lips together as I cocked my head to look up to him. “They’re very comfortable.”

“I can tell. You look sexy in them.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds before I broke contact and reached for the hot coco. With a cautious sip, I tasted his concoction. Hmm, very good, but... “This is divine, but there’s something—”

“Different?”

I nodded, taking another sip, tasting it again. “Definitely.”

“Chili powder, just a hint of it,” he languidly informed me. “It gives it a little kick. I also added half a teaspoon of chocolate liqueur.”

That made me raise my brow. “You seem to know a lot about hot cocoa.”

“My grandfather liked it this way,” Callum murmured, moving closer, his thigh almost touched the side of my legs.

“Your grandfather had good taste.” My breathing came to a halt when he leaned over and carefully took off my glasses.

His thumb held my chin, making me look at him directly. “I like the sexy look, but I love staring into your eyes more.” My mouth went dry. My body electrified by his touch. My whole existence became consumed when his eyes landed on my lips. Did he know how badly I wanted to kiss him, suck on his tongue as he made love to my lips? Yes, he’d kissed me, but I wanted the passionate kind.

It was as if he read my mind because he dropped his head and sought mine. When his bottom lip brushed against my upper lip, I swear I trembled,

badly. He then kissed me while I slowly parted my mouth to let him in, but I was left disappointed when he withdrew and planted a soft one against my cheek. “Goodnight, Stella.”

For the life of me, I couldn’t mask the hurt that ignited in my heart. I gave him a quick nod and immediately reached for my glasses, not looking at him as he exited the study.

I hated myself for *needing* and *wanting* things that weren’t meant for me. It was dangerous to show my feelings because I was going to lose in the end. Callum was clear with his intentions... and I somehow needed to get my head checked. My crush was shifting, blossoming into something more, and yet I had to put a brake on it. He’d resent me if he ever found out the truth.

I suppose I needed to toughen my exterior when—if—I was shattered inside. Even if it pained me to do so, I would do it just to spend a few more weeks with him. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I’d walk away, leaving him in his secured cocoon.

When I finally decided to call it a night, I wasn’t even surprised to find Callum on his side, his back facing me. Closing my eyes, I tried to calm my thoughts. It was then that my phone silently vibrated on the side table. Reaching out for it, I checked who the person was who texted me at almost two in the morning.

Clive: I know I haven’t responded after you sent me an email about you dating Callum. He and I have some history together. He was once a very good friend of mine.

I’m texting you drunk. Had I been sober, I wouldn’t have had the guts. All I’m saying is that I will be here when the time is up. Yeah, I know how he works and he never goes back to the same woman twice.

Take care, Stella. It’s really weird, but I think I really miss you.

It was so like Clive to say something like that. He missed me, but he was

embarrassed to say it outright. I couldn't hold back an amused snort as I reread his message again.

“Stella?”

Shit, wasn't he sleeping? I shifted to my side to see if he was watching me, but he was still in the same position as I'd seen him earlier. “Yes?”

“I need you to come with me tomorrow night for a fundraiser I support for cancer.”

Oh. “Yeah, of course.” Cancer was a sensitive subject for me.

Callum stayed quiet for a minute before he spoke up again. “And Stella?”

I decided to reply to Clive's message tomorrow morning as I placed it back on the table. “Yep?”

“You need to wear the engagement ring from now on.”

Drat. When he was around, I suppose I could. “Okay.”

“Good. Sleep well.”

Here we go again, I silently scolded myself as my tear ducts started to have their own mind. “You, too,” I calmly whispered back and then shut my eyes and let the tears flow.

~S~

“What are you still doing here? Aren't you supposed to be leaving now?” Luciana held my elbow and dragged me away into a secluded corner.

That was the plan... but I was getting antsy. Maybe more like I dreaded seeing him after last night because being around him from here on out was going to be extra difficult. *I wanted too much...* far more than what he could give me.

“I was really on my way out, but I noticed that we needed new champagne glasses filled and one of the old ladies said that one of the waiters

tried to get with her, so what was I to do?” Valid excuses, they were, but it was far from the truth.

Luciana was about to go mini Nazi on everyone. This event started off wrong. First, the florist called in that the flowers they had shipped out from South America were going to arrive tomorrow. So I had to scramble and find another supplier that could come close to the type of orchids that the starlet wanted for the perfume launch. Second, my assistant had food poisoning, so Sienna had to take all of her responsibilities. Sienna’s quick and a fast learner, but how was she supposed to learn everything when Ally only left a post-it with all of the instructions? Third, one of the hired bartenders was caught taking pictures of the other celebrity guests in the party, so I had to get one of the large, beefy security men to escort him out, sans cellphone.

Lastly, the event I was to meet Callum at. We actually agreed that it would be best if we met there since I wasn’t sure if Luciana would let me get off that early, knowing that this event was going to be on the celebrity news the next morning. It was a great opportunity to get exposure and we were both hell-bent for it to go as smoothly as possible.

“Go. Mark actually texted me that he’s more than happy to come and help us out.” Luciana eyed me suspiciously.

Well, it wasn’t as if I had other ulterior motives... a bit. “I did call for back-up. Besides, he’s more than happy to help. He *is* our best friend after all.”

She rolled her eyes at me, making me stare at her jeweled green eyes and thick ebony lashes. Sometimes, I just wanted to pluck one out just to see if they were fake. Seriously, hers were far too long!

“Gotta go now. Be nice to Mark, okay?” I kissed her cheek then the other before giving her a tight squeeze. “Thank you.”

“If you aren’t shagging Callum yet, tonight better be the night.”

That made me smirk. “I’ll keep you updated.”

With a little wave, I darted towards the exit and the flip-flop of my heart in my ribcage started its own jungle-themed rhythm. Luck was on my side when there was a cab waiting outside. A quick thanks automatically left my lips as the hotel staff opened the door for me.

“Claridge’s please,” I said to the driver.

Whilst in the cab, I pulled out my phone and texted him that I was on my way.

Callum: *See you.*

Great. Now all I had to do was get through the night. My thoughts took me back to last night again, rehashing it like a true lovesick person, and before I noticed, the cab was already parked right outside the hotel.

“Here we go,” I muttered under my breath.

This was the first time I was accompanying him to anything, so the pressure was on. With my aloof persona in place, I trotted in my champagne colored, tight-hugging bodice of a dress that stopped at my knees, but the dress was so tight that I could barely walk a foot apart in my gold, five-inch stilettos. There was only one thing I aimed at, wearing a dress like this, and that was to be noticed. Not by others, but by Callum. It was a normal attempt for a woman to entice a man this way, but I had to work with what I had. He liked his women this way and, at times—like when I had to work tonight—I sometimes put extra care into my appearance. So maybe I just went overboard with this one in particular. I mean, if his heart was unavailable, I sure as hell didn’t want him to check out other women while he was with me. There was also the fact that I wanted to be remembered by him later on down the years...

I didn’t have to walk far; the man stood in the middle of the foyer—not on the side, but right there in the middle—with people milling and walking

past him, dressed in a tux. I was immediately in a depraved sexual riot. The second I spotted him, my whole body and mind shifted. I was entering into Callum Kensington's domain, hypnotized and entranced by the power he exuded. The man simply commanded it.

He looked formidable. Commanding. Stoic. An elegant rogue with an edge of danger to it. "Stella, you look..." Callum trailed off, disconcerted, before he bent his head and aimed for my ear. "Please tell me you have some sort of undergarment in this dress?" he hissed into it.

He was a man who knew the woman's body and underwear well, huh. I was far from pleased. In fact, that bothered me a great deal. "I didn't want any lines. And as for the bra, you can see how that's not going to work, either."

"It's obscene," Callum hissed, furious even. "I can practically imagine what you look like naked."

That was the point, but never mind. His reaction was enough to douse me to face reality. "If you want me to leave, just say so. I have work to do anyway," I managed to blurt out. I wanted to gouge his eyes out. It took a few hours to be prepped to the point of looking like this... and now he tells me that I looked obscene? Did he not go parading around town with women dressed in far less than what I was wearing now? Fucking prick! I simmered.

Out of the blue, Callum quickly tensed. His jaws locked as he looked past me. "My father and Zara are coming towards us."

"*What!*" I hissed, not sure if I was about to laugh or cry. However, even before I had the chance to decide, I heard a man's throat being cleared behind me.

"Nice to see you here, son," Charles Kensington greeted Callum just as I was moving to Callum's side, facing the intruders.

He was younger looking somehow and not what I had imagined him to

be. Callum's looks definitely were inherited from his maternal side.

Charles then found me; blue eyes assessing me head to foot. "Stella von Berg and a Kensington together. What a lovely pairing. Glad you finally took my heed and found yourself a wealthy heiress worthy to marry."

What was I to say to that kind of tacky comment? Mind you, I was rendered speechless, *but* that was before I was introduced to Zara. I was decent looking, but next to this woman, I paled in comparison. No wonder Callum couldn't get over her.

"Pleasure to meet you, Stella." Zara composed a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She faced Callum and when their gazes connected, *I* even felt the spark. "Good to see you again, Callum." Love was so apparent in her dark eyes that I somewhat felt like I was the one intruding in their little eyes-devouring-you-on-the-spot reunion.

Their moment was broken by Charles excusing himself to greet one of his old cronies—who were somewhere across the room—leaving the three of us in a compromising position.

Zara was so focused on Callum that she might've forgotten that I was here, too. Callum had yet to utter a damn word, but the man was like a stone, staring holes at the woman he loved.

I stood apoplectic, eyes flickering back and forth before I finally urged myself to move out of the way. "I need to go to the loo." I excused myself, barely looking at them, and sought for a quiet place to balm my broken heart.

Relief rushed through me when I ventured into another room that was empty except for a few chairs hoisted to the side. From the looks of it, the cleaning party had yet to arrive. How appropriate that I stepped into a room that was someone's wedding reception.

I was so consumed with forcing myself not to cry that I hadn't heard the door open. Imagine my fright when I heard someone's voice asking me if I

was okay. “Are you all right?”

My eyes were still glued towards the once-happy celebratory party before me. “Uh huh.” *In a couple of minutes or so, I will be.*

The mystery person revealed himself by squatting before me, concern etched across his face. “You don’t look it, Stella.”

With a small, quivering smile, I spoke to Derek, “You saw that, huh?”

He nodded solemnly. “Yeah. Why are you with him?” His question was more of a wonder than anything. “You’re dating playboys, one after the other. What the bloody hell for? To get yourself trampled over?” He peered closer, lifting my chin. “You deserve a man that will love you, not play around with you.” He cleared his throat, looking sorry. “I admit, in the beginning I became frustrated with you. I was too focused on wanting you to give it up to me that I forgot how we were together, how you were with me.” He paused. “I didn’t realize this until I started dating again and realized how much I missed you.”

Dear goodness, I couldn’t deal with this now. Not right now. “Derek—”

“I’d give everything to have another chance with you again.”

This was sad. “I’m in love with him,” I admitted bravely. “There’s no hope for me.”

“Guessed as much. He doesn’t see it, though. I doubt he sees any woman, if at all.” Derek gathered me up and held me tight. “We all love and learn. Someday, you’ll love again.” He kissed my cheek, eyes seeking mine. “I pray to the gods that man will be me.”

Someday you’ll love again... those words held comfort. Words I could hang on to. Something to look forward to.

“Let’s get you warmed up before Mr. Playboy comes and fetches you away from me,” Derek offered, leading us towards the bar.

That was, if Callum still remembered I existed...

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Chapter 21

Callum

“We need to discuss our future,” Zara persisted, pressing herself closer towards me. Her perfume reached my senses and I somehow felt like I was being transported back in time to when I was madly and hopelessly in love with this woman.

I would’ve moved Heaven and earth to make her happy. Zara had been my life. Everything I did then was for our future. I was a roughened teenager, but the moment I met her, I was willing to make changes. The moment I knew I was in love with her, I didn’t even hesitate to commit myself fully to her. However, somehow all through that love and affection—not to mention utmost dedication—Zara easily walked away from it all. *From me*. Here she was now, demanding we “discuss” our future. What was she on?

“If you haven’t noticed, I’ve moved on from you.” I sought her eyes, putting all my energy in holding her gaze. “You’ve been replaced. There’s no future with me. Best you get that truth into your head.”

“You don’t love her,” Zara immediately retorted back.

My nose flared at her audacity. “How dare you. You don’t know anything!”

“You know how I know? Because you didn’t even glance at her, not once, the second you saw me. She excused herself to use the restroom and yet it seemed you didn’t even hear her.” She pressed her heaving breasts against my chest. Her lips and hot breath tickled my ear. “You only have eyes for me. No one will come close, Callum. It’s the same for me. I want you.” She pressed harder, making me silently curse. “I haven’t had a man for a year and I’m anticipating for you to relinquish this need in between my thighs. It has only craved you, no one else.”

This was bad. Sex with Zara had always been dynamite. Her talking about not having any other man after me made my throat dry. She was temptation to the fullest. She knew my body, knew what turned me on... and her dirty talk confirmed just how much she wanted to be back in my life.

“Charles filed divorce yesterday. He brought me out here to reconcile with you.” She kissed my lobe. “You can have me tonight... or whenever you want.”

A voice informing the guests that the ballroom was now available made me pull back away from her influence. Zara still held power over me. I was discomfited. Horrified. Yet, somehow, aroused. It was troubling and I hated it—*her*—for torturing me some more.

Besides, there was Stella.

God, Stella! I had seriously forgotten about her. My eyes scanned the area, looking for her.

“She probably left already,” Zara quipped into my ear.

If Stella had, I couldn’t blame her. She’d probably witnessed how Zara was full on seducing me or how I had let her do it, not even stopping her attempt. As I stated before, I didn’t deserve Stella, and yet, I couldn’t let her go. I was a horrible man. Selfish. Needy.

In need for her as well as the sense of comfort and security she brought.

“I have to go.” I unclasped Zara’s hold from me as I scanned the throbbing sea of people. Where did she go? Did she leave?

Frustrated, I went towards the entrance and asked the hotel staff in charge if they had seen Stella leave. I knew they would know who I was talking about because I had seen how they blatantly gawked at her behind as she sauntered towards me.

An exasperated grunt showed how desperate I was to find her. It was rude of me to actually have forgotten about her when Zara appeared. It was a

shock to see her again, with my father in tow... but still... Stella didn't need to witness how affected I was when it came to the woman who had brought me to my knees once. I tried to picture what it would've been for her to see me with Zara and, whatever came in to mind, I didn't like much.

In all honesty, I didn't know what I wanted. When it came to Zara and Stella, I was confused. I knew that *now*, after what happened with Zara earlier, but for some reason, Stella brought out other things in me.

I might have appeared calm to some as I drifted off from one place to the other, eyes flittering about for one particular person. What greeted my eyes just ignited a great example.

The bar was the last place I decided to check because I hadn't imagined Stella would seek out a drink, but my, my, was I wrong.

Stella, the minx, was seated in a rounded-cushioned, red leather barstool, legs crossed, with a man's hand resting on her exposed thigh, thumb caressing the line that met her pressed thighs, intimately. She was sipping her strawberry champagne, oblivious to the fact that I was only a few feet away, as she listened to the man whispering into her ear. His left hand was on her hip as a gesture for everyone to know that he was hers to claim.

In a heartbeat, I joined their cozy, little, intimate circle. Clearing my throat, I made sure my voice delivered the words succinctly. "Excuse me, but I think you're pissing on my woman."

"Callum. Oh, um, this is Derek." Stella giggled, blushing. "An ex of mine."

She seriously giggled. Was she already drunk or was she enjoying this tête-à-tête they were having? This literally played havoc with my raging temper, teetering on the edge.

"Derek. Good to meet you." The besotted chap played the gentleman, but I was far from being playful.

If it were my way, I'd love to fight him off—man to man—and see if he could beat me. *He could at least try*, I mused. With all this frustration gathered in my body, I could do some light workout with Derek as my target.

Instead of acting like a true animal, I penetrated his eyes. The man didn't cower, though. "Right. The infamous wanker who left Stella because he felt unmanned by not being able to exude his potency and vigor." *That* certainly got to him. Good. "I assure you, I didn't have the same problem as you did."

Stella made a loud gasp, but I ignored it.

Instead, I took hold of her waist and got her to her feet, almost dragging her out of the bar. Once we reached a quiet, secluded corner, I hoisted her there, caging her in between my hands. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you had sex with the man! But you were a virgin when I had you, so I must be seeing things." I shot the words like bullets, not masking the kind of fury of hell I was in.

What came out of her lips next put me in a tricky position.

"I did have sex with him." She simply said it like it was of no consequence. "You had my virginity. He took the other," Stella finished.

Everything around me evaporated.

The loud buzz of people in the hotel completely disappeared. The erratic thrum of my pulse rung in my ears as I studied the beguiling nymph with acute concentration. My sole focus was Stella and what she had just bombarded my thoughts with.

"*You've had anal before?*" When she responded with a careless nod, I became livid.

What the bloody fuck! I wasn't sure if I was furious because she let another man touch her there or because he got there before me. Either way, I didn't like anyone touching her *anywhere* intimately. I liked knowing that I was her first... but this Derek guy was her other first, too. So it *was* more like

a pissing contest, but I didn't care. Seeing her with her ex, cozy and intimate, made me rabid with jealousy. Top that with the blasted news she had just gifted me, I was an animal ready to let loose.

"What does he want with you?" I demanded, inching closer to madness. Stella shrugged, looking away. I gritted my teeth. Impatient. Frustrated. Not to mention, troubled by Zara and now facing this catastrophic imbalance I had with Stella. "Answer me."

Stella made me want to keep her, for reasons that were selfish and wrong, and yet, it somehow made sense to me.

"He wants me back," she responded, eyes cast down, staring at my chest.

I wanted to growl, go ballistic, go the fuck however I wanted, but a delicate quiver of her bottom lip unhinged something greater than the possessive side of me.

Goodness, she looked so fragile, beautiful and yet a sexy siren all wrapped into one delectable package. "Are you going to?" I carefully asked, trying not to lose my temper.

"No." She was still adamant not to meet my gaze.

Breathing her in, I took a moment to rationalize my thoughts, then deemed it impossible. "Will you go to him after we're through?" It was an invalid question, but for some reason, I wanted to know.

"Maybe. We'll see. I want to date around; see how it is out there."

See how it is out there. Right, bloody right. I nodded, as if understanding it all. Saw it all. "You mean you want to see how it is to have sex with different men? Try out all the shapes and sizes, you mean?" I was becoming unreasonable, but I couldn't hold it in. Jealousy was a new emotion I could do without, but it had reared its ugly head when it came to Stella. Not even with Zara was I this territorial. Thinking of Stella in such a precarious situation, I became incensed with fury at the thought of her giving herself to

different men.

I was so taken with images of her that when she finally lifted those crystal gray eyes to me, it seized me whole. I completely felt perplexed.

“Is that what you want, Cal?” she whispered; voice little, fragile even.

Her wispy voice nailed a thorn inside me. In this instant, all the rationale, uncertainties, the good and bad intentions, beliefs, weaknesses and happiness dulled away and I entirely became... unguarded.

My forehead rested against hers as I listened to our hearts thud with wild eagerness. The tip of my nose connected with hers. Our lips brushed, motionless. “Stella.” The tip of my wet tongue darted out, wetting my bottom lip, but as it did so, it also tasted her champagne coated one.

Like a truly addicted drunkard—intoxicated, bewildered and simply couldn’t resist temptation—my tongue sat on her bottom lip. From the inside, it traced the outline of her lips. From the bottom to the top, rounding it in a full circle, tasting her luscious lips with newfound hunger. “Stella,” I whispered her name again. Drunk. Hypnotized.

She trembled against me. Lifting my hand, I let my fingers caress her cheek. Each stroke on her soft, silken skin charged towards the powerful magnetic pull I had been avoiding.

It compelled me closer; bringing me to a close as my bottom lip softly kissed hers, ever so slowly. The feeling was exhilarating, even more so when I first took her in bed, consummating our marriage.

My lips softly pried hers open, seeking more. More of her taste. Just more of her.

We kissed. It was soft, gentle and unrushed, as though we had all the time in the world to kiss and get drunk off each other. In this heated moment, all I knew was one thing; from the root of her head to the tips of her dainty toes, Stella was mine.

All.
Fucking.
Mine.

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Chapter 22

Stella

Callum was kissing me. The full on, no holds barred, toe curling, root zapping, earth-shifting kiss I had craved for so long. My God, my imagination had been fully surpassed with how it truly was to be kissed by him.

I knew he was a passionate man, but this—*kissing Callum*—eclipsed everything I had ever experienced with any man.

Callum cradled my face with his hand while the other held the back of my neck. I groaned wantonly when that hand took hold of my hair and gently pulled it down so my lips inclined to his, aiming for deeper strokes.

Piece by piece, his kiss soothed my wounds. It lulled my punctured heart and my lost hope was instantly revived. Each kiss was carnal, rushed and yet precise to make me burn hotter. It compelled me to yearn for all of him. That gnawing ache only growing. What little shield I had placed to distance myself, vanished.

Callum's lovemaking rendered me an addict.

His heated touch brought a feral aphrodisiac.

However his kiss took the prize because it simply was, undeniably, my most omnipotent weakness of all.

It unequivocally changed me.

A sexy, hungry, humming sound came from him as he applied more pressure in his kiss. It didn't help with my beyond peaked, stimulated senses.

Pressing my aching breasts against his hard chest, I let my hand inside his jacket and wandered south. My fingers slowly lavished on his honed body as it enjoyed each ridge of his chiseled abdomen. I held my breath as it travelled lower, heading towards the nether region.

Callum made another throaty, aching noise when he felt my hand softly kneading his balls and the base of his shaft. “I ache to be inside you,” he spoke against my lips. “But we have to wait until we get home. I want to taste you slowly.” He pressed his hips harder against my hand. “I want to savor that first stroke, that feeling as I enter your slick pussy, fitting me like a glove.”

Dammit. “You want me to wait until we get home after you just illicitly described all that? You must be nuts!” I didn’t want to sound desperate or like some trollop who was in dire need of a scratch, but hell, what did he expect when he’d ravished me on the spot?

“We have to get through tonight. I promise, once we step inside the bedroom, I’m going to seize your body until your mind is shut off and all you can do *is feel* me taking everything from you. I want to fuck you like I’m robbing you of your pride, your rights and your ability to object from the abuse your getting from my cock.” Callum gave me a soft kiss, measured and calculated, before he drifted his gaze into my gray ones. “I want you smothered by it, by me. All of me...” he murmured, thumb grazing my bottom lip. “I need you to need me... as much as I you.”

I *did* need him, but to a much grander scale. However, I didn’t voice that out.

Callum held me awhile, lips pressing against my forehead as we tried to lower down our libidinous bodies. Though we didn’t speak, the silence we shared was a comfortable one. Moments like these I treasured greatly. It was simple, uncomplicated and sweet.

Even with all these people here for the event, this tiny corner was hidden and tucked away from prying eyes.

Sighing softly, I brushed my lips against the side of his neck, kissing it.

“Ready?” he asked, looking at me with passion in his eyes.

Yeah, we definitely lit each other up with kisses. “Ready,” I responded with dizzy excitement. With shaky legs, Callum held me as he guided us inside the grand soiree.

It was electrifying to see him look at me this way... and the things he mentioned earlier about needing him... One way or another, I somehow had made a dent in his armor. The dent might be small, but I hoped the impact was long lasting.

I hoped... with that look in his eyes, I sure did hope... that maybe—*just maybe*—it would work out between us.

~S~

The Claridge’s Ballroom was a marvel of pristine white surroundings, cream tablecloths, hints of gold with mirrors placed strategically throughout the room to imbibe that refreshingly light, airy feel. It had that Victorian era influence meshed with modern Art Deco; the end result was an astonishing splendor.

After our kiss, everything seemed to rush past me. When Callum introduced me to some of his acquaintances, I didn’t even bother trying to register their names in my brain. Nothing mattered then except for him; for I truly and devastatingly, was swooning and spinning about in my own dreamland.

Once we were seated accordingly, we both got engrossed talking to the other guests that we were sharing a table with. No one seemed to mind or question my relations with him. For that I was relieved. It would be rather awkward to say that I was engaged to him and yet, in reality, I was ecstatic because my pseudo fiancé had just managed to kiss me and turned me into a lovesick idiot.

I think my idiotic meter skyrocketed when his hand reached for mine underneath the table, resting out intertwined hands on my thigh. I couldn’t

help giving him a glance, smiling as I did so. When I did, I wasn't even surprised that Callum kept with his conversation without paying heed to me, but his sweet gesture made sure I knew that he was aware that I was right next to him and that he wasn't ignoring me at all.

I liked this about him. A lot.

It took every ounce of concentration not to drag Callum away from the table and find a secluded area to ravish him there, so that I could get rid of all this pent-up, boiling hot, spinning out of control need to devour him. Social obligations were a bore. I was simply grateful that the woman who sat next to me wasn't.

Speeches were given. Dinner was served. We were all waiting on our coffees and pastries to be served when conversations began again. I was so engrossed in my conversation with Mrs. Chambers that I had forgotten about Callum for the moment.

He became quiet and when I checked at where his gaze traveled, it placed me in a deflated mood. Five tables ahead, Zara and Charles were seated. Still, I managed to give him an understanding smile.

When he gave my hand a light squeeze, I somehow took it as his way of sorry. I was relieved when the waiters arrived with our last course. It became an excuse so I didn't have to converse with him.

I understood him. His love and his hate for Zara... I could somehow grasp the capacity of his feelings. Not only that, but I felt sorry for him. What he'd gone through was horrible. Even with all that, a large part of my soul wished that he was mine. It was a twisted thing to wish for, knowing that it would never happen. Even when I was in this Callum haze that assaulted my every sense, my entire existence, my soul... my sanity... Even knowing all that, I still dared wish it.

Love was a damning thing for any human being because it made me a

dreamer. It was only a matter of time until something was to happen. I saw it in Zara's eyes; the way she claimed him without physical contact. In her eyes, it was all there to see. Callum was hers and she was his.

Their connection was palpable. It permeated the air. It was amazing and mortifying to witness. There I was, standing amidst the two past lovers, connecting through their eyes without a word being spoken, but so much was communicated.

As much as I wanted to be a bystander to their astonishing connection, I couldn't for the life of me stay rooted to the spot and not hear my heart break into smithereens.

I had to find solace, a short reprieve, before I set to leave and go home. My emotions were all over the place, but one thing stood out and that was jealousy.

