# A Word of Praise

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# About this edition

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# Chapter ONE

Kiara was having the exact opposite of a blast. The changing room they set aside for her was bigger than she was used to, and it seemed like the old childhood bedroom of an entitled little prick. It probably was, considering what she'd seen so far.

One of the party organizers had thoroughly instructed a servant to lead her there through the back entrance, so the attendees wouldn't catch a glimpse of the 'performer' before the 'main act'.

Main act my ass, all those stuck up moneybags couldn't care less about her performance. They would certainly be occupied closing billion-dollar deals and complaining about the rise of the minimum wage.

The agency hadn't specified what kind of event it was but based on the size of the kitchen she went through and the number of servants running like crazy, she assumed it was a fancy-ass party. And thrown by the modern equivalent of royalty, no doubt.

Who else would hire an aerialist to perform in the middle of a ballroom and guarantee a ceiling height of twenty feet for her silks? Not even the professional tent she performed on the summer had that kind of structure, but those messed up people thought their home should have a triple-height ceiling to compensate for their small dicks.

She wandered around the room, getting familiar with the place. Bounced a bit on the perfectly laid bed, messed the order of books too clean to have ever been read. She had a little bit of time before she needed to get ready because they made her arrive two hours before the show.

The action figures were kind of cool, but still too systematically organized for her taste. The owner even sorted them out by cinematic universe, for Christ's sake! Kiara couldn't help herself and switched the Hulk and Batman. Much better.

She considered taking the Spider-man as her prize, but it still didn't feel quite right. She deserved something else from that place, something nice. So she kept on searching, opening a few drawers and cabinets to find her trophy of the night.

Most of them were empty, suggesting the room was indeed a leftover from the child that once lived there. Probably the heir to that damn empire, if she were to guess.

One of the drawers, much to her delight, was locked. The promise of hidden treasures was too much for her, and she couldn't contain the small devilish smile that made its way to her face.

She opened her traveling costume bag and took out a hair clip, trying to remember the YouTube video she saw the other day about unlocking doors with the thing. It took her way longer than the video suggested, and she had to watch it a few more times to get it done. But soon enough that magnificent click sound was heard and bingo.

Inside the faithful drawer was a full collection of jewelry. She was no expert, but the total sum would undoubtedly surpass the order of millions. She rummaged through the pieces as if she was accustomed to it, but the truth was she had never put her hands in that amount of money before. Least of all that literally.

Her fingers felt the sharpness of the diamonds – at least she thought they were diamonds – and took a few pieces out, to help her see everything inside. You had to be filthy rich to pile up gemstones like that. It looked like her lingerie closet, and that was saying a lot.

After a few minutes of search, her index finger accidentally worn a magnificent diamond ring that immediately caught her eye. If was a fucking masterpiece! Unlike most other pieces, it wasn't ostentatious in size or weight. It was actually fairly light, with two crossing bands filled with little stones and converging to a slightly bigger one in the middle.

That was is. She couldn't even argue. That perfect little ring would be her prize for the night. It slid to her finger by itself, it wasn't even her fault. She chewed over the idea of wearing it to her performance, weighing the risk.

It didn't take her long to conclude she should go for it. The piece would be too small to be seen from up high and nobody would be paying much attention to her anyway. She was mildly concerned it could get stuck in the aerial silk, but it was clearly made to be worn with fancy lace dresses without tearing them apart. Her instrument would be safe.

Kiara checked the time and decided to begin her preparation. She still had an hour to get everything ready before midnight. How original, scheduling a performance to the party right at midnight.

Her process was fairly simple, but she took it seriously. It was her art she was talking about, and even though those unappreciative bastards might not pay much attention, she would perform with all her heart. Her only hope was that at least one soul would watch carefully enough to take a piece of it home, much like she'd do with her new ring.

That night she would present a personal favorite, a fifteen-minute performance to the piano version of Sia's Chandelier. Not that they deserved it, of course. But she didn't get many opportunities of a ceiling high enough to allow her to 'swing' from the virtual 'chandelier'.

She wanted to perform it on a festival she took part a while back, but much to her dismay the inner circles of the circus industry are not very accepting of modern song's routines.