Of course I was jealous. What woman wouldn't be? There I was, seeing the man who I had craved and wanted since I knew what lust was at the tender age of fifteen, who was almost at my reach, and his blasted past love showed up.

I was feeling all sorts of things and, when Derek showed up, the need for revenge was harboring me to do something reckless. All of these self-destructive ways of thinking went down the drain the second Callum reappeared, though. He was bold, crass and apologetic. I couldn't help becoming a hapless woman in his arms again.

That kiss... Callum's kiss obliterated my thinking. My reasoning. My hate and all the other damning feelings I had felt minutes before he showed up in the bar. That was all it took to make me his again and I sensed that he knew it, too.

If he ever wanted me tamed, all he had to do was kiss me and I would be his again.

“Want to grant me your first dance for the night?” Callum leaned over and murmured into my ear.

His closeness gave me immediate palpitations. The thought of being held by him while his ex watched was tempting, but I didn’t want him to use me as a ploy to make her jealous. I just wouldn’t let him.

I was about to decline him when we were interrupted, much to my relief.

Hugh Lowsley—one of Richard and Callum’s friends—came over to our table, greeting us. It was obvious that these two had a great bond. From the fun stories Richard had told me before, I was glad that these two kept in touch, even after all these years. I knew how difficult it was after school and life got in the way. It soon became an out of sight, out of mind kind of thing.

Hugh and Callum did the whole comrade-to-comrade thing, shaking hands and then some hugs and laughs. After their greeting, Callum turned to me. “I’m not sure if you’ve met Richard’s little sister, Stella?” He introduced me like we were friends, nothing to insinuate that we were past friendship.

This bugged me.

It was just then that Hugh cocked his head sideways to see me fully. He then whistled, handing out his hand for me to shake. “Stella? Wow, look at you!” He eyed me with avid scrutiny. “You’re all grown up and how gorgeous, I might add,” he added with an appreciative smile. Sky blue eyes skimmed all over me.

My small hand connected with his manly one, grinning as he shook it. “Well, we *did* meet when I was seventeen. I was bound to ripen with age.”

His appreciation was welcomed as it merely boosted my deflated spirits. I remembered him always being so casual. Nothing fazed him. Even when he was failing in one of his classes for being tardy, he had acted like it was nothing to be bothered about. Years later, Hugh was still the same man and a looker, if I dared add that to the list.

“Would you do me the honor?” Hugh offered his hand. “We can dance and catch up, if you like.”

From my peripheral vision, I caught Callum’s death stare. It should’ve been a warning that it would displease him, especially after the thing with Derek tonight, but unfortunately, the look sent me to the opposite direction.

“I’d love to!” I held out my hand, accepting his offer. It was audacious and I didn’t even glance towards Callum as Hugh led the way to the dance floor, which was filling up with people, possibly trying to work off those extra calories consumed from the dessert.

Hugh chose a quiet spot, further away from the other dancers and a tad further from the band. He held me securely as we danced to the jazzy beat. “I heard Tango is up next.” He quirked his eyebrow as if to taunt me, challenging me. Those sky blues never left my face, but I could sense that he was somehow teasing me.

Very well. I never backed out on a good challenge. “I love Tango.”

His eyes danced with amusement. “Do you now? I can’t wait,” he retorted before he quickly got serious.

Hugh studied me awhile before commenting on my eyes. “You know, if I’m not mistaken, your eyes are exactly like your Richard’s.”

They were. It was one of the things that gave us away as siblings. “It was the only thing we had in common.”

Hugh nodded. “That and that uncanny ability to make someone feel welcome. It’s strange really,” he thoughtfully said.

“I make someone feel welcome and strange all at once? That’s some ability.”

Hugh roared in laughter amidst our dancing. His laugh was so infectious that I went along with him, and for a few seconds, my troubles lifted away.

When Hugh spoke again, I was taken by surprise.

“I should’ve had Richard make me your conservator. I could guarantee you that I wouldn’t be such a bore as to take you to one of these functions.”

I stilled, shocked. “You *knew* about that?”

Who else did?

Hugh easily confirmed it. “Yes, Richard was a good friend of mine. I do miss that bugger. He was a great friend. Truly brilliant fellow.” He became somber. His eyes had that far away look as if visualizing Richard in his mind.

My brother was a good man. He wasn’t selfish and would dish out honesty over anything. He’d rather hurt your feelings instead of sugar coating anything to make you feel better. When I had problems, he never failed to be there for me. After our parents died, we mourned their losses, but he had to step up and into my father’s shoes. Juggling his new position, his social life and acting as a parent to me probably had been difficult for him, but never had I heard him complain a word about it.

It hurt to remember him, but at the same time, it was good to remember him again. “Thank you,” I murmured, almost teary.

“For what?”

I tried to smile. “For talking about him the way you did. Not a lot of people do anymore. It’s good to hear about Richard, even if it still hurts to think about what happened.”

“I suppose that’s why a lot of people try not to talk about it. It’s sad. It hurts, but that doesn’t mean we don’t think of him,” Hugh enlightened.

It was then that I wondered how Callum coped with my brother’s loss. He spoke about Richard, but he never went in depth about it all. With Zara’s betrayal and my brother’s passing, it was one after the other. I was sure it wasn’t easy to lose the people you loved all at once.

Hugh and I veered off sad subjects at the same time that the song changed and, as challenged, we tangoed with grinning faces.

I was delighted when the man truly knew his moves. For a while, I danced my worries away. Not caring if Callum was there watching or if he had already sought out his ex.

When our song ended, Hugh and I parted with promises of lunch or a coffee chitchat. Instead of going straight to my table with Callum, I went directly towards the loo to freshen up.

I was a few steps away from reaching the restroom when someone spun me around and took my breath away. “Cal.”

It took only one look to know that he was livid. The dangerous spark he had within him thrilled me. My heaving chest mesmerized his eyes. He studied the swells of my breasts before he lifted those dark eyes that seemed to reach into my soul.

“You let a man roam his hands all over you while I sat there fighting with myself because I wanted to bloody beat his arse!” he gritted out, eyes so dark that they promised only danger as he locked me in place. “What I don’t appreciate is you flaunting it right before me. Especially knowing the fact that you aren’t wearing any bra or underwear for that matter. What did you expect, Stella? If you were aiming to make me jealous, then you have succeeded.” He looked pained as he admitted the fact that he was jealous of Hugh.

It was a small victory, but it was one I savored the most. For jealousy bred deeper feelings and I hoped from there it could turn into love. It was a process. However, it was a long one. I was merely delighted that it was going toward the right path.

“Did you know you look really cute when jealous?” I leaned over and kissed the tip of his nose.

Callum growled at me. “*Cute?*” he hissed. “All you have to say is *cute*? You ought to be joking mad.”

Boy, he was cute all right, but he was getting sexier as he smoldered right before me. He was maddeningly gorgeous.

I ached to be with him.

“Someone has to joke around because you are way too serious.” I smiled, lavishing in his jealousy.

Callum was far from delighted, though. “*I’m way too serious?*” He nodded, pressing his lips together, still not amused. “Very well then, let me show you how serious I can get.” He shot out the words as he took me by the elbow and marched us in the other direction. The people that walked past us seemed to pay heed, but they were the least of my concern because I was worried what Callum had in mind.

Was he planning to confront Hugh? Hell. “You better not do anything stupid, Cal, or I will cause some damage.” I tried to threaten him, but my words didn’t seem to affect him in the least.

Everything became intense when he opened a door and dragged us both inside, probably to battle this one out. When he didn’t even bother to turn the lights on, I suddenly became frightened. Aware.

“Want to elaborate on your threats, Stella?” he spoke from somewhere in the room.

It was so dark, it was hard to see anything. I didn’t even have a clue what kind of room we were in, let alone how big it was. If I were in a broom closet, I wouldn’t have known.

Now about those threats... they had been purely empty. “I don’t know why you’d be jealous and go through the extent to bring us here to settle the discussion. I hadn’t said a word when you were practically having silent eye-fucking with your ex-lover.” There went my mouth again.

“It’s not Zara’s body I want,” he growled into the darkness.

The room was pitch black and yet I somehow felt him move. It didn’t

take him long to reach me and then he was circling his arms around my hips, tugging me hard against his chest. “I want you.” Callum’s seductive, raspy voice lulled me into submission. “This body...” his hands cupped both of my breasts and squeezed them so tightly that I was out of breath. “...is mine to do as I please.” His words echoed into my brain.

Thou shall not play with fire if one doesn’t know how to douse it, control it and tame it. For it will burn, scar and consume you alive without thought.

Did I pay heed? Not a fucking chance.

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Chapter 23

Stella

The anonymity of the darkened surroundings made it more arousing. My sense of hearing and touch were in full throttle. I heard each drawn breath he took. Felt each stroke of his hands. Each pulse.

In the dark, our bodies resorted to baser instincts. Sense they say was a powerful thing. I had never acknowledged the full magnitude until now.

Callum's hand went inside the V of my plunging neckline and captured a nipple in between his thumb and finger, rolling it back and forth until it was hard as a pebble.

"Callum!" I yelped from the aching pleasure as I rested my head against his shoulder, willing to do as he pleased.

He pinched my tortured nipple as he breathed into my ear. "How dare you let a man touch you, darling," he hissed into my sensitive ear. "You do know I'm furious at you, don't you?" he questioned while his other hand went lower, sliding in between my legs, inching higher until it reached my hot mound. "You're wet," he grunted out as he dipped a finger into me, all the while his other hand was remained busy torturing my breast. "*Who* are you wet for, Stella?"

I moaned as he stuck another finger inside. It was sick, but I loved how he was reacting to Hugh. This inhibited, impassioned man was all mine to savor.

"This is the last time I'm going to ask, sweet wife of mine. *Again, who are you wet for?*"

"You." *There was only ever you.*

He wasn't satisfied with my response. Instead, he became even more persistent. "And what am I to you, darling?"

"My lover," I whispered out, getting mindless as his fingers penetrated

me deeper, rubbing up against my g-spot as though it was possessed.

My answer *still* didn't please him. "Try again."

What else was there? Did he even consider himself my boyfriend? I thought not. We weren't like that. Not at all.

His fingers pulled out of my wet hole and off my breast. He became busy rolling my fitted dress up until it reached atop my hipbone then he gingerly cupped each breast and pushed them out, gripping both mounds.

This sweet, delayed gratification was killing me whole. I needed him now. "Callum, please. You're being cruel."

I sighed with relief when I heard the sound of his zipper and moaned in delight when his dick protruded and poked me from behind.

A soft purr escaped my lips when I felt his hard shaft nestled in between the crack of my butt, the tip teasing my silken folds. He gently tilted me forward for better angle.

I was on pins and needles with anticipation and when his head came up on the right side of my ear, teasing me relentlessly, I was putty in his hands.

"Lift your arms and wrap them around my neck. Don't let go until I give you permission. Tilt your head to the side. I want your neck, breasts and pussy exposed to me," he commanded while I immediately followed his direction.

My breasts lifted upwards. My spine arched. My bottom angled directly for his usage.

Callum was licking his way along my neck. Precise with his seduction, each stroke and touch was bound to drive me into oblivion. Even his voice, it was used as a weapon to accomplish his goal. What a goal that was.

"Close your eyes, darling, and listen to my voice." His breath tickled my ear as he spoke. He slid his lips down to kiss where my pulse was located and then he went back, assaulting my senses. "A woman's body is made for

pleasure.” His dick slid back and forth into my slit. “It was designed to feel and receive pleasure. It’s a gift that each woman should acknowledge.” His thumb found my clit, making slow, agonizing circles around it, rubbing it precisely and accordingly along with the strokes of his length. “When a man desires you, you grant that gift to him. You surrender it. You enjoy what he’s doing to your body.” His voice was hypnotizing, lulling me to become his plaything or whatever he wished of me.

When his other hand found my pebbled nipple and painfully tugged at it, I moaned with pain just as he started speaking again. “This man becomes your master. Your Alpha. Your Omega. Your sole ambition is to cater to his every desire. Needs. Wants. Demands.”

I was so enthralled with the sound of his voice that I was having mini-quaking orgasms from his onslaught. Callum was a master in stimulation in all art forms. Tonight, he proved that foreplay can be much more sensual than the actual sex act itself.

When he asked me a question, I was past rational thinking. “Will you be that woman for me, darling?”

“Yes,” I moaned, needing release. Anything he’d ask, I was ready to give. At this point, I was spellbound and locked under his craft.

With all of his might, Callum thrust forward and sunk his shaft into my wet core, growling in my ear as he did so. Once lodged inside, he reached out and tortured my breasts. Each stroke of his cock pounded deeply into me, making sure every thrust kissed my cervix.

He feasted on me.

His sacrifice.

His meal.

Each stroke echoed in my body, begging for more, needing more of it.

“This pussy is only to wet for me. It can’t come unless it’s because of me.

You can't fuck until it's my cock fucking you," he hissed, furiously driving into my bruised cervix as I panted for more.

"I'm counting down the days until I can come inside you." Callum tugged on my hair, making me grunt in pleasure. "Do you imagine how it would feel, Stella?" I made a whimpering sound when he slapped my clit, sending delicious voltage across my strung-up body. "You will feel it expand inside you. The hot ropes of my come will be violent as I unleash them into you. It will be an experience I don't want you to forget."

Like that would ever happen. Callum was weaving my body into exultation. I was a panting, heaving, quivering mess, but it seemed he wasn't keen on finishing me just yet.

I begged when he playfully bit into my tongue. "I want you to remember how it would feel when I give myself to you, so each time I take your sweet pussy, you anticipate the finale."

Anticipate it, I shall. "Yes, I need to feel you... *fill* me up," I muttered, incoherent.

"Fucking hell, Stella," he said in a pained voice. Unleashed. "Sorry, but I have to come inside you," he gritted out. "Now!"

What?

"No," I gasped just as he pulled out. I hadn't seen it coming.

I let out a pained sob when his shaft penetrated my other opening, inserting half of his dick in me as he immediately released his load, pumping in precise strokes as he spurt his seed inside me.

"I'm sorry. My need to possess you overrode common sense." He kissed the side of my neck. "I'm sorry," Callum whispered as he shook while sagging on my back, spent from his intense orgasm. I could feel his dick expand while it made soft, small strokes.

This... with him... like this... felt perfect. I didn't want to leave this dark

place and face the rest of the world. Here, in the blanket of darkness, he was mine alone.

When he whispered *sorry* before kissing the back of my neck, I moaned against him. “It was painful in the beginning, but when you started coming, it wasn’t so bad.” I cocked my head to the side, resting it against his cheek, seeking for his lips. “Don’t ever be sorry for wanting me,” I said in between kisses. “I’m yours, after all.”

As our kiss deepened in an act of completion, I had never felt more in love with him. Never had I felt such an all-consuming connection with another man.

My feelings for Callum were complicated, but there was no speck of doubt that I was in love with him. My heart ached for him. My very soul yearned for him.

“Callum,” I moaned, voice loaded with emotions. Feelings so anew, yet I couldn’t say them out loud in fear of chasing him away. So for now, this was to suffice.

There was no going back.

I wanted this man. All. Of. Him.

~S~

At three in the afternoon, I decided to come out of hiding in the workroom and finally get something to eat for a light snack. I skipped breakfast since Callum and I woke up late. So, we decided to eat sandwiches instead. That was almost five hours ago.

I was about to enter the kitchen to fix something for myself when I decided to head straight to his study to check if he wanted something to nibble on.

When I got there, silence greeted me when I opened the door after a few knocks with no response.

Brian, Callum's other PA, apart from Eleanor, was striding towards me with a big smile, not finding it odd that I was in the study without the Boss.

"Hey, Miss Stella. If you're looking for the Big Bad Wolf, he's downstairs, sharpening his killer instincts." Brian breezed past me with his bright electric blue pants, white dress shirt paired with glaring green and electric blue tie to match his outfit and white suede loafers on his feet.

When he saw me check out his ensemble, he grinned at me. "Like it? I just got this yesterday. I love neon colors, don't you?"

I did, at times, but not all together, if I could help it. "It's very funky. It definitely suits your happy persona." It truly did. What I admired most was that he wasn't afraid to wear casual clothes whilst working with Callum. If he were in the entertainment industry, it would be understandable, but not in the business sector where the company you work for was one of the largest companies that had the capability of swaying the stock market.

"Mr. Kensington let's me wear whatever I want during weekends. He's not really that particular when it comes to wardrobe as long as there are no major meetings or events involved. I could pretty much get away with a lot of things." Brian whistled along as he rounded Callum's desk, opened a folder and shifted some papers. For the documents needed signing, he inserted it to the 'Immediate Attention' tray.

Brian was so easy to be around even though this was only the second time I'd met him. "How long have you worked for Callum?"

"For a few years now."

The urge to ask about Zara was almost at the tip of my tongue, but I held back just in case Brian would tell his boss. Now that was a problem I didn't need.

Clearing my throat before smiling at him, I said, "See you around." I bid him goodbye and went off to look for Callum in the gym.

I didn't know what I was expecting when I went downstairs, but certainly I wasn't expecting a full-size boxing ring with two men sparring and wrestling with mixed martial arts in it.

Callum. Sweaty. Rugged.

Hard as rock abs glistened as he worked against his opponent. He had black tape wrapped around his hands with some loose, black, track trousers on. Barefoot.

A burst of adrenaline rushed through me as I saw him do a double fly kick and he started to grapple the other large looking man before they rolled onto their backs, limb to limb, looking like they were about to crack each other's necks.

I cleared my throat loud enough for them to hear me as I walked towards the ring. As I got closer, my eyes immediately locked onto Callum's dark depths, sparking instantaneous lust in me.

Jesus, what a sight he was up close.

Was it wrong that I was beyond soaked? Yep. The man seriously mastered this body.

Chapter 24

Callum

The soft sway of her hips compelled me to look her and I halted everything with a flick of my fingers. Lars, my Irish trainer, paused as he checked where my gaze had landed.

Lars simply grunted, knowing full well how seductive Stella looked as she came towards me; hips swaying and face clear of makeup with a short, silk dress on. She looked every bit the luscious woman and I realized just then that I wanted to sample her sweet tasting lips again.

“Hi,” Stella shyly greeted me, blushing, eyes all on me with one thought in mind; lust. She might’ve greeted me shyly, but there was nothing shy about how she looked at me now. She hungered for me. Blatantly.

“Hello, my sweet.” I grinned, coming out of the ropes and hopping to the ground, standing before her. “Missed me?”

I saw her contemplate the question. I knew she missed me. It was written all over her. All I wanted was confirmation, for her to say the words out loud.

“A lot,” she whispered, unwavering. “I missed you quite a bit.”

My self-restraint dissolved immediately. Like a hormonal teenage boy, I pulled her against me and kissed her as if she was the air I breathed.

From the background, my ears perked up when I heard the glass door close with a soft thud. Lars took his cue and left me with my enchantress. “I’m taking you out on a date.”

“Really?” she panted, taking my lips again as her arms encircled my neck before she spontaneously hopped and jumped onto my hips, locking her legs around me while her hands cupped my face, kissing me with pure, unadulterated hunger.

My hands cupped her bottom, squeezing it as I did so, matching her

passion with abandonment. “Christ, you’re so gorgeous.”

Stella started to rub up against me. The heat from her pussy felt wonderful against my stomach. “Fuck me in the ring, Cal,” she pleaded, voice packed with desire.

Hell. It was the first thought that had popped into my brain the second she wafted through the doors, looking the way she did. She looked like the first bloom of spring; fresh and un-plucked. It was pure, simplistic beauty. “I would love to, darling, but I promised to myself that I would take you out on a date this time before I try to snake my way into your hot,” I suckled on her bottom lip, “slippery and enticing pussy.”

Stella pouted. “Please?”

Jesus, the woman was set out to strangle my cock. A promise was a promise and I was going to take her out, even if I was to run about London blue-balled and in dire pain. “Not a chance, milady.”

She raised her brow at me, curious. “Where are you taking me?”

That was a surprise. One I hoped she’d like. “Goodness, woman. Let a man take you out on a date without the whole interrogation,” I teased as I nibbled on her earlobe. God, I wanted to sink into her wet cunt... even just for a few seconds, however I knew seconds wouldn’t be enough to quench my hunger.

After last night—the stint with Zara, Derek and Hugh—I knew I had to start paving our foundation. I didn’t want a shaky relationship with Stella. I wanted her to know that during our time together—the entire duration—I was hers.

Besides, I needed another excuse to see her smile. There was something about her smile that made me feel as if I was doing something right in my life. For some reason, a big part of me hoped that, someday, I wouldn’t be the man who would diminish that glorious smile of hers.

After what happened with Zara yesterday, I had so much to make up for. Apart from that little snide remark she mentioned last night, she hasn't said anything else and based on my experience with past lovers, this was a bad sign.

Women would pout, act extremely bitchy, not to mention clingy atop all the *who's prettier* questions and the *who's better in bed* drill of insanity. These were the most common epidemics of women needing reassurance that they were fine and secure on the relationship front.

Stella never did all that, so it was normal for a man to worry. I wasn't sure if her reaction was based on the fact that she was above all of these petty, churlish acts and platitudes... or it could simply be because she simply didn't care about me...

Both were fine, really, but I wasn't going to deny that I was hoping that the first one was the most valid.

I cared for Stella. Atop the fact that she was Richard's baby sister, I also started to care about the person that she was, the woman beneath the surface.

Stella was remarkable. She lost her brother and her parents and yet, she wasn't one to dwell and make everyone's lives a living hell because she was going through a tough time. She was wealthy in her own right, yet she didn't flaunt that like other women easily did. Most of all, she had a heart. When she talked about her best friends, her work and other people she cared about, her face would light up, animated. These were all admirable things and I wanted to be a part of that circle later on. I wanted her to care for me the way she did with her friends.

I knew I wanted it, but the reasoning behind the very fact was still baffling to me. Pondering much about the subject didn't get me anywhere. I wasn't in love with her, but I wished for her to start caring for me.

It really was odd.

When Stella emerged an hour later, dressed to torture me all night long, my thoughts ceased to exist.

The tightening of my chest surfaced as I stared at her. Gray eyes infiltrated my thoughts. “Stella,” I uttered her name and the feeling in my chest intensified. The urge to kiss her senseless and take her to bed was so inviting that I had decided not to touch a bit of her in fear that I might not be able to control my libido. I was becoming a glutton when it came to her body. Each time I took her, the addiction sharpened. Magnified. How could a man stay away from a barely touched, nubile body? Let alone a very responsive, sexy, gorgeous woman that made moans that hardened me in a flash? Never in my life had I been this libidinous—body so unquenched that I was half-aroused most of the time—thinking only of Stella.

This was well and all, but I wasn’t bothered by it since it was all physical. The needs of the flesh could always be doused one way or the other, but the emotional and mental ones were the hardest to forget.

Tonight, I wasn’t going to allow the ghost of Zara to interrupt us. Stella deserved my one hundred percent attention.

Half an hour later, we finally reached our destination.

Let’s see how I fair in this test, I challenged myself.

Chapter 25

Stella

A loud gasp came from me when Callum parked and I saw where he was taking me. “Wow. You go all out, don’t you?” I was beyond impressed.

The man simply gave me a smirk before he let himself out, rounded to open my door and offered his hand to help me out of the vehicle. “It’s our first date. A man’s got to take extra care to make the first impression last a lifetime.”

He was guiding me towards the entrance of the London Aquarium. It truly was nice. “Well, you’ve definitely accomplished just that.” I leaned over and kissed his lips. It had been over twenty-four hours now from our first make-out session, and still, I couldn’t get over the fact that I loved kissing him whenever I felt the need to be close to him.

Two personal staff greeted us at the door. We were then escorted towards a dark room with several lit candles on a dining table with the large wall-to-wall aquarium next to us. The soft azure glow it gave to the room made it cozy, intimate and beyond a doubt enchanting. The heady smell of candles and their incandescent glow just added more to the effects of intoxicating seduction and romance.

Now seated, Callum took charge of serving the chilled Magnum. “I don’t think I’ve romanced anyone like this.” He grinned as he handed me a flute with the bubbles in it.

“I should feel special then,” I murmured before taking a lengthy sip of my drink.

“You should,” Callum mused, looking like a ravishing beast out on a hunt.

What did I say to that? Thank you? Breaking our eye contact, I decided

not to respond to him. Callum was a difficult man to read and I'd rather not get into the habit of trying to break into his thoughts because I'd inevitably lose.

Nursing my drink, I focused on the soft sounds of Chris Botti echoing in the background while I watched the fish dance about their way in the large tank.

Callum remained silent and, before long, our servers carried out the first course.

We were on our second course when I noticed something different about Callum. In fact, he had totally abandoned his meal, much to my confusion.

What I found most disconcerting was the fact that he was leaning against his chair, staring at me with a whimsical look on his face.

"What?" I asked before I took a bite of the scrumptious meal. When he didn't respond, I carefully placed my utensils on the sides of the plate as I cautiously inserted the stem of my flute in between my fingers and slightly shook it in tiny circles.

"I'm watching the candlelight's reflection as it dances on your face," Callum finally found his tongue.

Great. *Was he making fun of me?* "Lovely," I muttered as dryly as possible.

"It is. It highlights your face superbly..." Our gazes locked and I felt the air leave my body when he finished his sentence. "I'm mesmerized by its beauty."

Gah... how the heck was I supposed to swallow this lamb chop in my mouth without choking? He was making me beyond aware.

I was so aware that I could feel the heat of his gaze stroking my face. It was diffusing my brain. It was uncontrollably liquefying my vagina. I was thrilled and petrified when he looked at me with that predatory gleam in his

eyes.

“More champagne?” he broke my running thoughts.

I could only nod.

Callum’s eyes danced as he took note of my reaction to him. The smug bastard even smirked when he refilled my flute.

Damn him. He knew the effect he had on me and he was using that to drive me insane. Couldn’t he have waited until after the meal? It was hard enough to concentrate on anything, let alone focus on getting through course after course with a sex-god of a man across the table, undressing you before his very eyes.

“Hungry for some *more...* or dessert, darling?” Callum went on, hidden meaning and all.

He sure was having a ball. Well, I suppose I could enjoy this meal the way he did as well.

“I’m always hungry for anything sweet and creamy, Callum,” I responded provocatively.

His eyes darkened as they dropped towards my breasts, probably noticing the outline of my constrained peaks. I was a jittery mess while Callum looked completely menacing.

When servers came to gather our dishes, not once did he lift his eyes off me.

When one of the waiters came back to ask what we wanted for dessert, Callum interrupted him mid-sentence.

“Anything sweet and *creamy* should do. Right, darling?” Callum’s gaze was unwavering.

The waiter opened his mouth then closed it again while I blushed from the root of my hair to my toes. “Right away, sir.” Thank goodness the waiter was able to compose himself.

I was beyond mortified.

Those formidable darkened orbs didn't leave me when he decided to stand up and circled the table to stand before me, offering his hand. "I believe you still owe me a dance."

That made me grin. Rejecting him for Hugh was still unforgotten. "Lead me away," I said as I accepted his hand.

He led us close to the fish tank, holding me in a tight embrace. My body swayed with his, but I couldn't hear the music because my heartbeat was becoming so erratic, it reverberated loudly in my ears.

"Do you know how you affect me with your teasing?" He placed his leg in between mine, pressing it against my heat so I could feel his erection. "I can't get enough of you, Stella," Callum declared before capturing my lips, kissing me senseless.

Mother hell, he was becoming too much. Small doses were good. Large doses were somewhat manageable, but *this*, this was frightening. I loved the man but if he kept going like this, I might end up thinking that he was reciprocating my feelings. I couldn't have that. Caring for me was what I wanted and aimed for, but his heart belonged to Zara, simple as that.

~S~

"Where are you going?" Callum tugged me back against his chest when I tried to break out of his embrace. It was barely seven in the morning and I needed to get ready for work.

"Work." I yawned, melting against his body. He was so warm and I felt so little when he wrapped his large frame around my body.

"But it's Sunday." He kissed the back of my neck, one hand cupping my breast, the other making slow circles around my stomach. "Take the day off and spend it with me."

It was tempting, but... *but what?* My mind countered. *Let go and enjoy*

this time with Callum. You might never have the chance again. The damning thoughts continued to flow out of nowhere.

“Um, let me think about it.” I contemplated some more.

Callum was making out with my ears and it was distracting, not to mention that he lazily kept poking about, seeking for entrance—with one or the other—wasn’t helping me at all.

“Come on... besides, we have to meet friends for lunch.”

I shifted my position so I could face him. “I didn’t know we had a lunch date.”

“I forgot to mention it, but we are. We’re meeting Dimitris and his Lindsey for lunch.” He caressed the bottom of my lip as he said these words. “I’m still waiting on my good morning kiss, Stella.”

“So is Dimitris Kosta really that good looking in real life?” I wondered out loud. I’d read stories about him. I’m not going to lie, but I’m a tad more excited about meeting him in person than going to eat lunch.

“You’re a fan of his?” He studied me intently.

“I saw his last movie with Luciana.”

“And? You got hot and bothered?”

Shit. “Maybe, yeah.” I licked my lips. “Okay, I was turned on. The man signifies the word sex. Pair that with a man like Bass Cole and it was a feast for us women. It’s like Magic Mike without all the dancing.”

“*You watch films like Magic Mike?*” Callum’s reaction was laughable. “Goodness, woman, what have I gotten myself into?”

I snorted as I tried to get away from him, but he was too fast and captured me again, rolling me onto my back as he hovered above me. “I don’t think I like you fantasizing about other men. I want to be the only man to dominate your mind.” His face never left mine as he entered me with one rough thrust, making me gasp loudly at his harsh invasion. “Your body.”

A pleased cry came from my lips as he crucially plowed me senseless. “Do you like it when I fuck you like this, my love?” He was intense. Too intense as he questioned me without giving me any room nor air to reply to him. He was so massive that each stroke made me come and convulse. He knew how to stroke my body well, owning my body as he’d promised.

“Look at me, Stella.” His voice was gentle, a total contrast to the way he was handling my body.

One thing I had learned about him, when he was serious, he’d never leave your face. He’d memorize each movement the person took so he could analyze it, break it down as he intimidated the person, slowly cutting down their barriers without the effort of speech.

“Callum.” I leveled with his gaze.

“Who are you thinking about now?” he pestered on, watching me moan and gasp from his thrusting.

Who else? The man I loved. “You.”

Something passed his eyes. “Only me?”

“Only you.”

My world shattered around me when he kissed me whilst fucking me into paradise. Somehow, amidst all the fucking, I realized too late that we had shifted from fucking and were already making love. What took me aback was how Callum treated me. He kissed me like a man in love. So I let my imagination run riot with my heart. Even for a day, I could live in an imaginary world without it hurting me.

~S~

Unfortunately the lunch date had to be cancelled.

What came out of Callum’s mouth next shook my world. I knew, right then and there, that nothing was going to be the same again.

“My father is dead,” he said without any emotions. “I think I killed the

blasted fucker.” Callum was so detached that I was starting to wonder if he was making it up.

“Oh, Cal, I’m sorry. Aren’t you going to see him or something?” I went towards him and gave him a comforting hug. I knew most people would touch the body, say their goodbyes before it was taken away.

He somehow looked lost for a moment before he finally nodded as if understanding what he had to do. “I have to go. Zara called and she was hysterical.”

His Zara? I nervously pressed my lips together. Our time was done. With his father dead and Zara’s intent on getting Callum back, I had no chance with him. “Do you need me to go with you?” I offered, knowing that this was difficult for him.

“No. I think it’s best I do it alone.” The immediate withdrawal from Callum was felt. He couldn’t even look me in the eye.

So I stood back and watched as he got ready to leave. When he was done, he stood there, contemplating if he was to kiss me or not. “I have to get going.” Callum finally moved and managed to kiss my forehead.

“Be safe.”

He nodded before walking out of the bedroom, looking somber and in good need of a hug. He looked so lost and I wanted to badly be there with him, but he didn’t want me there.

For the rest of the afternoon and evening, I kept my phone next to me while working through my projects just in case he decided to call or text. When dinnertime came and I hadn’t heard from him, I tried to convince myself that he was all right. Besides, Zara was there, so technically, I wasn’t all that needed.

I fixed myself a sandwich to eat before taking a long bath. It was almost ten o’clock when I slid into bed. I was in and out of consciousness most of

the time because I wanted to be awake when Callum came back.

He finally came around right about midnight, bringing a surprise present for me.

What he had brought with him nailed my future.

I was half sitting on the mattress when Callum decided to turn the switch on his bedside lamp. He looked disheveled and distraught. I was about to ask him if he'd had dinner when he mentioned her.

“Zara needed a place to stay. My father’s house wasn’t an option and getting a hotel room would be too lonely. I hope that’s okay with you?” He was looking at me dead-on, so I decided to look away, composing myself.

I didn’t want him to see the hurt and jealousy that was immediately etched all over my face. It wasn’t okay, but I didn’t have it in me to say it out loud and cause more burden when his father had died only this morning. “Whatever you think is best.”

“She’s in one of the guest rooms, in case you were wondering.” He raked a hand over his hair, sighing. “I’m going to shower.”

I nodded, watching him go into his closet before striding towards the bathroom naked.

Zara was in one of the bedrooms, probably plotting how to get Callum into her bed. Going back to sleep was now out of the question. I knew there was still unfinished business between the two. What I hated most was that I felt like I was the wedge in between them, breaking them apart; even more so now that his father was dead. If I weren’t here, Zara would probably be on this very same spot, sharing the bed with Callum.

He was already going through so much; I didn’t need him worrying about what to do with me. I suppose the best thing to do was to be the first one to slowly walk away, so that he didn’t have to do anything. I didn’t need for him to feel sorry for me. No, that would be the last thing I wanted.

Truth be told, this entanglement with Callum was for practical reasons. *I did get what I wanted to begin with, didn't I?* Falling for him was just an unforeseen mishap on my part. So maybe now it was time for me to start dating again and hopefully find the guy for me, someone to love me the way Callum loved his Zara.

I pretended sleep when he joined me ten minutes later. I waited until I heard his breathing evened until rolling to my other side, wanting to stare at him for a bit, like saying my farewell, but I was surprised when I found him staring at the ceiling, clearly deep in thought and very much troubled.

“Are you okay?” I reached out to touch his arm, gently stroking it. I fought the urge to curl up next to his heat and smell him for the last time. It wouldn't be wise to do that because I might end up crying and confess that I was in love with him. He did warn me not to fall for him, but I hadn't taken him seriously. The joke was on me.

Callum's voice broke through my reverie, sounding hollowed and bitter. “It's funny how I never pictured him dying. What do I do with all this anger and hatred I harbored through the years?”

I wished I had the power to erase all of the pain his heart was going through, but it wasn't my place to do so. Instead, I had to respond rationally. “You let it go. It's not healthy to have all this hate in you. It'll only end up poisoning you. I don't want you to end up like him. You're way better than that. The man is dead, Cal.”

“Lucky bastard,” he muttered. “Just when I was about to pull everything out from under him, he fucking dies.”

I placed my hand over his chest for the last time. “Let all the hate go. Maybe then... you'll have enough space to let love in again.”

Callum didn't respond. Instead, he let out an agonizing sigh.

Drawing my hand away from him, I curled it against my chest while

continuing to face him. “What’s going to happen to Zara?”

Callum sighed again.

I was a masochist because I kept pestering for more information. “Are you going back to her?”

He remained silent.

When he sighed for the third time, he followed it with his answer. “I honestly don’t know how to answer that.”

Shit. I simply had to know. “You’re still in love with her, aren’t you?”
Yep, I was a major masochist.

Callum brought his arm across his eyes, covering them. “Maybe... I don’t know anymore,” he murmured, pausing for a few seconds. “Zara...” he said her name without hate, for the first time. “Zara was my life. When I lost her, I didn’t think I’d survive. Three years later, I’m in this confusing position. I’m not sure if I’m willing to take the risk again.”

Yeah, I’d bet my entire life that he was in love with her still. As much as it pained me to hear him talk about her, I needed to be the bigger person. This was my brother’s best friend after all, the one who’d taken me under his wing when I didn’t have anyone else.

“I suppose this is the time to fix everything,” I carried on. “She’s waiting for you.”

“I’m hesitant—” he paused. “She broke my heart, Stella. I loved her so much. Gave her everything of me... Zara could hurt me again and I don’t know how I’d cope if I had to go through a second round of heartbreak.” Callum was exposing himself to me. I felt his reluctance towards Zara, but it was obvious that he had thought about it a lot.

How long had he thought about going back to her? I had to wonder. Did he imagine it was Zara each time he took me? If I based it to that time he fell asleep on top of me and whispered her name, then yes, maybe he did, often.

Putting my heartbreak on the side, I dwelled on Callum's dilemma. I could cry later, but right now, the man I loved needed my help. So I was going to pretend that I didn't care about him. "If she really loves you, then she's worth all the heartache and pain." How painful was this? I was pushing him to get back with Zara. Even if my heart was irrevocably broken, I wanted him happy. He had gone through so much devastation and I believed it was his turn to be with his love again.

"Thank you for being here, Stella," he said, not knowing that he was crushing my heart into shards. "You're a great listener and a good friend."

Ouch.

Fuck. The *friend* part did me in.

"Goodnight, Callum." I had nothing left to say, so I rolled back to the other side, facing away from him.

"Goodnight."

Silently, I kept to myself. Counting down the time until it was time to leave.

At the crack of dawn, I double checked to see if Callum was asleep. He seemed like he was, though his position remained the same. I granted myself a minute to study his face because I knew I might never have another opportunity to do so again.

With a heavy heart, I scrambled out of bed and dashed out of the house without brushing my teeth or putting any make-up on. I simply slid out of bed, changed clothes, gathered my work things and left the house to go to my own flat.

It feels weird to be back in my own place, I thought as I opened the door.

"Fuck!" I screeched when I saw a full frontal of Mark. "Jesus! *Bloody fuck!*"

Mark had the audacity to laugh at me when it should've been the other

way around.

“For fuck’s sake, Mark, put some clothes on!” I covered my eyes as I scrambled towards my bedroom.

Luciana and Mark were obviously shagging now. As happy as I was that they had finally gotten that out of the way, I couldn’t help smiling and shivering at the memory of Mark’s naked body. That was beyond awkward.

I had to make a mental reminder to sit those two down and make pointers about proper flatmate etiquette when it came to nakedness and sex. I loved them both, but if they kept me awake at all hours because of their hard and noisy romping, I’d find my own place.

Much to my relief, I didn’t see Mark or Luciana when I came out to leave for work. Although, at about eleven, I finally heard a knock on my office door. I didn’t need to look up to guess that it was Luciana with some sort of explanation. *This* I couldn’t wait to hear, obviously.

“Morning, love.” Luciana was dressed in an all white pantsuit, which emphasized every curve. The mischievous spark in her eyes was something new, however. I was sure Mark Cotswold was the one who had lit it up.

“You’re chirpy.”

She grinned before rolling her eyes at me. “Okay, we’re shagging. Tons. Hell, Stella! He’s amazing!” she let on, giddy at the thought of Mark. Luciana was a lot of things, but *giddy* wasn’t part of her Italian, sophisticated DNA.

I hid a smile, trying to act all serious. “I’m worried. Does Mark have a golden cock? From what I’ve seen this morning, it looked pretty normal.”

Callum’s on the other hand, there was nothing golden about it. It was mean... like a bull, like an angered beast or...

Okay, I had to stop. There was no point in getting all hot and bothered thinking about him when I might never get to kiss or feel his body again.

Seriously, I had to snap out of my funk.

Luciana only sighed. “That and more. We haven’t really spoken about what will happen. We’re just having fun, but we promised to talk about it soon...” She paused as she read the text message that had just gone through on her phone. “Mother just got in town. I have to meet her for lunch.” She waved me goodbye. “I’ll catch up with you soon,” she said before closing the door on me.

Her mother was here for her event, The Pisano Event. She wanted to make sure everything was how she had pictured it. It was weeks away, but she was beyond meticulous. I was simply glad that Luciana got to deal with her full-time. I mean, I adored her mother, but in my current turmoil, I could only handle easy to difficult to please clients, not the almost impossible ones.

When I felt a headache starting to sprout, I leaned against my chair and closed my eyes, massaging my temples. *I’m falling apart, aren’t I?* I thought sadly.

A beeping sound erupted, interrupting the silence, indicating a text message. With a groan, I reached for it on the table.

Callum: *Burial is for tomorrow at eleven in the morning.*

He surely wasn’t wasting any time getting rid of his father. I was starting to type my reply when I paused mid-way, contemplating if I should even bother with a reply. After a few seconds, I decided not to. I was sure mine would get lost amidst the rest of the people sending him condolences.

For lunch and the rest of the afternoon, I stayed in my office, enjoying a sandwich and a bottle of orange juice as my lunch. When nighttime came, I decided to stay in my flat. Since Luciana was staying with her mother tonight, I simply couldn’t resist the temptation of being alone again. Besides, going back to Callum’s house with Zara in there as they tried to console each other would be too nauseating and too painful for me to witness.

It was a cowardly thing to do—hiding away—but at this point, I had to start picking up my life again.

That night, I woke up several times, checking my phone most of the time. It was sickening, but I kept hoping that he might've messaged me, wondering where I was. Alas, I never got a missed call or a message.

That was a big indicator that he was done with me.

It was time to let him go.

After the burial tomorrow, I was putting Callum and my life with him behind me and starting anew.

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Chapter 26

Stella

When the burial took place quietly without a hitch, I wasn't in their line of sight, but I watched from a distance, which was just enough to see Callum and Zara.

It was an intimate ceremony with about fifty people. As I scanned the unfamiliar faces, I noted that Callum's mother and grandmother were not present. I didn't know anyone here, and for that I was relieved.

Zara clung on to him while I watched as he murmured into her ear.

There was no question in my mind that something was going on between the two. It was the way he touched her. *Yes, he was touching her now.*

I was glad that our "fake" engagement was never confirmed. This would've been embarrassing for the both of us.

I didn't know how I would get through it all without breaking a tear because the entire somber theme that surrounded me definitely matched how I was inside. Dead. Bleak.

Anyhow, I pedaled through the ordeal with great hardship, but I got through it; thank goodness.

The burial was followed by a reception in a nearby hotel, I was contemplating if I should even bother, but when I saw that Callum was checking his phone before he joined Zara in the tinted chauffeured car, I decided to approach him and say my goodbyes. There was no point in prolonging the inevitable was there?

At first, he didn't see me approach. It was only when I cleared my throat a few feet away, loud enough for him to hear that someone was waiting for him, that he spun around and saw me standing there. He cut the call with Brian, his PA.

“Hey, are you coming to the reception?” Callum inquired, not bothering to come over and kiss my cheek or any sort of greeting at all. Wasn’t it only a few days ago that I shared his bed? Yeah, he got the award for the biggest tool of the year.

I didn’t need for them to flaunt their rekindled relationship right in front of me. Besides, if I saw Zara giving me triumphant looks, I might just rip her a new one. So for everyone’s sake, it was best to leave from here.

“No, I have to get back.” I fidgeted with my hands a bit. It didn’t escape my notice that we were acting all weird and rather awkward. Sigh. “Well, I’ve got to get going. Take care.” I pressed my lips together and gave him a bland smile.

“Wait, Stella—”

I frowned. “Yeah?”

He was looking away, then his gaze landed on his shoe, then my shoe and then whatever was behind me. “Could we talk later? I have to go back to Zara now, but I’m hoping we could talk soon?”

My heart ached. *I love you... but you will never know*, I sadly thought as I looked at him.

Callum couldn’t even manage to look me in the eye. *Talk?* Sure, I was so certain he really wanted to talk.

His frown deepened. “Stella, I’m sorry, but this is really difficult for me. Zara needs me right now and I...”

...want to be with her, too, I finished the sentence in my head. I meant nothing to him.

We were nothing.

With a small nod, I understood him fully. “Of course. See you around, Callum Kensington.” I started walking away, not looking back at him.

Since work was the last thing on my mind, I walked around London. I

ended up right outside of Foxtons. A nice chatty bloke my age started inquiring if I was looking to let or buy a flat and somehow—I vaguely remembered all the events—I ended up buying myself a three-bedroom flat in Hyde Park Gardens.

The more I thought about the place, the more I felt better. The flat was spacious and airy with white walls, large windows and wood flooring. The view of the park was gorgeous, but not only that, the flat had that homey feel I connected with the moment I entered its door. I suppose, it was what I needed. I needed to make a home—a home of my own—away from my real home, St. Lucia.

Since I was buying it cash, I was hoping the closing deal wouldn't take as long as twelve weeks. As much as I loved living with my best friend, I thought it was time to have my own place. We were advancing into that age that needed more stability in all aspects of our lives, be it in our personal or career wise.

It was a day of new things. I was exhausted, but there was still one more task I had to finish before I could go home and call it a day.

Last stop, Chelsea, Callum's home. I needed to get some of my things, important things like my mum's jewelry and other things that held value to me. The rest of my wardrobe I planned to have shipped back to me.

I was relieved to find his house empty. There was a big part of me thinking that Zara had moved in and had all of my things thrown out, but I was surprised that my items remained as they were, untouched.

Gathering my important baubles, it didn't take me that long to finish up as I carefully placed them inside my purse.

“It was fun while it lasted,” I murmured into the walk-in closet that had my belongings in it. As I was walking out, I wasn't expecting to find Callum in the bedroom, waiting.

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Chapter 27

Callum

I was rubbing the back of my neck as I entered my bedroom, pausing when I heard noise coming out of the closets. Stella was here?

“It was fun while it lasted,” she spoke, dispirited.

Her voice tugged at me. I was sure she was feeling like I was throwing her out, but it wasn't like that at all. I was more than confused, being pulled in all directions. There was so much to be done. Even after burying my father, there was still his company to sort out. Not to mention Zara's clingy pleas and demands, thousands of employees worried if they still had a job, my mother's constant blabbers and the list just kept on growing. The only person who was in my life before all this happened, was the only one who wasn't demanding anything. It proved what a great woman she was, but at the same time, it seemed that she was willing to move on from me.

I didn't blame her. Things between Zara and I were complicated. I wasn't even sure where to begin. As much as I pondered about where Zara and I were heading to, the thought of saying goodbye to Stella didn't sit well with me, either. I knew I couldn't have both and that I had to let someone go, but I was dreading the thought of not seeing Stella again. I cared for her, I truly did.

It was fortunate that Zara was staying with her family for the time being, since they brought the subject of impropriety of staying at my house while mourning the loss of her husband, even though it hadn't been a real one.

When Stella finally emerged from the closet, my immediate reaction to seeing her didn't help one bit. Yes, I was undoubtedly attracted to her, but I was more drawn to the airy lightness that she easily exuded. *Yeah, letting her go was going to be a battle*, I sadly conceded.

“Hi.”

“Hello,” she said whilst looking like she wanted to dash out of the door and not face me at all.

“I was hoping we could talk?” I was nervous, hoping that she’d give me a chance to explain. Leaving things the way they were was not what I had intended. This was not how I pictured ending things with Stella.

Stella nodded, baring me her beautiful eyes. “If you think it’s necessary, yeah, I suppose we could.”

Where the fuck did I start with this catastrophe? I mentally went through all the crap in my brain, racking to find what the best way to deliver things without sounding crass would be, but I was rendered speechless. After my third sigh, I frowned as I glanced at her impatient looking face. “Would you mind if I take a quick shower? I’ve had a long day and a shower would do wonders for me. I hope that’s all right? If it isn’t, then it could wait until later.”

“Sure, go ahead, Cal. I’ll just wait right here.” Stella even added a sweet smile. It was too sweet, it left me unsettled, but I brushed it off as I thanked her for understanding before striding towards the bathroom and showering as quickly as possible.

In less than ten minutes, I was dressed in jeans with some strands of my hair dripping with water due to the fact that I had been in a rush and I didn’t have the time to dry it with a towel while Stella awaited my return. Alas, the woman wasn’t there.

Right then, I heard a loud slam of the front door. *Did she just leave?* Renewed energy buzzed throughout my body.

Striding out of the bedroom, heading downstairs, I called out to her, “Stella?”

Once I reached the front door, I peeked my head out just in time to catch

a glimpse of her getting into a cab. “Blasted fucking fuck!” I screamed as I darted towards the foyer table and took hold of my keys and my wallet.

Dressed only with jeans and nothing more, I literally ran towards my car barefoot, jumped inside my silver Pagani Huayra and gunned the engine, going after her.

It was mental, truly it was, but I didn’t want to part this way with Stella. When it came to women, I was a completely pompous, callous tool... but Stella was different. “Hell, she’s my fucking wife! Of course she’s different, you soddy bastard!” I growled as I tried to catch her cab. The traffic was atrocious, but still, I could make out her head appearing in the back of the cab.

After a lot of swerving in between cars, tons of honking and yes, I almost crashed into a few cars, I made it out alive and finally caught up behind the blasted black cab at a stoplight.

Leaving the car running, I stomped towards the cab and yanked the door open. “How dare you walk out on me!” I barked at the apoplectic looking Stella.

“Kindly walk away, sir, or I might have to call the—” the driver started to fuck with me, so I laid it out quite nicely for him.

“Interrupt me one more time and you won’t like the consequences, mate.” I wasn’t to be fucked with. Today of all days, it had wrung me dry. I was past exhaustion, but I knew I wouldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t settle this amiably with Stella.

Stella glared at me before quickly apologizing for my ill-mannered behavior. With a fierce look, she pinned me on the spot. “There’s nothing to talk about. Please, let’s leave it as is... I don’t want to drag this out.”

“Well, I do. We have to talk. You can leave afterwards, but either way, we’re talking. Get out of the cab, Stella.” There were horns honking and

some expletive words flung towards us, but I was unperturbed. “You’re holding up traffic.”

With her chest heaving, her eyes ready to spit fire and her skin aglow, she had never looked more radiantly gorgeous than at this very moment. “Damn you, Kensington!” Stella hissed as she exited the cab.

She only had a large tote with her, so it didn’t take that much effort to pluck it out of the seat. Expressing a relieved sigh, I dug in my pocket and handed the cabbie his due. He was more than grateful when he saw it was three hundred quid in his hands. “Cheers mate!” he bid me goodbye as I nodded towards him, slamming the door shut.

It was starting to rain with light showers. Summer time in London wouldn’t be the same without these showers. I used to like it, but right now, since I hadn’t donned a shirt, I wasn’t that appreciative.

Was I surprised to find Stella pouting as she stared at my running car? Not really. “Get in,” I commanded as I tightened my grip on her purse and strode towards her.

She shook her head, stubborn as a goose. “No. I don’t want to, Cal.”

“Get inside!”

“Callum. I. Said. No.”

She was testing my limits and I was about to explode like a ticking time bomb if she decided to play stubborn. “Don’t defy me, Stella!” I roared, yanking the door open, past caring that she was fuming and throwing curse words at me. I ignored her and shoved her purse inside the car. The road was starting to get wet, but I was beyond caring about my underdressed state as I failingly tried to act calm. Holding the door wider this time, I directed her again for the umpteenth time. “Get inside, Stella.”

“You have no right to manhandle me. No. Right. Do you hear?” She screamed, unmoving.

In normal circumstances, I wouldn't be so brutish, but this wasn't one of them. Planting both of my hands around her sides, I lifted and carried her before gently dumping her tenacious self on the seat. Ignoring her hisses and growls, I securely placed the seatbelt across her tensed body and then slammed the door shut then went to the driver's side.

Stella was furious, but she was unbending. What else was there to do? All I cared about was for her to get in the goddamned vehicle and drive back to my home so we could sort this out rationally. No matter what happened after this, I couldn't for the life of me let her leave in this condition.

This was Stella... Richard's sister... the woman I vowed to take care of, which I wasn't doing exceptionally well in that department.

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Chapter 28

Callum

My immediate plan was to drive back to my home and talk there, but noting how we both were still so pumped with anger, I decided to take us for a spin about town.

Still simmering from Stella's little stint, I broke the silence. "I told you we would talk after I showered. Why the hell would you even think about leaving when we haven't discussed anything?"

Her gray eyes flashed at me, hard as crystals. "*What the hell is there to discuss, huh?*" she stormed. "Are we supposed to hug each other and say, 'Oh it was wonderful being shagged by you for the past weeks. Thank you, dear Callum. We should have lunch sometime.' Is that what you're looking for here? Because if it is, well, THANK YOU! You can stop the car, so I can get back to my life."

"We aren't through yet!" I yelled as I gunned the engine and parked behind a private garden. I had no clue where we were, but that didn't even faze me a bit.

"You need to get back to Zara," she bit out, fetching her purse as she tried to yank the door open, but found it securely locked. "Fuck!"

"I don't like the thought of you leaving. I feel like I should do something, but I don't know what, Stella." I shined on a little of what I was going through. I respected Stella, but for some reason her immediate want to leave made me feel like I had failed her. I know I shouldn't because it wasn't making any sense, however it was what I was feeling.

She sighed.