She would have done it anyway if it wasn't for the strict selection process lead by one of her former instructors. The Russian aerialist slayed on the silks, and Kiara was crazy in love with her art, but the damn woman didn't accept any routine performed to a song released after the invention of the internet.

A final look in the mirror let her know she was good to go. Her makeup was dark around the eyes, making her blue eyes shine with a mysterious vibe. 'Thank daddy dearest for that' she thought, looking up to the roof in a silent prayer.

Her hair was loose to improve the flow during the routine. People would always cheer when she got upside down and flipped her hair, showing her sidecut.

The outfit was her favorite part, a cut out black lace unitard that contrasted brilliantly with her blood-red aerial silks. She knew it stood in a grey area between sexy seductress and murderous dominatrix, but that was precisely what she was going for.

She checked the time again, ten to midnight. The silks' safety knot was attached to the ceiling at the very center of the ballroom, three floors below. She would come in from the balcony on the second floor and swing her way above the public.

She estimated the ribbons would stop about eight feet above the ground, allowing them to flow above people's heads. Prior to the event, she asked to do a technical rehearsal to sort those things out, but apparently the hostess rejected the possibility. Bitch.

Kiara reached the balcony where her instrument was safely tied and undid the knot. She signaled at the DJ to plug in her flash drive and took a deep breath to concentrate on her silks and her number. When the first few notes of the top hit song played on the speaker, she clutched the fabric and jumped towards the main hall. Showtime.

# Chapter TWO

The bar of his childhood home used to be a forbidden place for Chris. He would often sneak around the house hoping to simply sit on the high stools and play businessman. The image of his father drinking a glass of whiskey after hours was ingrained in his memory from a very early age, and he could almost see the stamp of his trousers' back pocket button engraved on the stool leather.

Today, however, the bar was full of drunk ass-kissers that stuck to the counter like scrambled eggs and the frying pan. As if they didn't have the means to taste that kind of liquor elsewhere.

He tried to escape the ballroom to go lay on his old bed for a while, but apparently it was being used to 'host the talent', whatever that means. His mother really went overboard with the party, inviting over three hundred people to celebrate his new role at the company.

Managing director, one step away from his father's position as CEO. But a party at the Wright's residence is never just a celebration, is it? If it were up to him, he would go out for drinks with the boys and consider it done.

But there were social standards to meet and people's hands to shake. Most important of all, to his mother at least, woman to be paraded in front of him. Speaking of the devil.

"Mother"

"Are you having a good time, son?" Patricia Wright could be called many things, but her most prominent quality was most certainly sophistication. If her elegant navy-blue dress adorned with handpicked matching jewelry wasn't proof enough, her poise definitely was.

"As good as it can be"

"Christopher!" she chastised in a tone perfectly tailored to reach only his ears in the most annoying of ways.

Not that he didn't love the woman, far from it. She gave him life, and a comfortable one at that, and affection in her own way. But she had unreal expectations for his goals and an unlimited amount of opinions regarding his personal choices.

"Sorry, mother. Yes, I am enjoying the party."

"Good. Have you met the lovely daughter of the Jacksons?"

There it was. Her number one subject of choice since he joined the family company, over five years ago. He thought that giving in to their wish to have a son taking over the business would be enough to take them off his back but clearly it wasn't.

Apparently, his father could only embark on his well-deserved retirement once he knew the company would be taken care of by a 'real patriarch', who 'knew the burden of taking care of a household'. His mother's words, of course.

"I didn't have the pleasure just yet"

"I'll introduce you two after the show. She's very docile"

Docile. Who describes a person as 'docile'?

"Sure"

"Perfect. Now come with me, the performance is about to begin, and I don't want to miss it. I know the perfect spot!"

Chris allowed her to pull him through the crowd, imagining just what kind of performance had the woman hired this time. She was always trying to outdo her own previous parties, and he had to give her credit. It was usually the highlight of the night.

He noticed when the DJ faded out a song to make room for whatever attraction was coming. A quick look at his clock showed him he was right, exactly midnight. His mother loved a good cliché.