Her back sagged a bit, defeated somehow. When she twisted to face me, there was something in her eyes that I couldn't understand; yet when I sought

it out, she lowered her gaze, staring at the interior. “Cal, we shouldn’t even be fighting about this. I realized that since your life is pretty hectic, and so is mine, that it would be better to just go back home. Besides, I didn’t want to be in the way with Zara. We started this whole thing with no expectations. I want to simply leave it at that. I know I should’ve told you that I was moving back into my place, but I thought that it would be better this way, since you have so much on your plate as it is. I didn’t want to be a burden.”

“I apologize.” *For neglecting and forgetting you*, I silently added because it was true. I did somehow forget about Stella. “I hope you’ll forgive me someday.”

Stella brought her face to mine, smiling brightly with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “For what? You had so much going on. You didn’t even have to reach out to me this way. I understand, Cal. So if you’re worried about letting me down, you shouldn’t. You always thought well of me, even if you were a mere stranger. You’re a great man, Callum. Don’t try to tell yourself otherwise.” She then moved closer, wrapping her arms around me, her heavenly scent annihilating my senses.

Her gesture certainly surprised me, but when her arms wrapped around my neck with her intoxicating smell blanketing my nostrils, it dawned on me that this might be the last time I could hold her. When that entered my mind, I felt somehow rattled and incredibly uneasy about it.

“Thank you, for all you’ve done for me. I may seem like a spoilt woman at times, but I do appreciate everything you have done for me, Cal,” Stella whispered into my ear and then she brushed her lips against my cheek and kissed it gently. “Please take care of yourself. If you need a friend, I’m a phone call away.”

I swallowed, a tad shaken by this small exchange. What was going on here? The pitted ache in my stomach now lashed harder. “Stella…”

She shook her head, stopping me from saying anything. When she asked me to unlock the door, I obediently did so. I came out of the car, opening her door. I knew she didn't need me to do it, but I simply wanted to.

For the last time, she brushed her lips against mine. "It was my pleasure to finally have met the man inside. I'll never forget it." Stella bestowed me a beautiful smile before walking away.

I wanted her to stop, maybe take her back to her flat, have dinner or whatever else I could conjure up, however even though my mind was busy, my tongue was frozen. My feet were glued to the floor, unmovable.

From a distance, I waited until she let herself into a cab without looking back at me. My eyes immediately closed tightly when I heard the car door slam shut, driving away.

"Goodbye... for now, Stella."

For now.

Chapter 29

Stella

A week had passed since the incident with Callum. I had to admit; I sometimes checked my phone out of the blue, wishing that I would get a message from him. Be it a mere *hi* or *hello*, anything merely to check in and let me know that he was okay. I could take the initiative and call him, yet I was reluctant just in case I heard Zara in the background. One thing I didn't want to do was interrupt their relationship.

After I had gotten entangled with Callum, I had avoided the gossip rags and tabloids, but that didn't stop Luciana or Sienna checking for me on a daily basis. Sienna was becoming a good friend and I appreciated her effort for the past week. She was so sweet, bringing me coffee twice a day, so that I didn't have an excuse to drag and moan about whilst working.

"What's the news today?" I lightly inquired just as Sienna slid the Starbucks coffee cup towards me, avoiding my gaze.

"You know, the usual tit and tat." She was skimming towards one of the order forms, flashing her massive ten-carat yellow diamond engagement ring as she did so.

She was being suspicious and I was getting curious. She usually had the juicy bits readily available. Besides, now that she was acting all odd, I was like an addict in need of her daily juice. "I like tits and tats."

Sienna smirked, lifting those unusual golden-green eyes of hers. "They're reporting that he purchased her a new home, so I guess that means he's not living with her. Blake assures me that a man in love wouldn't be caught dead having his woman living in a different house."

How thoughtful of Knightly to relay that information, I wondered how much Sienna had let on about my unusual affair. I never meant for anyone to

know, but with Luciana's big gob and with Sienna working with me closely, it was difficult for her not to catch on.

We both turned at the door when someone knocked. Ally opened the door to let a deliveryman in, carrying a black Lalique vase full of summer blooms. Ally ordered the man to situate the vase on the coffee table before all three of them immediately left me alone, but that was before I caught Sienna winking at me.

With a thudding heart, I got up and inspected the flowers. It consisted of vintage lilac roses, powder blue hydrangeas, tracheliums, mint green carnations, lisianthus combined with sandriana foliage and peonies. It was superb, but what really caught my interest was the card that vied for my attention.

Reaching for the note, I calmly opened it.

You're one of a kind.

CK

CK. Ha. Bloody. Ha.

"Callum Kensington. Great." I took in a sharp breath and tried not to think about the fact that he had bought Zara a house. "Hope you're living the life, buddy," I muttered, scathingly.

It took me an hour—yes, I was bloody counting the time—to grab my phone and type a reply.

Me: *Got your flowers. They're wonderful, thank you.*

Almost immediately, my phone beeped back.

Callum: *Can I see you tonight? Dinner, perhaps?*

"Shit," I hissed, placing my phone down, nervous. I was so tempted to say *heck yes*, but I knew I should move forward. Where the hell was Sienna or Luciana when you needed them most? Those two sucked for emotional support.

Deep breaths.

Okay, Callum wanted to take me to dinner. With dinners, the outcome usually could vary. Coffees and lunches were typically friendly, neutral. Dinners on the other hand were complicated, too intimate. I was treading on a fine line and I didn't want to fall flat on my face. He was with *her*. Zara. I had to remind myself that. So a dinner with Callum was out of the question. Besides, there was that dinner invitation from Derek...

Speaking of moving on with my life, I best get a move on with that one. Picking up my phone again, I sent a message to Derek, letting him know that I would love to meet him for dinner. The second message was for Callum.

Me: I'm going to see Derek tonight. Maybe some other time, coffee or lunch would do. Say next week?

There! Sent. I sounded like a rational woman. Not an ounce of jealousy oozed out of those words. I was proud of myself. My phone shrilled again immediately. "My, aren't you a busy one today!"

Callum: You're going back to him then?

Getting personal much? Hell. What did he care if I did or didn't? He had just bought a house for Zara, that's a massive purchase. For him to dole out that hefty sum, it could only mean one thing and I hated him for it... a little.

Me: I'm not sure yet.

I was hoping he'd leave it at that, but nope! He wasn't done.

Callum: Does he make you happy?

Derek was great, for some time. That was until he went berserk with his relentless pursuit to get my virginity out of the way.

Me: He did at one point.

Callum: Now, what about now?

I had no idea. All I knew was that I was in love to a man who didn't want it because his heart belonged to her, his Zara. If this was his attempt to make

sure that my dating life was great so he wouldn't feel a tad guilty, then he was fine. He had nothing to worry about. I was fine without him.

Me: *I'll know soon enough.*

I stared at my phone for a full minute, waiting for his reply, but when I didn't get one, I convinced myself that he had only been feeling obligated towards me.

So, I tried to mask my hurt and delved into work.

An hour later, he finally responded.

Callum: *I miss you, S.*

"Oh God!" I freaked. "No need to have a panic attack, so calm down." I coached myself to breathe evenly. This was Callum after all; it could mean so many things. *I miss you* might be different in his terms. "Yeah, he was used to having me around. So, don't get yourself affected, Stella. Just fucking don't or you'll be fucked," I repeated to myself until I released the phone and didn't bother replying to his message.

It was bad, but his words never left me. Even when I went on the date with Derek, Callum was in the back of my mind. I hated how affected I was with his words.

Yet I was determined to move on, broken heart be damned.

Chapter 30

Callum

Stella didn't bother replying and all afternoon I was plagued by images of her.

It was the first time I had admitted to her that I missed her, and yet, the tenacious woman decided to ignore it. I wasn't sure if I was in awe or furious at her. I suppose I was a combination of both. I had to give it to Stella, though, by her not responding to that consequential message, it made me want to seek her out.

"Callum?"

"Yes, Zara?" I asked, glancing at her a bit.

She had insisted on cooking me dinner, so she was already here when I got back from work, chopping and humming her way in the kitchen.

Dinner was great, but she chatted my ear off and I needed a reprieve. With a bottle in hand, I strode towards the garden outside, needing some fresh air.

However here she was again, following me. I had avoided heavy discussions about the future since I wasn't sure where I wanted to go, but I suppose Zara was adamant.

It started when my father died of a heart attack. Two hours later, Zara was on a mission to inject every single memory we had as a couple back into my life. My father was had just been declared dead, but she was already pestering me then about our future together.

"You look deep in thought." She smiled, pressing her hands on my chest.

As I looked down on her, I remembered the same look she had back in the day, one where she vowed to love me. "Thinking is what I do. Money makes money, but money doesn't just sprout without formulated ideas."

It was a good excuse because, well, I used to think about business all the time, yet now, Stella had dominated my mind. After last night's dream, I woke up, reaching out across the bed for her, but it was empty. Sleep evaded me afterwards, however Stella remained.

Knowing that she was out on a dinner date with her ex didn't help my uneasiness. When my mind wandered to the subject of her letting another man touch her, I wanted to commit murder.

"We aren't getting any younger." Zara was onto her usual self. Couldn't she give me a break? Hell, she was becoming such a nuisance. Zara pressed harder against me, lips slowly creeping towards mine. "We could be together now. No one is stopping us."

No, no one was stopping us, that's for sure. Although, Stella had been in my head and it seemed like her memory wasn't going away. It was plaguing me and I wasn't sure where to go from here.

Being around Zara again reminded me a lot of all the good things we had shared before, but try as she might, it didn't feel the same. There was something off; I couldn't pinpoint it really, but it was bothersome. A part of me wanted to capture what we'd had before, however the fireworks we once shared were now a mere sparkle of what we'd had in the past.

Zara used her hand to guide my face to look at her. "We can get married now. It was what you always wanted."

That was before... Stella.

Now, things have changed.

"I don't love you the way I used to, Zara. I'm not saying this to hurt you or to be mean because of the past; I'm simply telling you the truth. My mind is bombarded with Stella lately." That certainly made Zara scrutinize me in a different light.

"But what you had with Stella was sex. What more is there?"

Was it just sex? It was *the* greatest sex I'd ever had. Merely thinking about how great the sex was had already got my blood running south...

Stella.

She was a mixture of ethereal beauty and spitfire vivaciousness. Add her extraordinary cunt into the equation and then it was a double-edged sword; any mortal man's Achilles' heel.

"Stella's my wife, that's what's more, Zara," I directed at the woman who used to make me kneel at her feet.

"Wife?" she choked out. "I thought she was just a fuck?" She gripped me harder. "Are you in love with her?"

Zara looked like she was in a great deal of pain. I still loved her, I knew that much, but it wasn't the same. My body didn't rattle the way it used to. My heart didn't beat as wildly as it once had. She used to take my breath away... yet now, I realized that they were memories that could never be rekindled or relived again.

I wanted to be cruel, be that bastard who made her cry and crush her heart the way she had mine, but for some reason, I desired to come clean more. Maybe all this heartache and pain would ease out of my conscience if we freely discussed this now. I suppose, this moment was as good as any other.

So I started with Richard and his plea.

I didn't dare glance at Zara until I finished speaking. I knew I didn't owe her anything, however a part of me wanted for her to understand.

"You don't love her and you still love me... but you want to be with Stella because she makes you feel *better*?" Zara was staring at me, waiting for a yay or nay reply.

"Better is not the word precisely, but yes, she does have that." Amongst other things...

"Well, I can be all of that and more. Just give me time. You still love me,

Callum. You can't just brush that off and pretend that you don't because some virgin made you addicted to her fucking untouched cunt!"

Her tone and the way she was speaking about Stella snapped something in me. "*And I bloody love that virgin cunt of hers!* It's one where you can't fucking compete, Zara. I'm the ONLY man who had a taste of that and I fucking love knowing that no man has ever dwelled in that euphoric place. She's fucking mine and I won't stop until she's back in her place, beneath me, panting and gasping my name until she can't breathe any longer!" Well, there you have it. My cock had made the decision before I'd even thought it myself.

It was one thing to be addicted to something; it was another thing entirely when you had become addicted to a woman.

Stella von Berg, I'm coming for you. On you. In you. It didn't really matter, as long as I was sharing it with her.

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Chapter 31

Stella

“What the hell?” I softly muttered under my breath.

It had been over an hour and the guy wearing all black hadn't stopped staring at me. It was creepy. Freaky even, but it was exciting me at the same time.

My date night with Derek turned out to be a dud. Maybe it was me who was trying too hard to forget Callum or maybe the man's charisma had just not been working for me anymore. Either way, I had left that date feeling more depressed than when I'd walked in.

So here I was, a couple of nights later, somewhat working on promoting a new flavored vodka in one of Mayfair's swankiest clubs. It was hectic, lively and I thrived for these moments, but *the man* kept interrupting my flow.

“Why do you keep glancing at your watch?” Mark asked whilst handing me a drink.

“What's in it?” I ignored his question and referred to the drink he was handing me instead. I dipped my finger in it then tasted the concoction.

“Lychee.”

“Tastes fantastic!” I grinned, grabbing the drink from his hand. When working, I usually only drank a champagne or two, but tonight, I had decided to push it further, since everyone was pushing me to chill and “loosen up” a bit.

My friends, lovely as they were, kept pushing me to meet a new man and have a one-night stand just so I would know what it was. “You kept saying that your hymen was the reason you couldn't enjoy singledom to the fullest. Well, here's your chance. Free the bad girl and shag whoever you fancy!” Luciana had even taken it as her “responsibility” as my best friend to make

me look the part.

When Mark had seen me earlier, the first thing he had said was that I looked *decadent*. Mind you, I thought that was the first compliment the man had ever given me, so obviously, I had to wear what Luciana had for me: an itty-bitty, black silk skirt; designer, five-inch, strappy gladiator heels that went all the way to my knees; and a lace corset top. The whole smoky look went with the part.

“See, you look gorgeous! With your come-fuck-me eyes, no man will be able to keep his hands off you,” Luciana declared, proud of her product.

“Certainly. No man could keep a soft knob when you’re in the vicinity,” Mark added thoughtfully with a goofy grin.

Yes, I certainly looked the part of a vexing dominatrix who ought to get laid. “You two are both mad!”

Luciana winked at me. “Speak for yourself. We are friends, aren’t we?”

So that’s how this whole shebang started. It was my working night-off, if that made sense at all. My thoughts halted when Mark had to excuse himself when Luciana waved to him for help. I was halfway through my drink when the eye-baller/creeper finally approached me. *It took him long enough.*

He came up next to me, questioning. “Boyfriend of yours?”

American, I noted his accent.

“Friend,” I said as I saucily eyed him from head to foot. Tall, dark, hot and cocky. *Not bad*, I mused. Brilliant.

“Single?”

“*Are you?*” I quipped back.

“One hundred percent. And you?”

I was married—technically—but that didn’t count, right? “Umm...” I trailed off, making that wishy-washy, awkward face. “Ninety-nine percent?” *Sexy and smooth, Stella*, I chided myself for being an absolute idiot.

“And the one percent?”

Oh well, this was my night to have fun. Callum and his dark, beautiful eyes be gone, I thought with a pang of sadness. *If only...*

He was with the love of his life, so I shouldn't keep thinking of him that way, even if he had sent me a text message stating he missed me. Besides, Luciana had a point. I had always wondered what it was like to be free, have fun and date as much as I liked without anyone or anything to stop me. So here was my chance.

This stranger before me was my first conquest to be. Thinking of Callum and how much I loved him wouldn't help me move forward. All he wanted from me was sex. So acting all sentimental was downright bad for me.

I gave the stranger a knowing smile before I downed my drink. I was single, wasn't I? “That's up for you to decide.” The stranger hid back a smile, which made me even bolder. “Do you have a name, stranger?” I cocked up a brow, loving this new me; fun, flirty, fabulous and *fuckable*? Ha!

“Let's make a deal. Sit with me, talk to me, drink with me and I will tell you *everything* you want.” He didn't bat an eyelash. “Everything you want.”

Hell. I think this was the first man that had made me feel *something* after Callum. I was definitely interested now. Looking at him through my lashes, I bit my lip and made a decision in my head. “Lychee.”

“Excuse me?”

I smirked and dangled the empty martini glass. “It's empty. Get me another lychee martini. I'll be over at your table.” I noted how his eyes burned into my skin. “Don't be long. I don't like waiting.” Waving him goodbye, I strutted towards where his table was situated, knowing that the stranger was watching me.

“Well aren't you a sight for sore eyes!”

I'd know that voice *anywhere*.

Fuck.

Me.

Hard.

Breathe calmly and deeply before you face him, I reminded myself internally. After a few seconds with my fakest smile in place, I spun around and greeted him. “Fancy seeing you here, Callum.” My fake smile faltered when I saw his face. He looked as though he was about to strangle me or kill me on the spot. Either way, Callum had danger about him that easily gave off the would-definitely-inflict-harm-at-a-moment’s-chance kind of vibe.

“It’s a surprise, really. I think you forgot to mention that you fancied being a hooker.”

Normally, I would be insulted given that this was Callum who was treating me like a complete tool... *however* I was the new quadruple F’s Stella, alcohol infused. “If you want to make a reservation, I’m all fully booked until the end of the year. Try calling me the day after New Year’s, I might slot you in.” With a smile, I left him there, looking like he was about to shake with rage. He had been rude, condescending and totally out of line.

Now seated in one of the red leather booths, I looked anywhere except where he had been. I didn’t want to chance getting a glimpse of him again because it fucking hurt. If I saw Zara as well, I might just end up crying and hiding in the loo.

When the stranger came back with my drink, the bubble of excitement that I’d had earlier seemed to have fizzled. Realizing that made it quite depressing. With a deep sigh, I took hold of my drink and gulped half it down without even wincing at the strong burn of the vodka. My stomach was on fire and I liked it. It made me feel something other than the pain in my chest.

The stranger kept asking mundane questions; how old I was, what did I do for a living, blah blah blah and blah.

I wasn't trying to be rude after the poor bloke had gone to fetch me another *tini*, but my ears were bleeding and I needed to get away. As usual, I had to use the same excuse all women used as a top-secret code and that was the bathroom.

Seeing Callum had made everything come crashing down again. The immediate assault of pain and longing was now in full effect. Memories of him bombarded me and I was having a hard time shaking his ghost away.

Pushing the dark door to enter the loo, I strode past the women who were busy redoing their make-up and talking about men as sex tips that were randomly flung about. I went all the way to the last cubicle, topped the lid of the toilet seat and wiped it down with an anti-bacterial cloth before I plopped my sad bottom on it.

Tears formed in my eyes and I immediately wiped them away with a tissue. I kept telling myself to stop being such a pathetic woman, hiding away in a loo at a blasted club.

I was having a lot of fun, truly. That was, until Callum had decided to ruin my night by appearing out of nowhere. Why did he feel the need to mess with my head so much? Hadn't I been gracious enough to let him go and be with his Zara? Any woman who was in my shoes would have thrown one hell of a tantrum before walking out of his life, most especially after how possessive he'd been a few days before it had happened. I didn't do any of that, though, because I cared for him. Most of all, I respected him as a man, a man who had lost someone extremely significant in his life. Zara's actions caused Callum so much pain and resentment. I wanted for him to have a chance at being happy again.

I was taught to love and to do so with my all, that sacrificing yourself to make the people you love happy was the best thing you could do to show affection. Setting him free was a tough choice to make; yet I had done it

because I had felt his pain and agony. He was trapped in his dark misery... and I wanted it gone. I'd rather see myself crying like I was right now than see him twisted with pain.

Yes, I loved him enough to become a selfless woman. I was dealing with it still; the after effects of losing him. So it was truly hard when he toyed with me because I could only endure so much before I started faltering and my selfishness would get the best of me.

He was Zara's. I had come to accept that.

Wiping my eyes dry for the last time, I rummaged through my clutch purse for some eye drops. Yes, I had them handy because my red eyes weren't meshing with the look I was going for. They'd been a staple in my purse ever since I had walked out of his house. The sad thing about having a broken heart was that it always showed. It was either you lose or gain weight, sported red puffy eyes, dark circles from insomnia, or a defeated sad face that never seemed to go away even when you smile. I mean, it was truly ridiculous.

Okay, I'd had enough of feeling like shit. I pushed myself to gather my bearings and walk out of there. I wouldn't let Callum, or any man for that matter; ruin this first night of my trial run in singledom.

Letting myself out of the cubicle, I strode out whilst fixing my skirt, making sure the back part wasn't hanging or anything. The last thing I needed was to be flashing people my arse. A small, wicked smile formed at my lips when I thought about people's reactions, but when I looked up, I was startled to find Callum lounging against the sink, still looking like he was out to gut me alive.

Hold on. *Where the fuck was everyone?* I freaked as my eyes took in the locked door and the quiet emptiness around me. The music had become mere background noise.

“We’re all alone here, in case you were wondering.”

What the shit? I couldn’t be trapped in here with him or I’d go bonkers. My eyes immediately darted towards the door again before I hastily moved towards it, however Callum immediately blocked me. Strong arms wrapped around my waist as he pushed me against the floor-to-ceiling mirrored wall.

Holy mother, I yelped when I thought the force would break the mirror, but what really terrified me more was Callum. I kept choking on my breath each time his breath hit my lips. The demented man was so close that he was giving me panic attack.

“We won’t be out of here until I call someone.” His eyes dropped to my lips, biding time. “I had the management make it look like the bathroom was out of order. For a specified time.”

Even with breathlessness, I mustered enough courage to ask him a question. “How the heck did you manage to get that done in less than fifteen minutes?”

Callum’s nose inched closer until the tip of his nose touched the bottom of my lip, caressing it. “I own the club.”

Of course he did. No wonder he knew where I was. His wealth gave him power and I hated that he was using it to get his way with me. I knew what he wanted. I could smell it on him. He was after one thing and that was sex. If he thought he could lock us in here for a quickie, he could think again. He couldn’t have Zara and me together. It just wouldn’t happen.

“Right, I forgot you own a lot of things,” I said, heavy with sarcasm.

My heart palpitated when he lifted his eyes to meet mine. “Certainly. In case you forgot, I own you, too.” His dark eyes engulfed me whole as he pressed his chest against my own. “And while we’re on that subject, let me tell you how livid I am that you’re acting like a loose trollop!”

That did it! I suddenly was just as incensed as he was. “*What the hell is it*

to you?”

He growled in my face, caging me in as he planted both of his hands on the sides of my head, his face dark with fury. “*Because it’s doing my head in! Because I’m bloody jealous of every guy that fucking dares to look at you!*” he spat at my face, unrelenting. His chest heaved while I watched, entranced at his passionate nature. When he spoke again, his voice was a mere whisper. “Because I can’t fathom the thought of you desiring another man.” He slowed down, capturing me with a new kind of intensity that left me breathless. “I saw you, Stella.”

I knew I shouldn’t be feeling guilty because I wasn’t with him, but dammit, I felt the guilt in my heart and it weighed me down. Callum was pushing through my exterior and, what little armor I had, was in a dire state. I couldn’t let him see what I had hidden inside because he’d see me differently and I didn’t want that.

“Stop messing with me, Cal.” *Please*, I beg of you.

Maybe it was the way I said the words or maybe he felt the need to breathe, but I was relieved when he got himself off me and gave me a couple feet of space. The room between us caused him to eye my outfit again, taking in my pushed up breasts in the lace corset, the tiny skirt and the strappy heels that wrapped around my legs. I watched as he smoldered with lust, need and fury all at once.

“Why are you dressed like a prostitute?” he wondered out loud.

If he was trying to sound insulting, he had failed miserably. I knew what my outfit was doing to him. I didn’t need to see his bulge to confirm it because his eyes alone were enough indication of what he wanted to do to me.

“Why? Is it *too daring* for your taste, Mr. Kensington?” I taunted, trying to hide a smile.

“You find this amusing?”

“Maybe.”

Callum stared at me for a few seconds before smirking. “Stella... how you drive me crazy.” I smiled at him for the first time tonight and when our gazes crossed paths, he became a little more serious. “Come home with me, Stella. It’s been lonely sleeping without you next to me.”

Damn, he just didn’t waste any time did he? “Callum, seriously. You need to stop this.” I was getting really tired. I was far beyond emotional exhaustion. The more he pushed, the more difficult it was for me to fight back. Callum was relentless and kept barreling in, uncaring even after I asked him to stop.

“I just want you home. That’s all.” He searched through my depths. “I love sleeping when you’re next to me. Waking up with you curling up to me was one of the things I loved about mornings.” He paused, closing the gap between us. “You liked living with me. How can you deny us from being together?”

“Because I’d done what you asked me not to do.” He had warned me, but I didn’t pay heed. Now he was about to know what I’d kept for so long. “I’m in love with you, Cal.” I gave him a brave though shaky smile. “I’m bent and fallen head over heels, crazy in lust with no room to breathe in love with you.”

When he didn’t respond and kept staring at me, frozen like he was a damn statue, I took it as a sign of rejection. He did tell me not to fall for him. Now it was my turn to warn him not to worry. I wasn’t going to propose that we were going to live happily ever after, nor was I going to ask for his babies. He could scratch all of that. I knew he was thinking crazy ideas at the moment and I needed for him to see that I wasn’t going to act on it. In fact, it was the total opposite.

“It’s fine, so you shouldn’t worry because I’m still learning the ropes. I mean, I’ve never been in love before, but from what I’ve seen and witnessed, I’m sure it’ll go away if I give it some time.”

“Like the fuck it would! I won’t let you!” he fiercely gritted out. “I want your love, in my hands, in my arms, next to me, every night. So, no, you don’t get to say that you’re wishing it away because I’m claiming that heart of yours, Stella.” Callum had barely finished speaking before he plunged his tongue into my mouth, devouring my lips like they were candy. My legs parted as he nestled in between them, grinding both of our sexes together, dry humping me. “I’m so crazy for you.”

I was lost; genuinely and equivocally lost in him. My arms and legs clung onto him like the shameless wanton woman that I was. Our need overrode everything and I fell deeply into Callum’s spell, losing the ground I had held for myself as I surrendered to the passion we both ignited.

“I need to be inside you.” Callum was already pulling his zipper down before he pushed my skirt upwards and my thong aside.

Our mating was torrid and utterly sublime.

“Tell me you love me,” Callum demanded as he slid in and out of me; commanding and unrelenting.

“I love you,” I whispered the words as though they sealed my fate. I had never felt so bare and so open, and yet, declaring those words empowered me somehow.

Callum started to pant, matching his thrusts. Each stroke was making me cry out in ecstasy. “Stella,” he choked out before I felt him tense, crushing me against his large frame as he came inside me. It was how he described it... but what I didn’t anticipate was the mere act itself felt sacred.

He was breathing heavily on my neck, our hearts beating wildly against our chests, coming down from our highs. “Fuck. I’ve missed you,” he rasped

out with a hand cradling my cheek before he started kissing the back of my earlobe. “I don’t think I can walk out of here without you. You’re coming home with me.”

I was battling with my body and it wasn’t helping that I could feel him starting to get hard again whilst inside me. “What about Zara?”

His hips gently rolled, pumping slowly, lazily. “She’s not who I want.”

My hand touched over where his heart thumped enthusiastically. “Is she still in here?”

He paused, breathing hard. “Yes, I’m sorry that she is.”

I swallowed what little saliva I had left. “You’re going to end up hurting me, Cal. I’m scared.”

He pulled away from my neck and faced me, determined to get his way. “Tell me what can make this easier for you. I’m willing to compromise a great deal just to have you back.” A small smile pulled on the side of his lips. “Hell, I’ll even go as far as to not have sex with you as long as you come home and sleep next to me.”

Compromise, huh... “*Even if I date other men?*”

Gotcha.

He opened his mouth then shut it closed. “You want to see other men? *Why?* You have me. You don’t need anyone else.”

“If I’m risking being hurt to be with you, I want a piece of something that isn’t lost to me. I don’t want to be fully consumed by you and end up losing everything in the end.” I licked my lips, pausing as I sought his understanding. “Let me hang on to something—*something that’s mine*—a piece of myself that you can’t take away.”

A deep crease etched on his forehead, contemplating my proposal. He took about half a minute to make a decision. “Very well. As long as you promise that it’s only dating. No sex of any kind. No one gets to touch you

—*not even me*—well, unless you give me permission *then* I'd be more than happy to oblige your requests.”

He truly was serious about compromise. “Are you sure you can handle your jealousy?” I had doubts, of course I did.

He didn't even bother sugarcoating anything, though. “No, but I'm going to keep on trying.” His sincerity was felt and I took that as an answer.

“Then we have a deal.” It was a damn gamble, but I don't think I'd ever forgive myself if I didn't take this chance.

“Thank you, Stella.” He dropped delicious kisses all over my face.

“*Again?*”

His tongue was seeking, toying with my ear. “I think you need a few more shots of Callum in you so that you'll be immune to other men.”

Arrogant bastard, I mused. “You're mad.”

“Oh, you have no idea, my sweet.” His thrusts resumed. “When it comes to you, I'm nearing mental,” Callum said before sinking his teeth into my neck.

Chapter 32

Stella

I went on two dates that Luciana set up for me and every time Callum waited up like a demented person. It wasn't that I was goading him or anything, but I needed for him to know that if I couldn't fully have him, then I had to keep something of myself as well. He got to keep Zara in his heart and I got to keep my freedom. Even exchange? Not really, but I'd rather have it than not have anything at all.

What I liked about him after those dates, though, was how he always greeted me the second I entered the foyer. After kissing me on the cheek, each and every time he'd say, "Thanks for coming back safe."

Our transition was evolving and I hoped he'd stay this way. I wasn't blind, I knew he didn't like me going out, but he had no choice other than to agree with my conditions.

Tomorrow marked a week of me being back here and I promised Clive that I was going to go have dinner with him. After the meal, we had plans to watch the latest horror flick that had recently come out. Callum had a business dinner, so it wouldn't be a problem if I stayed out a lot later than usual.

I knew I could date who ever I desired, yet for some reason, I didn't want him to know that I was going out with Clive.

As expected, dinner with Clive was splendid. It was so great that we ended up catching the last slotted time for the show. Watching a horror flick when drunk was actually quite refreshing. Clive and I both ended up laughing at parts that were supposed to be meant as scary.

To say that I had an incredibly fun night was an understatement

Time flew by and I didn't come home until it was past three in the

morning. I tried not to panic since it was extremely late.

I entered the house like a thief; suspicious, alert and sneaky. The house was dark and I sighed with relief as I tiptoed into the foyer, trying to make as little noise as possible. I was planning to sleep in one of the guest rooms when Callum's voice echoed throughout the dark house.

"That was Clive who dropped you off?"

Fuck. He was up!

"Good of you to check out through the window like a total creeper." Was he waiting down here all this time? God, I hoped not.

Callum emerged from his dark hiding spot, wearing only his black boxer briefs and nothing else. "What did you guys do?" he asked, folding his arms on his chest, looking at me like a sergeant interrogating his underdogs.

No, he promised not to do this. If I gave in now, he'd do this every time. "In case you forgot, Callum, you gave me your word that you wouldn't question me. As long as I came home safe, everything was fine."

I could actually hear him grind his teeth together. "Yes, you're having a bloody ball. I won't ask anymore, I swear it, but I need you to answer me this one question. Did you have sex with him?" he grit out, body tense.

Was he trying to intimidate me? "It really isn't your business."

He cracked, bellowing at me. "How could you let another man touch you when you claimed that you were in love with me?" Callum was raving with jealousy, however I was having none of it.

I snorted when he mentioned love. "How dare you throw that in my face!" I growled, shaking with anger as I tried to walk past him, intending to sleep and sort this argument out tomorrow, but the blasted man yanked my arm, not letting me free. "We'll continue this in the morning." I tried to be rational, yet he wasn't listening.

"*Just answer me, damn you!*" he gripped me tighter.

I glared at him. “Fine. I didn’t have sex with him, but I just might if you keep driving me crazy!” I fumed, yanking my arm free. “Goodnight.” I was trying to walk away again when he stopped me, once more.

“Stella—” he pleaded, all the anger seemed to have subsided the second he knew I didn’t have sex with Clive.

He was a possessive man, I knew that, but given our delicate circumstances, he should be a little bit more understanding. I was still drunk, tired and drained, and there was nothing more I wanted to do than crawl into bed and sleep. “What now, Callum!” I spun around, hair waving past my shoulders, ready to lay it out on him when I saw his expression.

“You have a hickey,” Callum hissed out, about to blow a gasket. “*You have a bloody fucking hickey!* You let him touch you.” His accusing, pained eyes got to me. “You let him touch you... how could you do this to me?”

Fuck. This hurt. It wasn’t intentional, well, not on my part. Clive somehow got a little over-friendly in the movie theatre. We didn’t even kiss or anything, but he did make out with my neck for a minute... *or so*.

This was one of the reasons why I didn’t want to stay with him. Apart from his jealous streak, I was now seeing what I was missing after going out with Clive tonight. Callum could never be that man for me, but I kept coming back to him. If I wanted to find love, being here would make it impossible.

“You know what, this wasn’t a good idea. I’m going to call a cab and go back to my place,” I sighed as I texted the private agency my address and hit the send button.

“Hell, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” Callum immediately apologized, mood changing swiftly. “Stay. Please. I’ll sleep in the other room if that’ll make you happy.”

This was a hopeless situation. I saw it clearly now. We were going to end up even more messed up than before. We both deserved better than that.

“Cal...” I started, figuring out how to convey my feelings without causing us to fight some more. “Would it be okay if you—” I stopped when he looked conflicted, like he knew what I was about to say. “I need some time apart from you. *To be alone*, I mean. You’re always around and I’m having a hard time. I’m all over the place and this is not healthy for me or for my business. I’m losing my focus and I simply can’t have that. I’ve worked too hard to get where I’m at.” Ever since I started this whole thing with him and realized that I loved him, it had been downhill from there.

“I’m a distraction.”

If I could ease the pain in his eyes, I would, but at what cost? He was going to keep me here, for what? Companionship? Comfort? I needed more. I wanted his love. If I had that, I’d give him every piece of me, but I didn’t.

“You’re too much, too everything, and I need to breathe. *You* need to let me breathe.”

Callum simply looked lost. “I...” he started, looking at me a little unfocused. “It wasn’t my intention. You know I would never jeopardize your business.” He searched my face when I walked over to him, cupping his face.

“I know, Cal. I know.” He didn’t need to explain. I understood him. It was simply unfortunate that I needed so much more than he could give me.

“I’m sorry.” He kissed the inside of my palm. “I just wanted you so much.”

He did want me, a lot; for sex, comfort and convenience and mostly, for everything else physical. Other than that, he couldn’t go further and that was the only thing that mattered the most.

The only thing that counted and mattered to me.

“Forgive me, Stella.” Callum held me tight. It was a desperate kind of hug, one which a person gives the other when he’s saying goodbye.

We needed space, although I didn’t know for how long. I didn’t want to

be incommunicado with him, but it somehow felt like it was what he was aiming for. Even if he hadn't voiced it out, I already knew.

"Don't say goodbye to me. It would be cruel to see you only once in awhile," I murmured against his chest. Not seeing him... and us going on with how things were for the last few years would affect me greatly. "We can try to be friends." *Please.*

"This is the only way I know how, Stella." He took a deep breath, inhaling my scent. "You can't expect me to be friends with you, knowing how much I want you." His nose buried further in my hair. "I'll always want you."

I knew this was for the best. Dammit, I knew it was, but I was being cut into two and I wanted the pain to stop. "The thought of not seeing you... it terrifies me."

He cupped my chin, his thumb wiping the tear that escape from my eye. "Be with me then. I'll be right next to you, for however long you want me by your side."

"Callum, you're not fair."

"I'm begging here." He pulled out of my hair and looked into me. "I've never begged before, but I'm beyond desperate to have you. It's horrible without you." He paused, throat bobbing before he found his voice again. His next move came as a surprise. Callum got on his knees, literally begging in the highest order. "I need you in my life, Stella. Stay and be mine again."

Callum was giving me a make or break it decision and I wasn't playing fair, especially knowing how I felt about him. He wasn't allowing leniency, not even for friendship. He was using my feelings as a weapon against me. "Cal—"

"Please, say you'll stay."

I would, if he could tell me what I wanted to hear most. It was now or

never. “Are you in love with me?” I whispered, breathless.

Something passed in his eyes and my heart plummeted when I realized what that look was. It was a look of retreat and regroup. He was thinking about how to respond to my question.

Callum took his time, gathering himself up on his feet again before responding to me. His dark, penetrating eyes commanding me to look at him. “I—” he carefully began, “deeply care for you. More than any woman after her.”

I didn’t even have the power to flinch because I had known what was going to come out of his mouth before he’d said it. Still, for him to confirm it, stabbed me into reality over and over again. Giving up on my loved ones wasn’t my forte, but I guess I have to learn how for the first time.

It took every ounce in me to give him a smile, which was full of love and understanding; that he didn’t need to explain to me why he cared deeply, why he couldn’t love me, or why he wasn’t capable of giving me what I wanted when I was more than willing to give him everything that I had. My present and my future, I wanted it to be with him.

How could I spend the rest of my life next to a man who was in love with another? True, sex would be out of this world. Not to mention that I would get to keep him all for myself. He’d spoil me to no end and I wouldn’t want for anything in the materialistic aspect... but could I accept that even though I had him, there would be times that he’d think about Zara? Wonder about her and what life could’ve been if she hadn’t done what she had? Did I love him that much that I’d be more than willing to sacrifice not being loved by the man I had chosen to be with?

The answer was, unfortunately, a resounding no.

My family had so much love to give. My parents were in love with each other and I wanted what they had. I shouldn’t settle for anything less. If I had

to give my all to a man, I'd expect the same exchange.

Callum and I weren't meant to be, simple as that.

My heart was in pieces as it cracked a little bit more inside.

The urge to dwell on my broken heart was too tempting, however I had to see this through and leave his house. My brokenness could be dealt with later on. Right now, I needed all of my will to say goodbye to him.

We were having a staring contest as he waited for me to give him an answer.

It took every ounce in me to gather the courage to walk up to him, knowing that this might be the last time, for a very long time, that I was going to see him in the flesh.

"Promise me that you'll take care of yourself?" I pleaded, knowing his penchant for racing and whatever else could get his adrenaline skyrocketing towards pure euphoria.

His quick transformation was heart wrenching. It tore me up inside, but I didn't have that much choice.

Callum slowly distanced himself from me. He became stoic. Unreachable. "Take care of myself," he muttered, nodding. "Why bother with asinine attempts of niceties?" Dark eyes cut through me. "I think I've begged enough. If you want to leave, go. You know you're way around."

"That's harsh."

He made a careless shrug and then spun around, not facing me. Callum's immediate detachment rankled on my threadbare composure. It hurt, but I knew he was purposely doing this to protect himself. This was his way of ejecting someone from his life; with a cold attitude and instant rejection.

"So this is it?" I lingered longer. For each second I stayed, it made me die a little bit more inside... and yet, my feet remained rooted, the situation unresolved for me.

“This was your choice, Stella, not mine.” He spoke with indifference. “But you may be right, it’s time we end this. I was getting bored, anyway.”

His back still faced me, so I took a moment and burned this into memory, seared *him* into me. I knew he said those words because he was angry, but it didn’t make any difference because it still managed to wound me.

“I’ll be heading out then,” I whispered as I darted his silent form another quick glance. I steadily strode into the hallway then out of the house.

Out of his life for good.

Someday I’ll love again...

Those words echoed into my broken heart. If that day ever came, I’d better be falling for a man who was capable of loving me as a whole because I wouldn’t expect anything less.

One thing I had learned with my short affair with Callum, though, it truly was pure hardship to force yourself to walk away when you had irrevocably fallen into the deep abyss of loving a man. To muster enough will and discipline yourself to turn your back on your heart, hear it break repeatedly and still remain intact and sane, was one of the toughest trials I’d had to battle.

Saying goodbye was the most difficult thing to do when my heart wasn’t ready to let him go.

This lesson would forever be scarred into me.

Chapter 33

Callum

I was in the middle of a conference call when Eleanor delivered something on my desk. I barely gave her notice as I continued on with the German investors.

An hour later, I was getting up to meet my mother for lunch when I noticed the large, fat envelope Eleanor had placed on the side of the table. It didn't have any labels or stamps, so I assumed it was work related.

Well, I had guessed wrong.

I know the agreement was to stay married until I was at the age of twenty-six. That contract was specifically designed for you and signed by you, not me. It's high time we put this behind us and move forward.

Best,

Stella von Berg

Divorce. She wanted a bloody, fucking divorce! “*Like hell!*” I yelled as I crumpled the paper and threw it across the room. The papers that she needed to be signed went in the same fashion.

The lovely English rose had finally grown some thorns and I didn't like it one bit.

~C~

It had been two weeks since I had last seen her. I knew she had moved to Hyde Park Gardens because her funds wouldn't be released unless I signed the agreement. Before I had done that, I asked to see the place she wanted to buy and also asked for my own copy of the house keys.

It was her first time living alone. I wasn't convinced that it was a bright idea, knowing she was a woman who was dating. Stella demanded I set her free and I had done just that, but now she wanted a divorce? That was

unlikely.

I let myself into her home and waited for her. After an hour and a half, I was getting impatient. It was almost one in the morning, *on a Tuesday*; where the hell was she?

My body froze when I heard the faint sound of the keys jiggling... and laughter. *Her* laughter along with another man.

Brilliant. Just what I needed, *another fight*.

Their laughter ended when they spotted me, standing there, brooding as I awaited her return.

The man spat out, furious. "*Who the fuck are you?*"

"Her husband," I causally said, looking at Stella.

Her date spun around to face the shocked Stella. "*You're married? Are you fucking kidding me, Stella?*"

She opened her mouth, hating me on sight. "William, it's not what you think. I'm getting divorced soon."

"Fuck!" William frowned as he gazed at me then at Stella. "Well, call me when this whole thing is over. The next time I kiss you, I want you to be a free woman. Single." He sagged a bit before we watched him retreat, letting himself out of the flat.

So the bloke's name was William. He's number what now? Fifteen? Twenty? She was bent on spreading herself around. Each man she dated was fucking with my brain. Throw this whole divorce fiasco in, so that she could freely do as she pleased, and it wasn't happening for me at all. My mind wouldn't allow the possibility to exist. She wasn't divorcing me until she was twenty-six. That was the agreement and I was sticking to it.

"How many William's are there going to be in your life, Stella? Haven't had your fill of fun yet? Either way, you're going to be married to me for four more years."

She tensed, flashing her eyes at me, breasts heaving. “I’m going to contest it. I want to have full financial control of my assets. It would be best for the both of us. We will be free of each other.”

Stella was challenging me to the point where I usually became ruthless, something I had vowed not to do when it came to her. “You could try, but I’m telling you now, you won’t win against me.” I paused, letting my words sink in. “Besides, that’s not what Richard wanted.”

“I know, *but he’s not here to see how miserable I am!* I’m all fucking alone!”

That wasn’t true. “You have me.”

“I don’t want you, Callum. So stop acting all chivalrous. I’m sick of everything. I want a new beginning.”

She was throwing everything back in my face, but I was ready to compromise so that I could have her back in my life. “Let me take care of you. I made a—”

“You vowed, you promised my brother that you would. I KNOW!”

“Stella.” I moved towards her, but she raised her hand, making me stop.

“No! I want a new life. Maybe someone new. Heck, maybe I could get married again and have lots of children then maybe I wouldn’t be alone anymore.”

“You’re married to me. Do you hear me? You’re married to me.” I pressed her against the wall with no chance of escape.

It was make or break from here.

“Did you... did he—William—did you guys go any further other than kissing?”

“Why? If I told you I did, what would you do, Callum?”

She was goading me. “*Did you?*” She was the master of avoiding direct questions. I loathed it.

“Like I would tell you. What’s the difference? From where I’m standing, I’m not obligated to answer anything.”

I growled. “Damn you. Stop torturing me.”

“*I’m torturing you?* That’s fresh!” Stella hissed at me. “You have done nothing except torture me after that weekend. Who cares if Derek, William, or whoever else, kissed me? Who cares if I’m enjoying their caresses... or when their having sex with me? That’s none of your business.”

“You went all the way?” My hands slowly slid off the wall, feeling weak and beaten. “*You—*” I couldn’t even finish a sentence because I was having a hard time grasping at the thought of her enjoying another man... pleasuring her... fucking her as she begged for more. Stella was mine.

She was mine... but I had been too arrogant and past blinded from my own misery to see how much I wanted her in my life. Now I was paying the price. I was hurting, gutted all the way to the core.

Stella looked panicked, but quickly recovered.

I flinched when she cupped my cheek, stroking it. “Cal?”

I was at a loss. I had never felt so helpless in my life.

“Cal, say something...” she pleaded, nervously biting her bottom lip.

I watched as her teeth let go of it. It changed from pale pink into cherry red and I stood here, craving those lips like I’d never longed for anything in my life.

My eyes scanned her beautiful face, tracing, memorizing and yearning all at once before I stopped and stared into her soul, pleading for the umpteenth time. “I want you to give me a chance.”

“A chance... *for what precisely?*”

This was it. She was asking me to lay everything down... what I could bring and offer her. I simply hoped it was enough. “To be worthy of you. Because I could be. Just give me a fair shot.” She looked unconvinced, but I

wasn't finished yet. "I can't get you out of my head. You're stuck in it. I want what we had before, Stella. I want that simplicity of being you and me." We were marvelous together. My father had to come in and wreck what I had again while my poor choices afterwards had driven her away.

"I want to make amends for my past mistakes. I'm not ready to let you go. I'd do anything. I swear, I will try harder." I wanted to reach out and touch her, but I was too frightened that I might not be able to control myself and devour her. That would throw away any chances I had left of getting her back. "I can treat you better than Derek or any other man out there. *Stay, stay and live with me.*" My chest felt like it was going to combust from the emotions running rampant inside me; my thoughts rankled at envisaging her with those men. "I need you." *Badly. Desperately.*

It seemed that my pleas weren't being heard. Stella simply looked like she had made up her mind. I watched in agony as tears pooled in her stunning eyes. "I'm sorry, but I can't," she whispered, unyielding to my needs, wants and desperation.

I wasn't ready to throw in the towel yet... one more...

"Why? *Tell me*, I'll make it all better. If you want me to take some weeks off work so we could spend some time together, I would be more than willing. I won't even drive any sports cars, knowing how much you hate me driving so fast. I could trade it in for a four-door vehicle. All you have to do is tell me." Each word was shot out one after the other while I watched her tears fall down her face. "Tell me, Stella, anything is better than your rejection. I won't settle for that. I just bloody won't. I'm not ready to let you go. We're not over."

Unconsciously, my forehead touched hers. The sudden effect of her skin and her smell brought out sadness that I couldn't explain. Yet, there I was, full of melancholy. "How could it be over, when I barely had you? We'd

barely even begun...”

“No.”

I felt her breath against my lips. She was *so close*, yet so fucking far. I was having a hard time reaching her. “Then tell me what to do because I’ll do it.”

Stella moved her face to the side, tears freely flowing before she tested how far I’d go to get her back. “Love me.”

Love. Did it always come back to that? The word sent me to Heaven and Hell. It shot me into darkness. For years, I was imprisoned in its cells—it’s begrudging grasp—but Stella had made it all go away. So if it was what she was after... then I had no choice. “All right, if that’s all it takes for you to come back, then I love you.”

Stella’s palm flew and connected to my cheek before she pushed against my chest, making me back off. “*Do you think this is a fucking joke?*” she hissed like a banshee, eyes wide and ready to draw blood.

What the bloody hell? “*It’s what you wanted!*” I shot back, rubbing the spot where she had slapped. “It was what you asked, wasn’t it?” I frowned, baffled at her reaction.

“*It is*, but I want it to be real, Cal!” she raged on. “So don’t insult me by your half-hearted attempt of pretending that you do! Not only is it insulting, but it’s downright humiliating.” She sniffed. “We both know that you’re not capable of giving me that. That’s why we’ll never work. I want to be loved, too. That’s not so much to ask, is it?”

No, of course not. She deserved everything... but I could give her everything except for the love that I didn’t feel in my heart. “Stella...”

“Please. Leave.”

Hope was diminishing before me quickly and I was grasping at threads. “Stella, listen to me please.”

She shook her head, unwilling. “No, Callum. This is where it ends.” She strode towards her bed and sat down with her back to me. “If you care for me at all, if you wish me happiness, you’re going to sign those papers so we can both move forward.”

I growled my frustration, past knowing what to do any longer. Divorcing Stella wasn’t on the agenda. “There’s no fucking talk of divorce,” I thundered out, meaning every word of it. “I’d rather rot than let you marry another man.” If she wanted me out of her life, unbinding herself legally from me wasn’t an option.

“Have it your way, just get the fuck out. I don’t want you here.”

Right, she was ejecting me out of her home. “We have to finish this.” I tried to reason, however she was beyond my reach.

“Get. The. Fuck. Out.”

Stella wanted me gone. Out of her life. What more was there to do when she simply was on a mission to find herself another man? If she truly loved me at all, she wouldn’t push me out knowing very well that I wanted her in my life. It counted for something, but to her, it wasn’t enough.

I wasn’t enough.

My eyes gathered her sobbing form. Each racking sound gutted me inside out. With a deep breath, I silently bid her goodbye. I wished her the best and hoped that she would find the kind of happiness and love that she longed for so much.

I suppose I should be glad that I wasn’t in love with her because if I was, I was sure another problem would arise that would separate us. It was a good thing then, wasn’t it?

At the end of the day, we saved ourselves from wasting time on each other.

Each step I took dragged me back into the luring pull of the darkness,

back into its familiar embrace.

I was a man who had everything... and yet, I felt like I was worth nothing.

Just like old times, I mused when I saw a missed call from Andrès Franco. “Welcome back to your old life, Callum,” I muttered as I dialed the call back button.

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Chapter 34

Stella

After that colossal confrontation I'd had with Callum, I decided to stop dating.

Before, it had been great to think that I could easily forget him by seeing what was out there, but who was I kidding? It wasn't going to happen any time soon.

Even Clive, I really liked him. If the time came that I was ready to date, I might give it another try with him, but as for now, I would remain all on my lonesome.

So here I was, finishing up my breakfast on a Saturday while listening to Rachmaninoff as I gathered the fresh blooms I had purchased at the shop earlier this morning, when I heard the buzz of the doorbell.

Striding towards the intercom, I pushed the button. "Who is it?"

"There's a delivery for Ms. Von Berg."

Okay? I thought as I pressed to let the man into the building.

The package was from Callum.

With shaky fingers, I opened it with my heart lodged in my throat. All the time, I kept thinking what was in it.

The present contained a large, heart-shaped diamond and ruby pendant with a thin gold chain. It was beautiful, don't get me wrong—but *why a necklace?* My question was soon answered when I opened the handwritten letter it came with.

It is exactly a week from since I saw you last...

You asked for my love and I couldn't give it to you.

I wished I could take out my heart and hand it to you so I could prove my worth, I would gladly do so, but since that's asking for the impossible, I'm all

but incapable of being worthy of you.

So here's an emblem of my heart. Keep it with you. Keep it safe. It may be cold and hard from the surface, but it never weakens.

It is forever withstanding and forever it remains. I'm gifting it to you, so it shall be forever yours.

With this, maybe it might just bring you everything you've been wishing for.

Best,

Callum

“Oh God.” I choked back a sob as my eyes blurred at the words he had written me.

His words were powerful, heart twisting and blatantly sad because it seemed like he really wanted to... *but simply couldn't.*

I stared at the deep crimson pendant and kissed it before curling up and crying my heart out. How could I stop loving a man who was willing to give up his own heart simply so he could prove that he was serious and worthy of me?

It was due to my own selfishness that we were both miserable, yet even racked with this all-consuming pain, I wanted—*yearned*—for his love. That was the only way I could be back in his life, I wouldn't settle for anything less.

So, we resumed to our old ways.

He lived his life.

I lived mine.

Separately.

It had been almost a month since I had heard from Callum personally. However, he had been making headlines as of late, partying until the break of dawn around the Spanish coast along with his other playboy friends.

I stopped following his “progress” after news broke that he went jet-skiing at midnight, naked to boot. Yeah, the crazy devil-may-care attitude was back. I cringed, thinking that he was putting himself in danger again, but that was what he lived for. He was an adrenaline junkie. I just didn’t get the chance to see it first hand.

He had been a lot tamer with me.

So after the article I read about him doing crazy midnight stunts, I decided to steer clear from any gossip and society magazines.

It was three in the afternoon and I had just gotten back from food tasting with Luciana for one of our main events when Ally buzzed through.

“There’s an Eleanor demanding to see you,” Ally informed me through the speakerphone.

“Did she say what she wanted?”

“No, *but I could ask* if you want me to,” Ally whispered.