He heard it before he saw it. Loud gasps took over the crowd, everyone looking up all of a sudden. He didn't know how he could miss the first swing of the enormous flowing fabric that dangled from the ceiling, but now all eyes were on the small girl hanging from it.

The music was spot on. Not only did she look like she was swinging from a chandelier, but also the emotion of the whole thing. He didn't know much about circus performances, but he could feel all the sorrow she was conveying through the song. This was not the typical light party performance; it was pained and heavy.

Each split was opened and then forced to open a little bit more. As if each action took a toll on her body and soul. She would fall along the fabric and show how hard it was to climb back up. And then, like her effort meant nothing at all, she would go back down into another fall. It was a shout out to all who suffer and rise to try again. It was an ode to struggle.

For an undetermined number of minutes, he didn't take his eyes off of her. Then he felt a bump against his shoulder, bringing him out of his daze.

"Sorry, man" drawled the drunken bastard. Only then did he notice most of the people had already gone by their business, ignoring the exceptional spectacle that was taking place right above their heads. 'Fucking idiots'.

He cocked his head back up to see the rest of the show, just in time to see her at the apex of the ceiling with multiple layers of fabric rolled around her body. She unhooked her feet from the

upper part of the ribbon and began to spiral down, picking up speed and rapidly approaching the ground.

Chris didn't know if her expression of despair was part of the show or if something had gone wrong, but he ran towards the center of the main hall just in time for her to halt a mere six feet above the ground.

At that moment, she looked right into his eyes and he could have sworn she saw his soul. She undid the knot the held her in place and let go of the silk, landing on her feet. He worried for a minute about a fall from that high, but her knees and ankles were clearly trained to absorb the impact.

Then she turned to him with a dazzling smile and winked. His heart turned inside his ribcage with that simple act, and he reached out to touch her like she was a delicate statue, too precious to be handled harshly.

She turned to leave, but he got to hold her arm before she could. He just wanted to ask her name, why was she leaving in such a hurry? But a quick glance down made him notice a shiny object on her left hand.

"Where did you get that?" His voice came out weird, definitely a mix of his antagonistic feelings at the moment. He was still amazed by that mysterious creature in front of him, but his anger was beginning to boil from the recognition of the priceless item attached to her ring finger.

Another careless guest bumped into him right before she could answer, and she took the opportunity to escape his grip. Then, favored by her petit size, she crawled between the crowded room and evaded the hall. He tried chasing her, to no avail. She quite literally slipped through his fingers and he was left alone once again.

# Chapter THREE

Kiara cursed her way out of the ballroom, running towards what she thought would be the kitchen and, luckily, her way out of there. What were the fucking odds! The only person who had the decency to watch her act till the very end, that devilishly handsome piece of work that ran to hold her before she 'fell'.

Fate was way too cruel with her. Not that she would have stayed there and engaged in a heartfelt conversation about her act and whatever else with that delightful sin of a man. But still, must he be the one to recognize her little theft?

How stupid was she to think she could wear it to the performance without consequence! Now she found herself in the kitchen pondering over whether it was safe to retrieve her bag from the changing room or she should simply go home without any of her stuff.

If he knew about the ring, then he knew where it was prior to its abstraction and the room was the first place we would search. No. She couldn't risk another encounter with the man, she'd rather go home in full costume.

She just wished she had hidden her cell somewhere inside the outfit, but she knew it was a no go for that particular performance. Too many risky transitions, she would definitely break the thing before the end.

Time was not in her favor, and she decided to count her losses after her physical integrity was guaranteed. Thinking on her feet, she chose to tell a little white lie to one of the girls in the kitchen. She was not an actress, but she could perform a role for a couple of minutes to get out of there. She chose the sweetest looking servant to ask for help.

"Hi, do you work here? I'm so sorry to bother, I don't know what to do!"

"What happened? Oh my, you are the circus girl! I only saw a little bit, but it was amazing! I love that song and…" Kiara would have loved to stay and cherish a fan, but the clock was ticking.

"I'm really sorry, I'd love to hear your opinion, but I have a big problem!"

"Oh, sure, can I help you?"