This was what I liked about her. She was fun and easy, funny when she didn’t mean to be. She had recently announced that she was expecting her first child with her boyfriend. I had to see if she and Sienna could train another person before she went on maternity leave. I knew she was only three months along, but these things took time. I didn’t want to panic and pester Ally when she was preparing to give birth.

With a heavy sigh, I answered her, “It’s fine, Al. Send her in.”

Of all the people to see me, I would never have guessed Eleanor. Could it be about Callum? I hoped it wasn’t too serious.

Standing up, I skimmed over my skirt and strode forwards, opening the door to greet the older woman.

I kissed both of her cheeks and gave her a tight hug. “Eleanor, lovely to see you, but I’m a little apprehensive about this surprise visit. *I hope it’s nothing serious?*” My paranoia and my over-active imagination were running

overtime and I just had to ask, manners be damned.

When her eyes immediately turned serious, I stilled, waiting.

“I came to speak to you about something personal and I hope you don’t mind me interfering, but I came about Callum.” The distress in her voice was evident.

Callum. Hearing his name alone resuscitated me. “How is Callum, Eleanor?”

She shook her head as I guided her towards the sofa to sit. “He’s alive.”

I frowned at her response. *He’s alive?* I didn’t follow...

When she saw that I was taken aback with her answer, she filled me in. “He got into an accident last night. *Have you not heard?* It was all over the news. He was speedboat racing with that Greek actor and that Italian guy.” She fanned herself. “They even have footage for it. Thank goodness they’re all okay.”

Accident. Speedboat. Racing, *again!*

“Goodness,” I shakily whispered. My greatest fear had almost gotten him. He’d had a close call with death. It had been my only wish when I had asked him to keep away from racing, but he was doing a splendid job of proving he didn’t have to listen to it now.

My entire body froze, suddenly numb as I pictured what would have happened had he not managed to survive the accident. “Callum’s in a hospital, I take it?” I tried to sound unaffected, but failed to do so.

“He was for a bit.” Eleanor sighed, worried. “This is why I came here. He’s back to his old recklessness and I’m afraid for what this will do to him.” She reached for my hand, seeking my eyes. “You see, he had always had this streak, but it spiraled out of control after Zara. His grandfather died with worry. He’d already had a mild heart attack the day before, but when he heard of news that his grandson and only heir had smashed into a boutique

window in Monaco and that Callum was being taken into emergency, the second attack wasn't as kind as the first," she continued with that shocking news. "He's officially on leave. *Indefinitely.*"

"On a leave? Why? Is he hurt? Does he need therapy? A shrink? What?" Okay I sounded like a mad woman, but for the life of me, I couldn't grasp how Callum—who was a workaholic—would easily give up work for no valid reason. Not only was it mind-boggling, but truly disconcerting.

I was beyond worried of what would happen if he continued on this path. What if he had a hard time harnessing this wild streak of his and decided to live life as a truly reckless, privileged heir like a lot of the people born with money?

"He's chosen me as the person in charge while he's on vacation. At my age, I want to think about traveling and Sunday luncheons and dinners, not the stock market, videoconferences and bloody meetings. I'm not prepped for these things and he knows it.

"You're the only one I can think of that could get through to him, love. You have to help him," she pleaded, beseeching. "He holds you in a high regard, Miss Stella."

What if he laughed in my face? After all, I hadn't spoken or seen him in a month. A lot could happen in a month. For all I knew, he probably hated my guts. "Where is he exactly?"

She shook her head again, disappointed. "He's on that Greek's yacht, partying. If you check the gossip sites as much as I have for the last couple of hours, it'll update you on everything. It's mooring off the coast of France. The French Riviera, I believe."

Yacht parties. *Oh, bloody joy!* "How do I get to him?"

"Don't worry about any of that. All I need to know is *when* then I will take care of the rest," she assured me.

“You’re quite the woman in charge. I’m glad Callum chose you.” I tried to sound optimistic, knowing quite well that Callum was going to be a stubborn one to reel back to England. If he was having a ball with his speed racing and streaking naked around the Mediterranean, he would hate me for trying to intervene with his party life.

Eleanor finally stood up, giving me a hug before looking me in the eye. “He’s like a son. I love him like one... I worry, is all.”

“I’m going to try and get him back to tamer pastures,” I murmured, somehow grinning at the thought of me trying to bring him to tamer pastures.

Oh boy.

Time to see my kryptonite. I could only hope I fared well this time around.

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Chapter 35

Stella

“Welcome aboard. Who might you be and whose intimate room party should I escort you to?” A tall, tanned, emerald green-eyed man with careless sexiness and a potent dose of eight-pack abs glistened before me, curious to the newcomer. “Luca di Medici at your service,” he introduced himself.

Hold on. Did he just asking me if I was a prostitute? “*I beg your pardon?*” I questioned, aghast.

“Kosta is only allowing us a maximum of two personal guests. A man in love tends to forget how it is to party all weekend long.” Luca’s Italian accent made that swoony singsong tone which distracted me to no end. “Since you aren’t one of my women, I was asking if you’re Bertrand’s? Franco’s? Kensington’s? But I believe Callum’s booked.”

Booked?

“You mean Callum’s with his guests? *Right now?*” Uh, what the heck did I get myself into? I could’ve just stayed in London. I knew I should have, but... a big part of me wanted to see him. Now I wondered how much this careless action would cost me.

“He is and I believe most of the guests on board are going to dine in Monaco. They’re bound to leave soon,” Luca informed me as we descended the stairs of the helipad towards the second floor of the yacht.

Guess this was the right opportunity to tell him, since he was acting friendly and all...

“Well,” I said, pausing for effect. “Callum’s *really* not expecting me. I’m here as a part of Eleanor’s rescue mission to save her boss from being a pauper.”

Luca stopped as he reached the second floor while I halted a step behind

him. He now looked suspicious, eyes a little more focused on me and too sharp for my liking. “Eleanor. Right, of course.” He cocked his head my way, eyes pinched to the sides as he looked doubtful at me. “*And who might you be?* I forgot to get your name.”

That made me swallow nervously since my throat suddenly felt parched. “I’m Stella,” I whispered, smiling nervously. “Stella von Berg.”

Luca’s emerald eyes grew like saucers. Lips formed into a big O before he nodded his head as if he understood everything. “You’re the child.”

What child?

Confused, I looked at him in question. “Sorry, I don’t follow—”

“Callum calls you that. So we all call you with that cute pet name.” He grinned at me, now comfortable that he knew who I was.

Somehow, the last thing I wanted to do was smile.

The child.

That alone explained a lot as to how he saw me.

In his eyes, I would always be one. Best I accepted that now. Well, I suppose I should be grateful since I wasn’t planning on doing anything with the man. After this little jaunt, I was homeward bound. Away from Callum and his tootsies.

I hadn’t even seen him, but knowing that he was somewhere in this massive yacht had already had an intense effect on me. I was tense, skittish and furious at the same time.

For the entire journey here, I had coached myself to remain calm and act as if he didn’t matter to me because, at the end of the day, I was the one poised to get hurt, *not him*.

“Let’s get you in the salon while I figure out how to squeeze you in.”

Right.

Luca barely delivered me to the salon before he disappeared, but after a

couple of minutes, I heard the choppy-slashing sound of a helicopter from upstairs.

A crewmember immediately sought for my needs, giving me refreshments and snacks while I waited for Luca's return.

It was then that there were sounds of choppers flying in and out a few times as I snacked on some mini sandwich wraps.

"I'm afraid I just missed him. I've been calling him, but his phone is shut off." He frowned, texting and then trying to call him again.

"Aren't you supposed to be with your dates?" I eyed him, wondering.

"Let's just say I'm good for the weekend." His wicked grin was instantly back in its place.

When his phone shrilled, he excused himself. "Hold on, Jacques is calling." Luca got up and went to the furthest side of the room. From here, I could see his contorted expression, which was not warming me at all. Then he expressed a melancholy sigh before he sat down, I knew this was about me. "That was Callum."

"Yeah?"

He shrugged. "He told me to get you on a helicopter and into his awaiting jet in the mainland to fly you back to London."

Fucking lovely. "I see. Did he say anything else?"

"He did, actually. In fact, he said and I quote 'you better make sure she's not there when I get back. Consider this as the favor you greatly owe me'."

How embarrassing to be booted off before I had even warmed my feet.

Well, at least I had tried being reasonable. It wasn't as if I had really wanted to seek him out. It was Eleanor's idea, not mine. "It was great to meet you, Luca," I said as I slowly stood up, handing out my hand.

Luca stared at my outstretched hand a bit before those amazing emerald eyes hooked me in. "He'd kill me for this, but why don't you stay the night?"

You can stay in my room.”

“*Why would you do that?*” I was even more curious now. Favors... now this? Huh?

His eyes twinkled, disarming me for a second before he continued again, “Life’s been boring lately, so maybe it’s time to liven it up a little, *and for Kensington to react this way...* it really gets me curious.”

Luca di Medici was a wicked man. Everyone knew that. I’d give my right kidney if I was wrong in my hunch that he was seriously toying with his good friend. “Are you sure I’m not imposing?” I double-checked.

“Very sure.”

A whole weekend in a yacht full of testosterone junkies; hot, sexy playboys all around... I now saw the appeal as to why the gossip rags followed these men.

I had yet to meet the other three notorious bad boys, well, *two* now, since the Greek was now a newly reformed man.

This was going to be a weekend to remember, without a doubt.

~S~

The mega luxury yacht had three floors, not including the rooms below deck. It was designed with a lot of white leather, accents of azure blue, black and lots of dark wood. The color scheme was light with an edge. It wasn’t overtly ostentatious than the other yachts I had been on, but it was enough to make an impression of wealth without going haywire with gold tones and expensive art hung and placed everywhere. The white and the azure blend gave away how proud the owner was of his heritage. Just like a true Greek.

Luca and I shared dinner in the salon as we waited for their return. The man was an enchanting storyteller and it didn’t take a long time for me to

guess how close he was with his friends. He even mentioned my brother, whom he has met on several occasions, and it touched me that he said great things about him.

Amidst all the tough exterior held a man who was sharp, business-oriented even though he pretends he didn't care about it, but what I liked about Luca di Medici was the very fact that he didn't ask anything about Callum, knowing quite well that was the reason I was here in the first place. I'm sure he was curious—piqued, but he was respectful of me, so he didn't charter towards the blatant obvious.

It was an hour after we shared our dessert and coffee when he heard the choppy sound of an arriving helicopter. From a distance, I could hear women's laughter.

Splendid. "They're here?" I stated the obvious.

He nodded, hand stretched out to me. "I believe it's time to make your entrance, Bella Donna."

If I was nervous, I dared not show it.

This boat was the last place I wanted to be in, but this was my obligation—as a friend and amongst the other reasons—to try and convince him to stop horsing around.

Luca and I strode, side by side, towards the rear of the boat, I suppose where the fun was taking place.

To the other side, if you go on a few steps, a jacuzzi large enough to accommodate a dozen people, sat surrounded with candles and the water covered in rose petals.

A line of loungers situated on the side and across it, the other wall was line with white leather seating. There was a black marbled pool table at the end. A large screen hung on the other wall that played the men's racing tournaments. A black marbled bar ensconced on the side. The floor had

hidden lining of LED blue and white lightening that made the whole ambiance more intimate, posh and upbeat.

The first person I saw was the former actor, Dimitris, coming towards us. I became so nervous that I didn't notice the woman beside him.

"Luca." Dimitris eyed me with interest. "I'm Dimitris Kosta." He held out his large tanned hand. I stared at it for a bit longer than necessary before I shook it with my own. "Stella von Berg. It's nice to meet you."

Dimitris didn't show any reaction to my name, so I didn't know what to make of it. It was then he introduced the woman who was standing next to him. "This is Lindsey, my wife." But before I could express anything, Dimitris was addressing Luca and they had to excuse themselves to talk privately, leaving me with his wife.

I didn't know he was married...

"Sorry my boyfriend was being rude. He's just worried because I don't think Callum is expecting you to be here still." Lindsey's dark eyes glittered with amusement.

I frowned. "I'm sorry, but thought he said *wife*? Or is my hearing quite bad?"

"Oh he's both." She guided me towards the bar, before handing me a champagne flute without even asking me if I wanted one. "Down two of these. I'm sure Callum would be a little pissy when he sees you, so these nice bubbles will help you calm down."

I took the two she handed me and stared at her, bewildered. "How did you know about me?" I had a feeling that Dimitris might've mentioned anything about my complicated relationship with Callum because she seemed to *know* something.

"*Oh you know*, let's just say that I have a beef to pick with him after he sort of handed me to Dimitris when the guy was pissed off. So I want to

return the favor.”

Lindsey certainly was different. The woman had spunk.

“I think I like you already.” I grinned as I annihilated the first flute.

It didn’t take that much to notice why Dimitris liked her because this woman was gorgeous, but not only that, she didn’t follow the usual niceties and protocol that usually followed.

“Hey—we women have to stick together when dealing with this hard-headed men.” She smiled as she took hold of a drink and toasted it with mine.

Yeah, she was my kind of girl friend. “Cheers.” We both sipped at the same time, and when I saw the opportunity, I made a beeline for it. “So, while we wait for Callum’s return, mind explaining how your Dimitris is your husband *and* boyfriend?”

Callum didn’t arrive until thirty minutes later, along with Andres and Jacques and their cohorts.

“Relax. I won’t let him near you if he tries anything crazy.” Luca winked at me.

Even Dimitris, who was one of Callum’s confidante’s, got my back. “If he tries to tell you to leave, I’ll gladly kick him out myself.” He spoke as he nodded towards the approaching two men who I have yet to meet. “Someone needs to warn the Brit that he’s wife is still here.”

Jacques, who had a cherry stem twirling between his lips, saluted me. “You should go change in your bikini, we’re going in the tub. We have an hour until a couple yachts will moor to come and join us to party.”

There seem to be a problem about that... “I forgot to bring anything.” I licked my lips, rushing to add to that sentence, blushing. “To swim with, I mean.” Why was I acting all idiotic? Umm, maybe because the attention was all on me...

Andrès beamed at me before one of the blonde women hugged him from

behind and pulled him towards the pool table.

“I have a lot of new pairs. Come on! Let’s get you into a suit before your hubby catches you.” Lindsey pulled me towards her side; walking as she asked what type I wanted. She didn’t even give me a chance to speak before we got to the lower level and went inside the master’s bedroom.

She then immediately went into a drawer and went through pairs, sifting through with tags in them. “Aha! Red is sinful. Totally want you need to punish him a *little*.” She wickedly suggested as she shoved the items in my chest. “Make that man suffer a little. I think he needs a good spanking, don’t you think?”

Me... *spanking Callum*? Goodness. “I’m not sure he’s into that bit.”

It was just then that her phone shrilled and she instantly took it. “Can you make it or what?” Lindsey checked her reflection as she listened into the phone. “Dude, did you tell Bass where you are? Cause I don’t want him on my ass, you know. Uh, yeah...*duh*? Okay. Okay—God! See you in half an hour.”

Lindsey made me change in the bathroom as she explained to me that Emma, her best friend and an actress, was coming to visit for a day. Apparently, she was best friends with Jacques and Dimitris.

It was odd how they’re all connected. But I couldn’t help but feel that pang of jealousy at all of their closeness... it was like a little family.

When I came out of the bathroom, Lindsey was jumping up and down with wicked excitement. “Perfect. All you gotta do now is make him suffer. Don’t give the nookie until he’s all done for, got it? That man’s been naughty, so he needs a good lesson.”

This woman was vindictive and upfront. “You must be keeping Dimitris in check all the time.” A smile formed my lips as I approved at the scant bikini reflection.

I looked... fabulous. Fun. Fantastic. And definitely fuckable.

Perfect.

“You might be surprised but he keeps me in check. I love him—but it wasn’t like that in the very beginning. You see, I married him when I was in love with someone else. We separated and got back together again. Santa Barbara then here—New York or Paris—we’re all over the place, but we’re trying to work it out...” there was fear in her eyes, showing a glimpse of vulnerability, which wasn’t evident before. “I hope he doesn’t give up on me. He’s such a wonderful man.”

“Dimitris, from what I observed earlier, seems to be quite attached to you. The man doesn’t have any eyes for anyone but you, Lindsey.” I reached for her dainty hand and squeeze it, giving encouragement. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

Giving myself another onceover before leaving the bathroom, Lindsey caught my eye in the reflection.

She didn’t even bat an eyelash when she questioned me straight away. “You’re in love with your fake husband aren’t you?”

That made me think, pausing as I stared back at her in the mirror. “*What makes you say that?*” Her question made me sad for some reason.

Lindsey shook her head, bunching her hair before pulling to the side. “You have Emma’s look. It’s that hopeful glowy face but with unsure eyes.”

“Oh.” I recalled the movie, remembering the actress. “Is she really that pretty in person?”

Lindsey grinned at me. “You bet. Sometimes I just want to poke her with a needle just to see if she really bleeds cause she sometimes look too pretty to be *that* real.” She raised her brow and pointed at my breasts. “You and I are on the same boat on the booby section, and honey—you need to tighten the knot to get more cleavage to get the *hot damn* effect. You want his eyes glued

on you all night not anywhere else, so tighten those knockers babe.”

Her frank blatant personality made me admire her more. I remembered telling myself that I should try a little dose of that, and maybe I wouldn't be so hung up and so miserable in my love life.

I barely stepped into the upper deck when I was spotted.

Those dark penetrating eyes only made a quick scan towards me before he glanced at the merry Italian. “I gave you orders, Luca.” Callum growled as he watched Luca joined Lindsey and I.

“Dude, chill out okay? Little wifey looks hot and she needs some little fun too?” Lindsey handed me a shot of tequila and did one with me. Boob shot and all, much to my shock.

Dimitris was there to sweep her off her feet and flung her over his shoulder. “Give us half an hour, we'll be back. I have some private matters to discuss with my wife.” He excused themselves, but before they disappeared, I caught him giving her a big smack in the ass.

Yeah, that man wasn't going anywhere. The man was in love with her and he was proud of it. It was an admirable trait. One I liked very much.

“Honeymoon period... after that... it's all bullshit.” Luca looked away, as if remembering something before he gazed over towards me, the known playboy look was back in place. “So, Stella is staying with me.” He even had the gall to fling his arm around my shoulder and tugged me close. “Right princess?”

I groaned. *Princess?* Seriously. I protested as I pinched his side a little. “Right.”

Callum's eyes flicked back and forth as he took in our immediate closeness. “What do you mean by *staying with you?*” he hissed, furious. Maybe if I looked closely, I might see the steam come out of his ears because they were beyond red.

Luca amiably smiled, unconcerned. “That means she’s staying in my bedroom.”

“YOU. UPSTAIRS. NOW!” he barked with authority that even Luca didn’t say anything, but he did in fact kept that smug looking smile of his as I glared past Callum and stomped my way to the upper deck where we could speak privately.

The deck was empty, but the LED lighting around it made it cozy and I suddenly became too hyperaware with Callum’s presence. I didn’t like that he was being such an arse, and I barely had the chance to breathe evenly before he demanded answers.

“Why are you here?” the hiss and the furious piercing gaze didn’t even faze me.

Easy tiger. “I heard about what happened and I got concerned.”

“It’s none of your business.”

He was making this difficult. “Well I’m making it now.”

Callum snapped, barking at me. “You have no right to interfere with my life. If I want to wreck it, it’s my decision.”

Oh, so he was beyond incorrigible. It was infuriating. “*I’m your wife!* In the eyes of the law, I have every goddamned right.”

“*Oh, so you’re my wife now?*” He snorted, unperturbed. “How’s dating life going *wife?* Shagged all the cocks you wanted have you?” Callum spat the words at me. Each word stabbed into me, making me even more enraged that I was earlier on.

I was so focused on his words that I didn’t even catch myself until it was too late; I slapped the bloody bastard. “Go to hell!”

“Guess they didn’t live to up to standards? You’ll never get over how my cock made your body sing and weep at the same time. You should’ve known that *the firsts* are always hard to let go.”

I slapped him again, flashing me those darkened eyes that sent chills all the way down my spine. “Keep insulting me. I’ll keep slapping you.” I threatened, but my words didn’t affect him at all.

He simply looked like a raging bull with a red flag being waved at him, ready to strike.

My whole body tensed, ready for a duel. My determined stance got swept into the air when he launched himself at me, captured my face with his large hands, and consumed my lips with ferocity of an imprisoned animal that got free of its cage.

Callum ate me whole and my betraying body merely sighed at the feel of him.

A guttural groan sprung from him as he kissed me, desperately. Ardent. Beautifully. “You just had to come didn’t you? I left England because I couldn’t stay away from you. I had tried and done all the things possible, so that you could have your own life *without me* because you asked it to be that way. You wanted to be left alone. You wished me away. So, I had to do what I thought was the best for the both of us and stayed away from London.” He parted from my lips, eyed fixed on me. “But now that you’re here, *in my territory*, looking beautiful as ever, *and you expect me to remain the same?*” he tsk-tsked me, shaking his head. “Don’t you know me at all?”

I did. Well, I thought I did. The old Callum would’ve divorced me already, but he didn’t. My brain was remembering things, confusing me more. But the biggest question was, which Callum was he, the old or new?

He remained still as he watched me think, calculating everything about me. “Time’s running out on you. So, you better start counting.”

Was that a threat or a warning? “What the hell for?”

“So you’ll know when the time stops when I make you my wife again.”

Back to the root of all evil. Callum’s desires. “You can’t force me to be

with you.”

If he thought I was just going to spread my legs open just because I still wanted, then he could think again.

But my encouraging inner pep talk came on a standstill when the bloody bastard gave me a smug smile.

It was a smile that made your toes curl, raise the hair on the back of your neck, goosebumps all over your body kind of smile. “Don’t get me wrong, I love force. I love it even more when it’s used by my cock ramming into you.” He was an impassioned man, uncensored, raw and primal.

I bit back a moan when his forefinger touched my neck and slowly trailed it in between the valley of my heaving breasts. His eyes were transfixed on them, while his breathing became ragged. “As much as I crave you right now, I will wait until you come to me. I won’t have it any other way.”

Even if my body was paralyzed and hypnotized by his presence, my brain was still functioning, appalled from what he had envisaged. “You’re such a cocky bastard.”

“Cocky I may be, but my instincts are always right.” His finger was now gliding lower, over my dress, past my abdomen, all the way down to my crevice, stopping it there—just right about my clitoral area. Callum’s knowing smile got wider as he watched me respond to his soft rubbing. “I can’t wait for your soft cries, my love,” he rasped out, eyes not leaving me, before he lifted his finger away and whispered into my ear. “Don’t make me wait too long, I’ve terribly missed you.”

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Chapter 36

Callum

For a good hour, I watched as she and Lindsey talked. After I saw that Stella remained onboard, I sent Mikaela and Maxine back to the mainland and had them escorted back to the airport so they could get their respective countries.

It was a surprise to see her, but what really got me all riled up was my reaction to seeing her in the flesh. My entire body burned—yes, literally—burned in hotness as my eyes regarded her with such thorough inspection, so thorough that one might think that I had a x-ray vision because my eyes peeled any scrap of clothing she had in my mind.

When the two yachts moored next to us, my eyes never left hers. When Emma Anderson came, Lindsey, Dimitris and Jacques all wanted to go in the jacuzzi, which made me more paranoid since men were vying for Stella's attention. They were just like me earlier, eyes raking all over that tight body of hers.

It wasn't even a question for me if I had to go and join them.

"Do you mind?" I whispered against her ear, as my arm held her stomach securely, pulling her towards me. She didn't even get the chance to respond before I had her locked, sitting in between my legs.

"Why does it feel like I've come home?" I felt so at peace. It took me back to how content I was again each and every time she was in my arms. I knew I had missed her...but God, I just realized just how much. Holding her like this made me not want to let go. I could die like this and I wouldn't even

protest.

I didn't know when things shifted really. At first we were discussing Emma's new movie, then the movies that were out—discussing which ones were going to be Oscar-worthy—to watching Dimitris devour his wife before us. Emma and Jacques were in deep conversation. Jacques was whispering into her ear as she smiled and laughed at something he said. It made me wonder, wasn't she dating that actor Bass Cole?

Everyone was so busy caught up in their own world when I noticed Stella shifting on my lap. "Everything okay?" I accidentally licked on her ear, but I didn't stop it once I heard her moan after the first one.

Nor did it help that Stella was now slowly rocking on my hardness. She was discrete about it though—it was slow—so excruciatingly slow that one couldn't even tell what she was up to.

If this was her way of punishing me, then she was right on point. Even if I wanted to stop her, my dick had missed her bottom. I would rather cut off my finger than part with my woman—yes, she was mine. The second she stepped foot in his yacht, she became mine again.

I gave her chance to run away again—to leave before I got here—because I knew, once I saw her again, there was no going back for either both of us. If she wished me away tomorrow, it wasn't going to happen.

Stella dipped her foot and it was inevitable that she was going to get soaked. She cannot provoke me and not know the consequences, especially knowing how much I felt for her—*especially knowing that*.

"You've missed me." I observed, stating a fact.

She nodded her head, looking away. "Yeah..."

I suppose I should be grateful to Lindsey for shoving as much alcohol as she could to Stella because it seemed to mellow her down. She was less catty and tense.

Easy to break through her thoughts...

And I know I was going to Hell for this, but I couldn't not take advantage of this leverage, knowing the kind of desperation I had for her. "I missed you too—so much so that you haven't left my thoughts since I saw you last."

I wanted to give her everything—whatever she wanted—and it was killing me...because the uncertainty was beyond me.

But I knew... *that my wife needed to know...* how agonizing it has been for me. "I think I'm falling for you." The thought alone of leaving her in London took a large part of me, but leaving her knowing that she was dating other men... drove me crazy. I had to do everything to make me forget about her—well, I tried anyway—but it didn't work. None of it did.

Stella was prominent in my thoughts. It was then I knew...that maybe I have been deluding myself... that maybe I was hiding behind from my past with Zara... making excuses so that I didn't have to face the truth. Because what was scarier than the truth? They said that truth had the ability to set you free, but for me, it was a shackle to love again. What if she Stella decides to leave me later on?

Or what if she finds that she wanted Clive and not me? I knew that they met up for coffee a few times. Each time killed me anew.

Stella looked back, lips inches from touching. "*You think?*"

As much I wanted to drown into her gray pools, her lips entranced me more at the moment. "I'm not sure, but I think I am. It sure feels like I am." And it sure felt like I wanted to get drunk from your lips...

"Oh, Callum... don't mess with my heart." She looked away, teary.

Did she not know how much this was costing me? How much it has been killing me to be away from her? For me not to even kiss her right now because I wanted her to come to me because I was insecure... that she might not love me anymore.

When I loved Zara before...before she decided to fuck me over, that woman was my world. I would have stuck by that woman no matter what as long as she was mine. But with Stella, I was willing to anything for her, but I failed to deliver what she had asked me months ago, so she decided to cut me out of her life, hurting me—hurting us—because I thought then that I wasn't falling for her.

Had she stood by me, waited until my mind wasn't so confused by all the misery that surrounded me by the loss of my father, his betrayal, Zara's return and revelations, then thing might have turned differently.

But she chose to set me aside... not fighting for me. The man she claimed to love.

I didn't know what to make of it... even now. It pained me to have her this close and not know if she still loved me.

Closing my eyes, I buried my face on her neck as I heard moans in the background. I wasn't sure if that was Lindsey or Emma, but at this instant, I didn't give a flying fuck because all I wanted was to be with my wife.

Mine. Stella was mine.

“Do you mind if I could feel you?” I grunted out into her ear. “I just want to be inside you. I won't so anything else... I want to feel your heat surround me.”

My heart sped up as I waited in agonizing vain for her reply.

And when she did, my heart skipped at beat. “Yes, but you have to kiss me first.”

I didn't need another second to pass to be told what to do. Cradling her cheek as I pulled her back against my chest, I kissed my fate.

It was hell.

It was heaven.

It was a ball of compounding beauty that drowned my soul. Her kiss

irrevocably owned me.

And nothing was going to stop me until Stella was mine again.

This was it...

It was the kiss of death, the kiss of life. I was signing over my fate into hers, spiritually locking her with me because there was no way in Hell I was walking away from this. Not now. Not ever.

Once was enough. It was a lesson learned, one I didn't relish nor plan to revisit.

My fingers were underneath the band of her bikini bottom, right around the crotch, but I didn't dare wander past the outline of her lips. It was meant to tease us both, but that soon turned into an odd for me because Stella pulled my cock out and started stroking it.

Mind you, my wife was uncaring that there were people around us—doing God knows what. The heated bubbles of the whirlpool jets made it impossible to guess what we were up to, much in my favor.

Not bothering to restraint myself any longer, I held her hip while I pushed her bikini bottom to the side and entered her hot pussy in one slow push.

Her hot wet walls surrounded me, cloaking my length with majestic tightness that made me utter a groan against her lips. When she started to grind her hips. I held her hips to stop.

“No my love. This is all I want. If you want more than this—you have to initiate that yourself in the bedroom,” I whispered, enough for her to hear but not the other gyrating people about.

“Callum...” she pleaded, but I was having none of it.

After five minutes, we kept on kissing as I pulsed within her walls. It had been too long and I could easily combust even without any rocking motion, but I wanted my first orgasm from Stella's initiation.

She wanted me, I knew from the desperation she had in her voice. But the

question was, was she desperate enough to throw in her doubts and love me with no holds barred?

~C~

After the intense kissing war we had with our lips and tongues in the jacuzzi, I had to withdraw fifteen minutes later, because I was truly—excruciatingly—having the most difficult time not to finish her there, right for everyone to see. So it was for the best that I didn't tempt fate and withdrew from her moistened heat.

Much to Stella's dismay. "Damn you, Cal."

It was time, bloody fucking time to test the waters. "You're staying with me for the entire time. I won't have it any other way." I announced before I took her hand and pulled us out of the water.

Not bothering to look at anyone else, I took us downstairs, back into my room.

As instructed, her belongings were in the closet as I asked the crewmembers earlier. "Your things are all unpacked in the closet. You can go ahead and use the shower first. I'll go ahead and check some business while I wait for my turn." I addressed, but I avoided locking gazes with her, because I was nervous. On top of that, I was already having a hard time fighting myself not to throw her on top of the bed and fuck us both senseless.

"You sure? I don't mind if you go first." She moved a few steps, and then halted. Unsure.

I merely nodded as I watched her bikini clad body retreat into the bathroom. A long awaited sigh came from me the second the door closed.

What if she decides not to do anything? After all, I didn't really tell her the words *I love you...*

Twenty minutes later, she emerged with a skimpy see-through sleepwear that ended right around the curve of her butt with a little underwear on.

I bolted right into the shower like a retreating fool. If she was meant to tease and torture me all night long, I had no one to blame but myself. But as much as I wanted her body, I craved her soul so much more. Without that, possessing her body wouldn't be as meaningful.

I wanted forever... and for me to get to where I wanted us to be, I needed my woman to come to me.

Doubts awash me as I took a shower.

Forlorn, I came out of the bathroom, heading towards the closet when I heard Stella.

“Callum?”

I looked up, eyes landing on her.

The moon from the window basked her aglow. Nothing—and no one looked more beautiful then, stealing my breath as she watched me. Pensive.

All reason...*all meaning*... all that I was completely left me when I saw her slowly come to me, eyeing me with naked hunger. Once she reached me, she paused, eyes roving all over me. “How much do you want me?”

Eyes hooded with desire, I pierced into her eyes. “*Dying*—I'm dying for you,” I rasped out, baring my all.

“Enough to promise me that you'll always be mine?” She dared ask as she came close, nose barely touching my neck as she tip toed and inhaled me—like how I used to do it with her. “Is this a smell of a man who is willing to be with me?”

The temperature in the room was cool, but I was sweating buckets. Stella... *in control*... was the sexiest thing I had ever seen, I was utterly rendered thoughtless—*speechless*.

A groan rumbled from my chest when her finger played with the edge of

the towel that was loosely wrapped around my hips, costing me ten years of my life.

“Have you stroked yourself thinking of me, my love?” she asked, finger teasing me to oblivion.

Everyday. Every night. “In the shower, every time, without fail.”

She purred at that, nipples hardening before my very eyes. My tongue gathered saliva as if those pebbled buds were already in my lips, tasting them.

“Did you touch yourself just now when you showered while I was out here thinking about you?”

When I said *without fail*. I meant. Without. Fail. *Ever*. “Yes.”

With a quick tug, she had my towel pooling around my feet. Without glancing at my throbbing shaft, I simply focused on her face, burning her into my memory.

“*Is this* how you do it husband?” Innocent eyes stared back at me as her hands wrapped around my length, leisurely stroking it up and down, hardening me until I was blue and purple.

“Yes.” I became a one-word utter sap. Enthralled and hypnotized by the spellbinding sensations my wife was bestowing me, but most of all, the empowered look she had simply engulfed my senses.

How I want you Stella... *how I bloody fucking want you*, I yearned some more as I watched in vain...

Waiting.

Still.

“What do you think about when you touch yourself thinking about me, Callum?” Stella asked, biting her lip before she upped her audacity. “Do you ever think about me... doing this?” She was on her knees, as I watched with fascination as her mouth took me whole.

Fuck me.

I was glued, watching her pleasure me, but when I thought I couldn't handle any more of it, I pulled her to her feet before I took her to bed, throwing myself above her.

She finally came to me...

The heady recognition of what that meant held me captive. "Am I still in your heart, Stella?"

"Always." She kissed me gently. "I'm yours... even if I didn't wished to be."

Did she still wish not to be mine? Her words hung above my head as I kissed her back.

"Tell me you love me, Stella." I begged as I ripped her sheer nightwear off, before I ripped her underwear into smithereens. "I need to hear you keep saying it."

The animal in me was seizing my entirety. The need to mate and be with my woman was beyond primal.

"I love you, Callum." She writhed against my cock, clasping her legs behind my back. "Make me yours. Show me how much you've missed me my love."

Snap.

Something broke, like a blasted damn, and everything became a blur as I made love to my woman.

~C~

It was after the second time we made love when Stella rolled atop me, kissing my face, when her curiosity got to her. "So, where are you're dates?"

I studied her face, before responding to her with honesty. "Well, I sent them away." My arms wrapped around her hips, before I rolled her onto her

back.

“Right.”

I kissed her some more. “Very right.” This felt right... there were no other words for it.

“How many women have you shagged since me?”

That broke our connected lips, as I peered into her face, wondering. “Is this a question you really want me to answer to?”

She looked away, before nodding her head. “Yes. It is. I need to know.”

“Really?” I had to make sure.

Eyes darted me a hateful glare. “Fuck yes. Now hurry and stop making me crazy.”

“Not one.”

She cursed as she pushed me off, enraged. “*Not one what? Not one redhead but tons of blondes? None what?*”

She didn’t believe me, but it was the truth. “Not one *woman*, Stella.”

That made her think for a second. “You weren’t even tempted? Not even oral?”

“No. Not once.” I sighed. “Although, I did want to try but I couldn’t do it.”

Her eyes turned into slits. “Not even with those dates? You shared a room with them.”

“Nope.”

My answer didn’t seem to please her an iota.

“So, you’re telling me that you had two beddable women and you what? *Played Scramble together?*” Stella pressed further.

How did I explain this... without sounding odd?

“They were for show, okay?” Best I kept going with that statement. “I didn’t want to look so affected after you, so I had to keep up a façade. The

girls do what they like as long as they remained here while I worked in the adjacent office. Most times, they do online shopping. Paint toenails and play Candy Crush. Does that suffice or do you need me to give you a whole rundown?”

“Candy Crush? Great.” She pushed me back on the bed, grinning. “Nope. I think you’re in the clear.”

I think I’m falling for you, the words surfaced as I kissed her... but now I had come to realize that I didn’t need to insert the *think*... that I was mad for her but my fear got the best of me.

The three-letter word frightens the living daylights out of me. I knew I should’ve said it then, but saying it out loud made it all too real... and I wasn’t sure if I was ready to step into that direction.

The point of no return—because the second I announce those words to her, I could never take it back. Not only was I frightened, but I’m also hesitant that what I’m feeling right at this moment might not be the real thing. It could be infatuation, or a fleeting moment of madness because I was so caught up in needing her... wanting her in my life. So I had held my tongue in check, knowing it was wiser to say them when I had no doubt, no room for uncertainty that it was truly what I felt for her—and I have come to that—I knew now.

It was only a matter of time until I told her the truth.

Life was certainly brighter.

For two days, we joined the rest of my friends explore the little cities along the French and Italian Riviera. I had never felt more fun, carefree and very much besotted by having Stella with me.

It was our last night. Tomorrow, we were heading back to the real world, back to London. So I decided to take her in Positano and enjoy a moment with her. As much as I liked being with my friends, I needed to spend some

time with Stella. Yes—I bloody needed it.

After our meal, we strolled towards the shore. It the small tiny strip of black sand lined with blue and white umbrellas, as we watched the sun setting before us.

“Thank you for making this all magical for me. I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy since my family left me,” Stella murmured, eyes appreciative to the beauty that surrounded us.

But what caught me was her heavenly face. It looked content, in love and happy just being with me.

Watching the sunset happen before her eyes—glowing happiness as she gazed ahead, elated.

Spending all this time with her, realizing that she was the one, truly was life changing for me. My priorities were shifting and I would do anything to keep her with me. She hasn’t demanded anything—like I have... but she ought to know...

“I love you.”

She blinked. Once. Before she turned to me, smiling. “Are you sure?”

That smile—her—everything about her simply took my breath away. “I have loved you, but my fears have overruled them. Forgive me for being such an unmitigated coward. But I’m telling you now, my heart lives for you, Stella.” I meant each word. Each were spoken with a promise. “Thank you for loving me, for bringing light into my life, for resurrecting my broken heart and making it feel again.”

She held me tighter, kissing my cheek. “Finally, I thought you’d never get here.”

I didn’t either, but I did.

I made it home.

Wrapped in each other’s embrace, I looked forward to spending my life

with her.

Our future awaited our return.

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Chapter 37

Callum

Knocking against her workroom door, I pushed it open and tried to persuade the stubborn woman to come and join me. “It’s been five minutes, Stella. You need to come out and eat dinner or I’ll very well pluck you out of that seat and take you to dine with me. You choose.” I threatened, but she only gave me a beautiful smile that made me want my heart beat a little speedier than usual.

“Coming, Callum.” The undaunted woman blew me a kiss. “Give me two minutes and I’m all yours.”

I loved how she said *I’m all yours*.

“Not a second more, you hear?” I parted the room as I went to the kitchen and waited for her. She skipped lunch and settled for a sandwich. When she didn’t eat dinner, I was ready to spoon-feed her.

Luciana’s mother’s event was right around the corner and she was busy emailing and texting—approving and disapproving orders for the last few days. She needed to take a break and eat, or she might fall apart in exhaustion.

So I barged in there and asked that she ate—throwing in the demand that if I could make her buttermilk pancakes and she just might be tempted to leave her workroom. Of course, like I would miss the chance in proving her that I was very well capable of making some damn pancakes.

A minute later, she breezed in the kitchen; eyeglasses and all, looking like a delicious dessert.

“Sit and eat, please?” I pulled the chair for her to seat on, before she plopped her butt and muttered *nom nom*. “Thanks for the pancakes, babe... but I need chocolate syrup?”

I groaned as I marched towards the fridge, taking the thing she asked for and drizzled it all over her pancakes.

“No strawberries?” She arched her brow, goading me to snap.

She was enjoying making me suffer, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kiss or spank her this instant. “Strawberries and what else? If you have any more add ons, best you tell me now.”

“Orange juice, that’s it.” She blew me a kiss as she started to work on her pancakes.

I was cutting her strawberries in halves when she broke into my thoughts.

“Callum Kensington, hot playboy—badass billionaire who has an affinity for doing naked stunts—was my personal butt boy.”

She looked so smug, so I threw her a piece of strawberry, and much to my awe, the woman caught it with her mouth.

Damn.

Without thought, I came to her, plucked her out of her seat and shoved her on the counter, kissing my wife with a passion that burned like a raging furnace inside me. “You wanted chocolate syrup?” I dipped my finger on plate and swiped on my chest, on my cock and everywhere else. “Gave a go at me wife.”

“You and chocolate?” she licked her lips. “You’re on.”

The mess we left the next day was unbelievable, much to my housekeepers delight since she wanted us to make babies...

A baby... comes later.

But for now, I have to start at the beginning.

~C~

I wanted to renew our vows, but this time, it was the real deal. I wanted to

see her eyes as she said the words to me. This was where it all started—in St. Lucia and I wanted to be in the place where it held great memories for us.

I chose to propose to her next to Richard’s burial plot. It may seem weird to some, but I wanted her family to be a part of this too. I also wanted them to know, if they were watching, that I was serious about Stella.

“Ever since you came back into my life, nothing was ever the same. You came and you marked me anew.” I looked into her eyes, seeing only her—her big heart, her love for me and my future, my wife. “I was suffocating, drowning in my sorrows—*and you*—you came and you breathed new life into me. You have seized my soul when I didn’t want it possessed. You burned and made your mark even though I held you at arm’s length.

“I love you—so in love with you that I want to make you my wife twice. I want to hear you say the words to me, before our friends and family that you’re mine and I’m yours, because I am yours...”

“You—” I spoke, breathless as I tried to reign all the flooding emotions that were overwhelming me at the moment. “You own me, Stella and I wouldn’t want for anything if you make me your husband again. Marry me and be mine forever?”

Tears formed her eyes as she broke down in front of me.

My wife was beautiful mess. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

That same day, when Stella fell asleep after we made love, I found myself before my best friend’s grave.

I stood there a moment, understanding the meaning of it all. Rehashing memories of that very same day I came back to the island, Richard bearing bad news and the marriage to Stella.

“Thank you for bringing me to her,” I murmured, “even though you’re gone, you still look out for me. I will take care of her. I love her more than anything. We miss you.”

Silently, I spoke to my departed friend, as if he was still alive.

The next day, I had our family and friends flown in for our wedding. Eleanor was the one who handled it all and I couldn't have been more grateful for her help.

Our ceremony was held during sunset since it was during one that I realized that all along, I had been in love with Stella. I wanted to see the sun set on her again as we shared our love.

It was an intimate gathering. One that was sealed in my heart. This time, when I spoke my vows, it was spoken with truth—*my* truth.

That very same night, we were out on our bedroom's balcony, draped only with a sheet, staring out to the sea, the moon and the stars above as we cooled our heated bodies in the hammock when Stella broke the silence.

“You know what I thought when I first saw you?” She cocked her head sideways, reminiscing.

This ought to be interesting. “Love to hear it.”

“I thought you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and I wanted to you for myself. When I told Richard, what I thought, he laughed me off, saying that maybe someday, if I let fate do its own will, it just might.” Stella crawled a little closer to my face. “I love you, Callum Kensington.

I paused, looking at her grinning beautiful face as my heart squeezed tighter. “Well, I'll be damned.”

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Epilogue

Callum

“Your baby is so beautiful.” Stella cooed at Ally’s newly christened baby girl named, Elizabeth.

“Here, why don’t you try to burp her? I need to go and check on something in kitchen.”

Stella looked skeptical. “Uh—yeah. If you really want me to.”

“I’ll hold her if you like.” Blake Knightly offered Ally as he placed his drink on the coffee table, who was sitting next to Sienna on the outdoor settee.

Ally reddened. “You would? Thank you, Blake,” she muttered, not looking him in the eye as she moved closer to pass the small cute bundle over.

I hid back a smile as I took another sip of my wine. Blake Knightly and I weren’t really friends since I loathed his cousin’s guts, but since our wives were friends and colleagues, we had to interact. The man wasn’t all that bad actually.

Elizabeth looked so tiny in Knightly’s arms and he seemed to be absorbed in the baby in his arms, studying her facial features. When Elizabeth let out a tiny, *cuter-than-anything-that-I-had-ever-seen* small sleepy yawn, the rest of us cooed and melted.

“I want one of these soon, *cara*.” Blake addressed Sienna without even giving his wife a glance because he looked so enthralled at the *now* sleepy form in his arms.

A round of laughter was shared while I reached for Stella’s hand and kissed it. My wife glowed as she gave me a smile.

Stella, after months of being married to her, still took my breath away.

Sienna on the hand only shook her head. “Talk to me about babies after you’ve potty trained both dogs, hmmm?” She then looked at us grinning. “He’s spoils them rotten and doesn’t seem to know how to control the urge to keep giving them treats for no reason. If the dog looks cute sitting down, he hands a treat. If one is acting all sweet and cuddly, hands another treat. I don’t even want to imagine how he’ll be with babies.”

“How many children did you guys plan to have?” Stella asked Sienna, piqued.

Before his wife had the chance to respond, Blake did it for her. “Five.”

“You two better get on that then.” I teased, but deep inside, I wanted to start my own.

The number didn’t really matter to me. I know Stella was young and she was busy with her business, so I hadn’t really sad anything because I didn’t want her to feel pressured. *Maybe next year...*

That’s how our Sunday went.

It was spent with a group of friends. Luciana and Mark later joined us. I must say that married life was suiting us both well.

I was deep in thought, driving us home in the motorway when I felt Stella hand reach out for me.

“What’s that smile for?”

I was smiling? I didn’t even notice. Taking hold of her hand, I kissed it again and placed it against my heart for a few seconds before placing it on thigh. “I was just thinking how much I love being married to you. I’m deliriously happy, wife.”

“That’s always good to know.” She glanced at me before looking out the window, then back at me again. “How do you feel about babies?”

Funny how our thoughts were in the same subject, I thought as I approached the subject that I had wanted to discuss with her. “Cute little

monsters.”

She snorted, squeezing my hand tight. “They’re cute, aren’t they?” she murmured much to herself, before directing me the next question. “How do you feel about making one when we get home?”

Did I say how much I loved my wife? “Don’t joke about that if you aren’t serious, my love.” I darted her a quick glance.

We haven’t been on this particular subject really. I wanted Stella to be happy and as much as I wanted to start expanding our family, her needs came first.

This might sound odd for some, but I’d choose my wife over my children. Yes, I would love my offspring’s madly, but my wife is world. Without Stella, life would hold no meaning for me. Other parents, I knew chose their kids over their spouses...but for me, it was the other way around.

My wife is my other half. Take that piece away, then I would be half a soul.

I was hers—unequivocally, forever was too soon, *loving her was my reason for breathing* kind of being owned.

Stella shook her head. “I wouldn’t joke about such a subject, Cal. Not only do I want one, but I also want to feel *your* baby growing inside me. When I said I want your all, I meant the whole thing. If you’re not so confident about your baby making skills, I would understand.” She lightly teased, but knew she was undoubtedly serious about having a child.

Pressing the gas peddle on my sports car, I gave the love of my wife a heated-can’t-wait-to-get-you-writhing-underneath-me-gaze. “You better take the next few days off because you wouldn’t manage to walk, my dear wife. And as for my skills, they’re legendary.”

We didn’t say a word until we were united in bed. The thought of Stella baring my baby brought me to my knees.

No matter what happens in the future, my wife came first—forever and always. Her needs were my own. Her desires were mine to deliver. Her wishes were mine to achieve.

Stella was the best thing that's ever happened to me. When I agreed to marry her when she was eighteen, I didn't know then... but I just realized that she Richard's last gift—he gifted us love, each other.

It was true what they say... that sometimes what you've been looking all along was right there in front of you. We get so blinded by so many things that we fail to see what was before our very eyes.

Never more, my heart vowed as I looked into her crystal gray eyes.

~ **THE END** ~

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Prologue

The picture frames that once lined the table in the hallway are now scattered across the floor, in shambles, like the pieces of my heart. Anger and sadness flow through my veins as I look at the broken glass that reminds me of my shattered soul. I am sitting on the cool hardwood floor with my back to the couch and hands in my hair. Tears stream from my eyes and my chest heaves up and down, as I try to catch my breath. All I can do is think back to the best day of my life and try to figure out how it all went wrong.

"You're it for me, Pea," Danny said. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. We're going to be so disgustingly happy, our friends are going to hate us," he joked.

"Don't I know it! I already see the girls making faces when we're together. This is going to push them over the edge," I teased. "Do you think we should make a group announcement? Head out on Saturday night, like usual, then BAM, look at my ring, we're getting married." I was already disgustingly happy and I couldn't wait to tell everyone and show off my classic princess cut $\frac{3}{4}$ carat diamond on my left ring finger.

"We can do it however you want, Pea, as long as you promise me forever and always." How could I not swoon when he said stuff like that?

"I'm yours as long as you will have me," I said as I crashed into him, pulling him in for the most passionate kiss of my life. Even though I

instigated the kiss, it wasn't long until Danny took control, claiming my mouth for his own, just like he did my heart.

In that moment, I thought to myself, 'I am hopelessly in love with this man. Please dear God, don't break my heart.'

Five weeks later, the night of our college graduation, I am in my apartment with a few girlfriends, Kylee, Marisol and Lena, getting ready to hit the after party. Knowing Danny would be here soon, I decide to wear something that would tease him in just the right way. My Danny was a boob man, so I put on my black lace corset top, that was meant more for lingerie, but God I looked amazing in it. I paired the top with a pair of dark washed jeans and my favorite black peek toe pumps. I was ready to celebrate four years of study groups, aggravating professors, finals, midterms, and lack of sleep with my friends and my man. This is the beginning of the rest of my life ...

Danny showed up a little after nine on his bike. "Hey Pea, are you ready to go," he called from the hallway leading to my apartment.

"I am. I heard you pull up. I guess since we're on the bike, I'm not bringing a purse."

"You know the rules, Pea. No purses or heels on the bike. Change your shoes please. You can put your heels in my backpack, if need be," Danny said sternly.

I headed back into my room, I exchanged my pumps for a pair of black leather knee high boots that fit perfectly over my jeans. Looking at myself in the mirror, I was surprised. I don't know why I didn't think of this earlier. This looks so much hotter. "Damn Mira," I said to myself.

I grabbed a thin black hair tie from my dresser and used my fingers to brush back my long brown hair and placed it in a low ponytail. I am sure glad I decided to curl my hair tonight because the wind would have really

messed up my hair and knotted it if I would have straightened it.

Giving myself one more glance in the floor length mirror on the back of my bedroom door, I walked out of my room, shutting the door behind me, “I’m coming.” I slipped on my leather riding jacket and left the apartment walking downstairs.

Danny was waiting for me on the front stoop of my apartment building. I don’t know if it was just an emotional day or what, but Danny looks somewhat more mature. He was wearing light faded jeans, an all black button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, exposing his tattoo on his right forearm.

Last summer Danny and Skylar got matching tattoos. Danny’s right forearm displays, in old English lettering the word Smash and Skylar’s says Axe, in the same spot and lettering. Skylar’s uncle used to call them Smash and Axe while they were growing up. Boys will be boys. I think it’s silly, but these boys are two peas in a pod. I’m surprised I’m not dating both of them.

Kylee was just finishing putting her helmet on and climbing on to the back of Skylar’s bike when I reached where Danny’s bike was parked. Danny was riding his beloved GSX-R. Again, the boys have matching bikes. I swear, these two did everything together. The only difference in Danny and Skylar’s bikes was the color of the seats. Where Sky has purple, Danny has a dark midnight blue. Everything else was all black. I think the boys called it “murdered out” but I have no clue what that means. It’s just looks like flat black paint to me.

I pulled on my black with pink pinstriped helmet and jumped on the back of Danny’s bike. This was my favorite part. I can just lie on his back, rest my head on his shoulder and go along for the ride. No talking, no music, nothing but us and the road. Some girls get off on buying shoes, me, I get off

on the sound of a bike. There is just something about the rumble of a bike that makes me want to flip around the front and madly kiss the man I'm so in love with.

Maybe it wasn't all bikes. Maybe it was just Danny's. I knew the sound. Even though it was the exact same as Skylar's bike and many other bikes around this town, something about the sound of this bike screamed Danny and nobody else.

We left the parking lot and headed towards the highway. With my legs squeezing the life out of Danny's legs and almost laying down on top of him, going fast. This is where I get my thrills in life and I'm so happy I get to do it with my future husband.

My future husband. Oh hell. In a few months, I'm going to be Mrs. Daniel Thomas. Mira Rae Thomas. That sounds like music to my ears.

I'm totally in my zone on this ride, I didn't even notice when a car came swerving into our lane. Danny's bike started to sway beneath my legs. I gripped his waist even tighter and tried to remember everything he ever told me. There is an art to being a passenger on a bike.

Don't fight against me. Don't lean into turns with me. Keep your body centered. Hold on tight. If we go down, try to stay on your back with your head raised. Try not to tumble.

Ok. Alright. Trying to keep my body centered, grip tight and not fighting against Danny, the bike continued to sway beneath me. Before I knew it, we were headed right towards the guard wall in the middle of the highway.

Panic set in. "Danny .. Danny .. What do I do?" I screamed and I knew he couldn't hear me over the traffic and the roar of the bike.