"You see, my mother called right before the show and said my sister is feeling unwell. I promised to go home immediately after the performance, but now I can't get to the room where I left my stuff."

"Why not? Do you want me to get them?" She was so eager to help, Kiara's heart clenched at the lies she was forced to tell. She almost felt sorry for lying to such a lovely girl.

“No! I think there is someone there, a couple. I heard things and didn’t have the guts to get in. I don’t need my things right now; I can take them back tomorrow or whatever. I just need someone to call me an uber so I can get to my sister”

“Oh my, people have no decency at these parties! Don’t worry, I can help you! I’ll call the uber. Here, let me write down my cell so you can call me tomorrow and get your stuff.” The girl handed her a piece of paper with her number, and Kiara appreciated the fact she would at least be able to pay her back for the ride.

“You are too sweet, thank you!”

“Of course! Now hurry to your sister, I’ll get your bag as soon as the room is clear. Call me tomorrow”

“Thank you, I won’t forget your kindness”

And with that, she left through the same backdoor that had welcomed her a few hours before.

The ride home was terribly uncomfortable. The driver kept ogling at her through the rear-view mirror, and she couldn’t help but notice how exposed her costume actually was. It was perfect for a performance, but barely covered her body when looked up close.

Kiara was seriously holding back from speaking her mind to the driver, playing scenarios in her head on how she would curse his soul out if she was in a safer situation. She had taken too many Ubers in the small hours of the night to know it was best to keep her mouth shut. She asked him to leave her at a twenty-four-hour diner close to her building, hoping to grab a small snack before hitting the sack.

“Hi Josie, do you have anything left for me tonight?”

“Kiara, honey, what happened? No changing room again? You need to stop accepting these trashy gigs, you are too good for them!”

“Not this time, Josie. It was a really nice place, good money too. I just had to leave in a hurry, that’s all” She hadn’t realized how tired she was, but her voice sounded like shit.

“Here honey, have this tuna sandwich. You need to eat something light, a heavy stomach is a restless sleep”

She laughed heartily, appreciating the caring nature of the older woman. She was about to take the first bite of the much-needed sandwich when her hand was pushed forward, causing her to drop half her sandwich outside the plate.

“Good heavens! What is that, young lady?” Oh crap, she forgot about the ring.

“Oh, right. It’s a fake, it’s part of the look”

“It doesn’t look like a fake to me”

“Yeah?” She dismissed the subject, getting back to her sandwich. There was no way she could explain how the damn thing came to be in her possession and the thought of it made her almost lose her appetite.

“I’ll close the tab tomorrow, I’m out of cash today”

“Sure thing, honey”

Reaching home, Kiara went straight to the shower. She was feeling worse than she did after most performances, and it was certainly a result of her sprint away from Mr. Ring-owner.

While the hot water undid some hard knots on her back, she allowed her head to travel back to the time she noticed him. It was right before her final helicopter drop, after she rolled the last layer of fabric around her body. She always took the few seconds before the fall to scan the crowd, see who bore with her through the entire show.

And there he was, just a tiny spot from the almost twenty feet height, but sure enough, looking at her in awe. During the drop, she hoped he would be one of the few that had that instinct to catch her. Those were always her favorites, she loved to look right into their eyes as she halted the fall.

Up close he was even more of a vision. She was a sucker for beards, and despite the fancy suit being a turn-down, she could easily see herself sucking face with the handsome bastard.

But then he had to notice her new tiny little ring. It probably meant he was close to the host, or even the owner of the whole mansion. Probably not, though. Granted she had only seen the man for a couple of seconds, but he didn’t strike her as one to own such an old-fashioned house.

Either way, he knew about the ring. And damn sure he would go after her for it. That’s just how rich people go by things, even if the price of it was peanuts in comparison to his bank account. Was it? She looked at the shinning object she chose to wear during her shower. Was that ok to soak it? She had no idea how to deal with such a precious object.

She turned off the shower, preparing to bed with her head still full. The little locked box inside her nightstand cabinet was getting a bit too packed for her taste. She opened it up to check out the items it contained so far, all her dear prizes, awarded to her by her own self, were neatly organized inside.