We hit the wall. The sound was so loud; I felt it in my bones. The sound of metal slamming against concrete is a sound I will never forget. Nails on a

chalkboard don't even compare.

I flew off the bike. The pain of hitting the cement of the highway at over sixty miles per hour is excruciating. I felt my bones in my leg snap as I try to keep on my back without tumbling.

"Aaaaahhhhhhhh," I screamed out in pain. Every inch I slid down the highway until I hit my final resting place was terrifying. I had no idea what was going on around me.

My body finally won out against me and my head slammed against the hard cement and pain shot through my entire body.

I assume I blacked out. When I finally came to, I was in the back of an ambulance with medics looking over my body and starting an IV, their faces looked grim.

"Danny?" I asked, my voice coming out weak and barely there.

The blond medic just looked at me with blank eyes. He slightly shook his head.

"No," I cried, "no, please no."

My Danny didn't survive. They said he had too much trauma and died on the scene. My body screamed in pain as I tried to get off the gurney and go to where ever Danny was. The other medic, who I don't remember too well, grabbed my shoulders softly and pulled me back to stay on the gurney. The blond medic inserted a syringe of medication into my IV and within seconds, I felt my body go lifeless and relaxed.

In that moment, my world came to a screeching halt and that was it for me.

Skylar came to visit me in the hospital, for the two days I was admitted, while I was treated for my road rash and broken leg. Surprisingly, I didn't

have it too bad. Because my injuries were minimal, I was released on the second day, with crutches and a wheelchair that Skylar had “borrowed” from the hospital. I had a pretty bad bump on my head, some scrapes and bruises and a broken leg, but I was alive. Which was more than I could say for Danny...

Now here it is, five days after the accident and the day of Danny’s funeral. At the service, his mom asked me to sit with her. She told me that I was practically family anyway, being engaged to Danny and all. It did feel a little weird not sitting with my friends and parents, but it was nice to be able to sit with Mrs. Thomas, who looks so much like Danny it’s scary.

Immediately following the burial, we all went back to Danny’s mother’s house. People were coming and going. Friends, relatives, faculty from the school, members of the community.

I don’t remember eating much today, or any day since Danny died, for that matter. I can hear my stomach growling. I know it needs some sort of sustenance, if I am going to take the pain medication the doctor prescribed, but the thought of consuming anything, makes me ill.

“Mira, honey, you have to at least eat something. Trust me, I know how hard this is, but you have to take care of yourself,” Danny’s mom pleaded with me.

“Mrs. Thomas, I promise I will eat something later. I just can’t right now,” I responded back emotionless, not even making eye contact with the woman.

Everything seemed to pass by in such a blur, I didn’t even realize that I was being wheeled out the door with Kylee on my side and Skylar pushing the wheelchair.

“Where are we going?” I asked them.

“We’re taking you home, Mi. You have had enough for one day. You

need a shower and some sleep,” Skylar said.

“And something to eat,” Kylee chimed in.

When we got into mine and Kylee’s apartment, I immediately saw the long thin table by the front door lined with pictures of my past. Some of the happiest days of my life, captured forever. I will be forever haunted by these images in my memory, let alone to look at them every day.

“This isn’t fair. Why did you leave me?” I yelled as I swiped my arm across the table, knocking everything onto the floor, shattering the glass in the frames.

“Come on, Mira, let’s get you in the shower,” Kylee said. I saw the pity in her eyes and Skylar just looked at the floor, not making eye contact with either of us.

“I’m sorry guys. Today was just an emotional day,” I said apologetically.

“Mi, we all miss him. Just take care and call me if you need anything Kylee,” Skylar said as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

“I’ll clean up this mess, hun. Just go,” Kylee said to me as I got out of the wheelchair, carefully sitting on the floor and tried to pick up the pictures around the glass.

Kylee grabbed a shoe box that wasn’t taken out in the trash and started putting my memories away. “I’ll just put them all in here, for safe keeping, until we can buy new frames,” she told me as I used the crutches to maneuver into my bedroom.

It's Him
By
Grace Villar

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter One

Georgina Wallace

This is it! I am finally going to London! When I next set foot in LA, it'll be with a British accent and an MFA in scriptwriting. —*at LAX*

@ginawallace

London bound! #London #lovingLondon #iloveLondon

Georgina64 listened to

London Calling—The Clash

My new apartment was a university accommodation in the area made famous by Sherlock Holmes, just a few steps from Baker Street Station. Even more exciting than that, I was going to be living close to the gorgeous Regent's Park and just a stone's throw from the southern end of Edgware Road, renowned for its unique Middle-Eastern atmosphere. The *flat*, as the Brits call them, was also walking distance from Oxford Street, where the lights during the holiday season are to die for. Or at least that's what the guidebooks said. I read half a dozen of them on the 10-hour flight.

It was raining when my plane landed in London. I know they say the Big Smoke wouldn't be as charming without a welcoming rain, but we're not talking about a light drizzle or even gentle raindrops, but a heavy downpour. I took the Heathrow Express to Paddington Station, but found myself obliged to take a black cab the rest of the way.

"Whereabouts are you from, luv?" The cabbie asked in a thick Essex accent as I climbed into the cab. My pants and coat were soaked, and I was

dripping all over the backseat.

"California," I replied, "Los Angeles."

"You traded your beautiful weather for *this*?" He asked with a chuckle.

"Well, I'm doing my *postgraduate* studies at University College London," I answered, remembering to use the British term.

"Ah, I see. Well, luv, better get used to the rain. It's been goin' like this for days. The weather report is always wrong; listenin' to it is doin' me 'ead in."

I smiled politely and gave a small nod of agreement when his eyes met mine in the rearview mirror.

"They say winter is comin' early this year, so I hope you 'ave enough warm clothes wiv you."

"Me too! But I guess I can always go shopping if not." British people really seem to like talking about the weather. The English guy sitting next to me on the plane had also warned me, at length, about the unpredictable and often dreary London climate. We pulled up in front of my flat a few minutes later and the cabbie got out to unload my luggage.

"That'll be a tenner," he said, straightening up after setting my last suitcase on the sidewalk.

I handed him a bill. "Thank you."

"Any time, luv. Good luck with your studies. I never did ask what you're studyin'?"

"Scriptwriting."

"Ah. Well, enjoy London." The cabbie smiled warmly before climbing back into the driver's seat and pulling away.

I turned to the building. A handsome young Italian guy leaned against the doorframe smoking a cigarette. He stared at my luggage. "I hope you're not on the sixth floor, because the lift's not working at the moment."

"Lift? Oh, you mean the elevator."

"Yes, *elevator*," he teased, mimicking my accent.

"Well, I'm on the fourth floor, so it shouldn't be so bad."

"If you'd like, I can help you carry your things up. I live on the fourth floor as well."

"Really? Thank you so much. My name's Georgina Wallace, by the way. You may call me Gina, or Georgie, if you like," I said brightly, extending my right hand.

He shook my hand. "I'm Antony de Lucca. Call me Tony."

During the climb to the fourth floor, I learned that Tony was from Italy (obviously) and was studying to be an architect. He also had a job at a café nearby. I also learned that the fourth floor was actually the fifth—by American standards.

"What you call the first floor is the ground floor here. Then the numbers start," Tony explained cheerfully as we rounded the *third* floor landing and kept climbing. "You'd think for the price we pay in this place, we would have a working *elevator*," again he mimicked my pronunciation. "It's supposed to be fixed by tomorrow, though. Where I lived in Italy, my apartment was on the twelfth floor. After a week of going up and down, I had legs like Arnie."

"Who?"

"Come on, California girl, your former Gubernator."

"Oh, right. Of course." We reached my door and Tony set my luggage down as I fished for my key. "Tony, thank you so much for your help. I don't know how I would have managed to carry all these without your help. I hope to bump into you again."

"Of course! You have to meet my flatmate. You'll like each other. He's American too, and he's studying cinematography. Maybe you'll be in some of the same classes. We should all hang out some time."

"Oh? Okay." I unlocked the door and set the bag I was carrying inside, then turned back to Tony. "Grazie mille."

"You speak Italian?"

"Cosi cosi," I answered shyly.

"Bene! I'll let you settle in. Welcome to London, Gina."

"Thanks. See you!" I pulled my last suitcase inside and shut the door. And that is how I met my first new friend.

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Chapter Two

Georgina Wallace

I am finally here! London is such an incredible city. And I've already made new friends. —*in London, England*

@ginawallace

Unpacking in my new flat in #foggyLondontown

Georgina64 listened to

A Foggy Day (in London Town)—Michael Bubl 
Baker Street—Gerry Rafferty

As I finished unpacking my things and setting up my room, a knock came at the door.

"Yes?" I called. "Come in."

The door opened a crack and a pretty girl with long brown hair and dark eyes poked her head in. She smiled and held out a hand. "Hi, you must be the American. I'm Ashley Worthington, your flatmate. Which I guess is rather obvious. Why else would I be inside the flat?"

"Hi, I'm Georgina Wallace," I smiled back and reached out to shake. "Pleased to meet you."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if you wanted to join me for dinner in about an hour? I'm making pork chops and roast potatoes. I hope you're not vegetarian. Are you? Or perhaps you follow a religious prohibition that won't allow you to eat pork?"

"Me?" I laughed, overwhelmed by her rapid speech and slurring

Australian accent. "No, I love meat. Pork chops sound delicious. Thank you for the invitation."

"Well, Gina—can I call you that?" I nodded as she continued talking. "I like you already. My last flatmate was vegan, and she gave me weird looks every time I cooked meat."

"You won't hear any complaints from me."

She flashed another grin and turned to head back to the kitchen. "I'll let you know when it's ready."

Over supper, Ashley told me about her family and her love of fashion. "I grew up in Australia, but my grandparents are European. That's how I ended up in London. For my thirteenth birthday, my grandmother gave me a Louis Vuitton baguette and a dress from Missoni. That's when I knew I wanted to be a fashion designer. My grandmother is a big fan of Valentino. She bought my mom a Valentino wedding gown when she married my father. And someday I will wear that gown," she gushed dreamily. "How about you? Who's your favorite designer?"

"Me? Honestly, I don't really wear designer clothes. My dad gave me a Chanel bag for my last birthday. And I fell in love with this Rafe clutch once. I purchased one of his miniatures last time I was in New York."

"Oh, I love his collections! I should write to the buyers at Harvey Nicholls or Selfridges about stocking them. They're so chic and trendy. But go on," she prompted.

"I like classic outfits and comfy material, but I'm not really willing to spend an arm and a leg."

She looked at me intently, as if I were a mannequin she had to dress for class. "Georgina," she said at last, her face breaking into a wide, excited smile, "I think I'm your fairy godmother in human form. You have to let me take you shopping!"

"I don't know, Ashley. My dad wants me to focus on my studies, so I'm not supposed to get a job or anything. I really shouldn't spend the money."

"Credit cards?" She asked with one raised eyebrow.

"For emergencies, not shopping."

"Come on, Gina. Think of it as your uniform. It's part of your university fee."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Maybe just a couple of things. Like rain gear."

Ashley clapped her hands in delight. "I know exactly where to go," she informed me with great confidence. "You've got to visit New Bond Street for the *uber* chic stores like Hermes, Burberry, Anya... do you know her? She made those 'I am not a plastic' bags? And don't forget Harrods. It's a British institution; a landmark, if you ask me. You have to get lost in there and pretend you're an Egyptian princess, then visit a café. Try the macarons from Ladurée especially, and the isaphan is divine! But skip the café if you're on a diet or have a date. Hey, do you have a boyfriend back home?"

"No... to be honest, I've never really dated."

Ashley's eyes widened in shock. "Are you serious?"

I shrugged. "I guess I've been... waiting for Prince Charming?"

She took my hand and patted it sympathetically. "Well, honey, London is the perfect place to find romance! There are tons of hot guys in your department. In fact, there's that guy Josh who lives across the hall. But I have first dibs on him. Then there's Aaron. He lives on the sixth floor. Blue eyes, blonde hair. He has a flair for fashion that makes me wonder sometimes, but..." She squeezed my hand and smiled warmly. "You just wait. Prince Charming is sure to show up sooner or later."

Chapter Three

Georgina Wallace

Classes started yesterday and guess where I'm already hanging out? —
at Library - University College London

@ginawallace

Library time! #geek #iamanerd #booksarefun #studyingiscool

Georgina64 listened to

Hello, Goodbye—The Beatles

American Boy—Estelle (feat. Kanye West)

I scanned the titles in the films and screenplays section, looking for the supplementary readings on the syllabus my professor had sent around via email a few days earlier. I grabbed a book on the rise of Indie films in the 90s and began scanning the first page. I didn't even notice that my free hand had begun to walk across the spines of the books on the shelf until my fingers grazed something unfamiliar.

I jerked and froze, as if caught doing something bad, then slowly looked up and into the most beautiful blue eyes I'd ever seen. I glanced away quickly, blushing. He had dark hair, a cheeky smile, and an adorable cleft chin.

"May I just say, that is the lousiest book you will ever have to read in your whole academic life," he said. A fellow American, I noted by his accent.

Our eyes locked, and I could feel my blush deepening. He smiled, grabbed a book from the shelf, and walked away. I stared after him with my

mouth hanging open, realized what I was doing, and turned quickly back to the bookshelf. *Who was that?*

I didn't have to wonder for long, because library guy was in my next class. Beginning acting was taught by Professor Greer—a tall, slender, middle-aged English woman who truly belonged to the theatre. She was animated, dramatic, and strict.

"Hello, everyone. I know it's rather juvenile, but let's go around the room and introduce ourselves. State your name, your undergraduate degree, perhaps a favorite movie or an interesting detail about yourself. So long as you don't bore us with a monologue. Starting from over here," she pointed to the girl on her far left.

"Hi, I'm Lisa Yoon. I'm from South Korea, and I have a degree in journalism. My favorite movie is *Eat, Pray, Love* and I once worked as a volunteer translator for a charity in Mexico."

Lisa was followed by Albert from Bedfordshire. He liked *Pirates of the Caribbean* and had a degree in videography. There was Anna from Spain with a degree in theatre and Ruth from Hong Kong with a degree in cinematic arts. There was a guy from Sweden whose name I forgot and Gareth Egerton from Wales. The girl next to me stood up to introduce herself. She looked like a porcelain doll, with perfect skin and long, shiny auburn hair.

"Hello everyone. My name is Victoria Ledbury. I graduated from Cambridge University with a degree in modern drama and theatre, first honours. My great-grandfather is Sir Michael Ledbury. I was understudy to the role of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* at the London Palladium last year."

Okay, so what are you doing in a beginning acting class?

As if reading my mind, she continued, "I'm taking this class as a prerequisite." Victoria Ledbury flashed her perfect white teeth like a celebrity

posing for the Paparazzi. Except we were in class—not at a press conference.

My turn. "I'm Georgina Wallace, but my friends call me Georgie or Gina. I'm from Los Angeles. My favorite movie is *My Fair Lady*. I have a degree in English literature, and no acting experience—unless you count 'barnyard animal' in a nativity play," I blurted. There were a few chuckles, and then the next person was speaking. I breathed a sigh of relief and let myself relax. My thoughts had begun to wander when library boy's turn came.

"Hi, name's Joshua Lawson. Got a degree in cinematography. My favorite movie is *The Godfather: Part I*. I like to work behind the scenes and I wanna be a director. And as you can probably tell, I'm American like Georgie here," he winked at me. I just gazed at him like a toddler waiting to be spoon-fed.

Get a grip, Georgina, I scolded, forcing myself to look away.

At the end of class, Professor Greer assigned us each a monologue to memorize and recite the following week, plus a mountain of reading for the class discussion two days later. Lisa, the journalism student from South Korea, caught me on the way out the door and invited me to join her for lunch at a nearby café.

"I can't believe how much coursework I have already—and it's only the first week!" Lisa exclaimed as we walked across campus together.

"I know! It's way more intense than undergrad."

"Where did you get your degree?"

"UCLA. You?"

"University of Victoria. In Canada. So you've never lived anywhere but Los Angeles, then?" Lisa asked in mild surprise.

"No, but I've traveled. With my dad. I'm an only child, and my mother died in childbirth, so it's always been just the two of us."

"I'm sorry about your mom," she offered, her voice full of sympathy.

"Thanks," I answered automatically. It was always such an awkward

subject. Of course it was sad that my mom was gone, but I'd never known her so it wasn't like I missed *her* as a person. More as a concept. I missed *having* a mother, but I couldn't miss the woman who had been *my* mother because I'd never even met her. I quickly changed the subject. "So what made you choose to study here in London?"

"Well, after undergrad in Canada and volunteering as a translator for a charity in Mexico, I guess I caught the travel bug. When I got back to Korea, there were so many more places I wanted to go. Plus, going back to school in a different country keeps my parents from hounding me about getting married. All their friends' kids are married or engaged, and of course they want me to marry some nice Korean boy," she made a face. "But my mother thinks I won't make a good Korean wife anyway because I can't make homemade kimchi."

We both laughed. I liked Lisa already, and was amazed by her honest personality. I love it when people don't give you lame, superficial answers.

"Fortunately, I have a brother who is married with kids, so it's not like I'm their only hope," she winked. "So what about you? What brings you to London?"

"I've always wanted to live here. I'm kind your quintessential Anglophile. I love everything British: Jane Austen, Shakespeare, David Beckham. I had a ten year love affair with a boy named Harry Potter, and *My Fair Lady* is my favorite film of all time. So I begged my dad to let me study here, and eventually I won him over."

We reached the café then, which was noisy and crowded with lunchtime traffic from the university. I soon learned why. Both my lunch and my [[what is Georgina's favorite coffee/tea beverage?](#)] were divine. I'd made a new friend and she'd shown me a great new restaurant. The first day of classes couldn't have gone much better than that.

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Chapter Four

Georgina Wallace

London, catching the sunrise might be hard, but you look wonderful tonight. —*with Ashley Worthington and Antony de Lucca at Westminster Pier*

@ginawallace

Start of term party! Time to wear my #littleblackdress #Londonatnight #autumn

Georgina64 listened to

Across the River Thames—Elton John

At the end of the first week of classes, we had our start of term party. It was held on a boat on the River Thames, although we remained docked. It was a perfect autumn evening, and the view was spectacular. If you looked to the left you could see Big Ben and Parliament; to the right, The Shard, Canary Wharf, and St. Paul’s Cathedral; and almost within reach, the London Eye. *London is so beautiful at night*, I thought blissfully, still amazed that I was actually living there.

“Isn’t this just an amazing party?” Ashley gushed, interrupting my reverie. I turned, smiling, to see her walking up with a smitten-looking Tony. I could see why. She was dressed to the nines, looking gorgeous in her designer Italian outfit, and she has this way about her that makes everyone light up when she enters a room.

Antony acknowledged me with the double cheek kiss Europeans are

known for, “Ciao, bella! Come stai?”

“Bene, sono stancha,” I replied, smiling.

“Wow, Georgina, I didn’t know you were Italian,” Ashley exclaimed.

“You know I’m American, Ash,” I answered, sticking my tongue out at her. “I just took a course in college is all.”

“Can I get you girls something to drink?” Antony offered.

“A lychee martini for me, please. Thank you,” I glanced from Antony to Ashley and gestured around the boat. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to walk around a bit. Come find me?”

“Sure,” Antony answered, grinning stupidly at Ashley. “Ashley, would you come help me carry the drinks?”

“Do I look like a waitress?” She protested, but followed him anyway.

I smiled and left them to their bickering. The music was a bit too loud for my liking, so I wandered to a more deserted part of the boat. London was indeed a beautiful city. Sure, I missed California, but I had fallen in love with London too, and at that moment I would have happily stayed there forever.

“Here you are,” Tony came up next to me, drinks in hand. “One lychee martini for the lady.”

“Thank you.” I peered around him, realizing he was alone. “What happened to Ashley?”

He frowned. “She’s talking to my housemate, Josh. The one I wanted you to meet.”

“The fellow American, right?” I asked, briefly wondering if it might be the same American Josh from my acting class.

“Yes. I think she likes him. But he is much more suited to you.”

“And I’m sure that has nothing at all to do with the fact that *you* like Ashley?” I teased.

He sighed, “It is that obvious?”

I nodded. "To me, but I don't think to her."

"I am usually so good around women, but she ... she is different."

I patted his arm sympathetically. "I think she'll come around."

"Really?" He asked, brightening a little.

Eventually Ashley found us. Surprisingly, she was alone.

"What happened to Josh?" Tony asked.

Ashley rolled her eyes. "I am so over him. He's kind of boring. He just kept talking about anime and cartoons for his art class. I mean, even that Greek god mystique of his can't make that interesting. And when I asked if he was seeing anyone, he said there's a girl in his class he's interested in." She made a face and gulped down the last of her drink.

"Did he say what class?" I asked casually.

Ashley gave me a strange look, "No. Why?"

"No reason," I answered. It probably wasn't the same guy anyway.

"O-kay ..." she drew out the word even more than usually, obviously not totally convinced but deciding to let it go anyway. She held up her empty glass. "Let's go get refills." And she grabbed my arm and dragged me off toward the bar without waiting for a response. I never did end up meeting the mysterious Josh that night.

Chapter Five

Georgina Wallace

Beginning acting might be my favourite class, because... —*feeling happy*

@ginawallace

No use crying over burnt milk, especially when it means a cute boy comes to your rescue. #damselindistress #knightinshiningarmor

Georgina64 listened to

American Boy—Estelle (feat. Kanye West)

“Gina, are you sure you don’t want to come to this Burberry event at Aqua in Oxford Circus with me?” Ashley asked for the millionth time as she flitted about the house getting ready. I was reading in the living room.

“I can’t, Ash. I have a ton of coursework to do.”

She sighed dramatically, “Oh, fine. Well, if you get hungry, there’s food in the fridge. Help yourself to anything.” She glanced at her watch. “Sorry, I have to dash. My cab is waiting downstairs.”

“Have fun!” I called after her, waving goodbye. Ashley was always on the go, attending every event and party—and she knew absolutely everyone. It was exhausting just watching her sometimes. I had no idea how she found the time to do her coursework. Part of me would have liked to go with her, but I really did have a lot of reading to do.

Hours later, I was bored still and half falling asleep. I swear it was like reading *Beowulf* in the original Old English. I wandered into the kitchen and

poked through the cabinets and refrigerator. Feeling too lazy to cook, I finally deciding to just warm up some milk and head to bed. I pulled out a small pot and turned the burner to medium-low heat. I must have closed my eyes, because the next thing I knew, the smoke alarm was going off.

“Oh no!” I exclaimed, suddenly wide awake. The milk was burning. In a panic, I switched off the burner and grabbed one of my textbooks to start fanning the alarm. It just kept going on and on. I fanned harder, and it got louder. It was after 10 p.m. on a weeknight; my neighbors were going to kill me.

Over the wailing of the alarm, I heard a knock on the door. I ran to open it, worried it was an angry neighbor. I flung open the door and my eyes widened. It was *him*—the guy from beginning acting class. Joshua. He was Antony’s flatmate. He must be. He was wearing a thin t-shirt and sweatpants, and he looked like a Calvin Klein underwear model. I swallowed hard and tried not to blush.

“Is everything alright?” He asked.

“I, uh, the alarm ... uh, the milk burned and the alarm ...” I stammered.

He walked past me into the apartment and reached up to fiddle with the alarm. After a moment, it stopped shrieking. The sudden silence was a tremendous relief.

“Thank you.”

Joshua was opening a window. “That should be alright, but the smoke smell might be hard to get rid of. Do you have air freshener?”

I nodded and walked past him into the kitchen. He followed me. We both looked up at the ceiling, where there was now an ugly black spot.

“You’re probably going to have to notify the concierge downstairs about that.” Joshua noted as I reached under the sink for the air freshener. He took it and sprayed into the living room, then turned back to me. He looked at me

intently, then took me gently by the shoulders. “Hey, are you ok? Just breathe. One, two, three. You’re fine now,” he said soothingly.

I let out a big sigh, and he let his hands drop from my shoulders back to his sides. “Thank you. I am so sorry for the bother. I guess I was way more tired than I thought. I’ve been studying for hours, you see, and ... I’m sorry.” To my intense mortification, I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I was starving, I suddenly realized, and exhausted, and miserable. And PMSing. I blinked furiously and turned away from him.

“Have you had dinner?” He asked suddenly.

I shook my head, not quite trusting my voice not to tremble if I spoke.

“Well, you’re in luck because I just happen to make a very nice stir fry. May I poke around in your cupboards? Or should I just run down to Waitrose?”

“There’s chicken and vegetables in the fridge; rice in the pantry,” I answered, then added quickly, “You really don’t have to do this.”

“I want to,” he insisted. “It just so happens that I haven’t had dinner either, and I’m starving. And it’s no fun cooking for one. So,” he said, as if that settled the matter.

“Well, then at least let me help.”

He set me to chopping the vegetables as he told me how he’d been an Eagle Scout and learned to cook at fourteen. It felt strangely familiar and comfortable to be making dinner and chatting casually with this virtual stranger in my kitchen. And I had a great view of his cute little butt. Ashley wasn’t kidding about the Greek god physique.

“So how did you end up in cinematic arts?” I asked.

He shot me a look over his shoulder, “Paying attention in class, are we?”

I shrugged, “Maybe. So?”

“Well, I love art and colors. Before I started my course, I spent a summer

in Italy just painting and drawing and learning Italian. That's how I met my flatmate Antony. But I love movies even more, and I want to create films. I guess it's my way of expressing myself. I want to be a director of a TV series or an indie film."

"That's awesome. I'm doing my postgraduate in scriptwriting. I don't know all or even most of what I want out of life, but I do know that I want to be a writer." I paused, then asked, "Can I see some of your work sometime?"

"Sure," he answered easily. "Will you let me read some of yours?"

I hesitated. "Maybe."

"C'mon, Georgie, a guy cooks you dinner, the least you could do is let him read your work." He turned to me and held out a hand for the onions and garlic. I handed him the cutting board and he dumped them into the pan on the stove, then gave the cutting board back and stared at me expectantly.

I gave in reluctantly. "Okay, fine, I promise to show you some of my work sometime. Not tonight, though."

"Fair enough."

"So where did you get your degree?" I asked after a moment, continuing to chop up the other vegetables.

"USC," he answered proudly.

I stopped what I was doing and stared at him until he turned around to look at me, then said with a straight face, "Get out. Trojans aren't welcome here."

He gave me an exaggeratedly wounded look, "Ah, so you're a Bruin, then? Pity." Then he flashed a cheerful grin and winked at me, "Well, fortunately we're cheering for the same team now, Georgie."