She took out her favorites, reminiscing the gig she got them from. A little porcelain fairy, with glass wings. It was so beautiful, but she found it thrown in the corner of the bathroom they assigned to her for that particular show. Then there was the small version of a Venetian mask. She adored that one because the host was particularly rude to her when she told them the ceiling was not safe to perform.

One last look at the ring made her refrain from adding it to the box. The other items were beautifully organized in their compartments, and she couldn’t see the ring fitting into any of the

few open spaces. She decided to keep it on her finger until she figured out what to do. His face came to her mind while she prepared for bed.

She would get a burner phone and give a call to her agent in the morning, asking him to keep a particularly low profile for that gig. They never gave out personal information on the artists anyway, too many creeps and freaks coming after the girls. It was one of the reasons she signed with them in the first place.

# Chapter FOUR

Chris was mad. No, not mad. He was livid. He had been ever since he laid eyes on the recently restored family jewel on the ring finger of that damn thief. Things only escalated when he reached his childhood room and found the top drawer of his desk unlocked.

He rummaged through the jewelry, trying to grasp if anything else was missing, but without the specific pattern he arranged the items, he couldn't be sure. The most valuable pieces were still there, but maybe she only got the ring because it was the easiest one to carry.

She had probably fled the scene by now, and he looked around the room to find evidence that could lead him to her. A black bag on the floor caught his eyes. Her bag. He smiled wickedly, wondering if she would go back there to get it. No matter how long it took, he would be patiently waiting for the criminal to return to the crime scene. She wouldn't leave without all her stuff, would she?

He almost ripped through the duffel bag when the zipper stuck in the middle, but luckily the old thing caved under brute force. The bag was a mess and he shuddered with the view. Clothes and makeup cluttered inside like they held no value. They probably didn't but the way she took care of her things – or rather didn't – showed him just the kind of person she was. Careless. Chaotic.

He emptied the contents of the bag on his bed, fighting the urge to sort it out and straighten it up. A hidden side pocket caught his eye, and by the weight distribution, there was something small inside. When he opened it, a sly smile crept into his face. A cellphone! It was the best thing that happened since that damned woman set foot on his old house.

Well, that was not entirely true. Before he acknowledged the fact his mother hired a punk, he had a fucking artistic orgasm with her performance. The woman was so utterly alluring he almost ran after her when the show was over. But that was all busted now that he knew what she really was.

Too much time passed, and the woman was still not back, meaning she fled indeed. He gritted his teeth at the thought and scanned the room again for more leads. Something was odd about his action figure's collection. And his books.

'You have got to be kidding me!'. The girl was fucking Goldilocks, coming into his house, messing with his room, and stealing the fucking ring. The vein on his neck was almost popping and the poor bedroom desk must have drawn the short straw out of the room's furniture. His fists slammed it so hard it almost broke the old thing down.

He pondered over his options now that he had her phone. She would want to retrieve it and he could arrange something to make her pay. Maybe tie her up with her presentation tool, that

giant red fabric. Preferably still on that see-through costume, so he could add a few more tears and slits. By the end, she would be begging him to…

“Son, what are you doing?” His train of thought ended abruptly, causing him to open his eyes and close his slightly parted lips that were breathing a little heavier than before.

“You have that same face you got whenever I caught you masturbating. Same room, too.”

“Jesus Christ, Mother!” The woman could pass as royalty most of the time, but there were moments her filter simply went out the window. He liked her better when it happened, but definitely not in that particular case.

“Your room is a mess” Back to her regular self, then.

“Wasn’t my fault” He shrugged, hating the need to explain to his mother why his room – his old room - was untidy.

“Was it the girl? Oh my, she made a real mess. Perhaps she didn’t have time to tidy things up, I should have requested her presence a few hours earlier”

“Where is she?”

“That is the odd part! I think she left. One of your father’s friends was eager to congratulate her on the performance. You know the one, Frank, the one with that beautiful young wife… Anyway, I digress. A servant said she left already.”

Chris knew Frank well enough to guess why he wanted to congratulate the beautiful, young, and flexible performer. He was used to the feeling of his blood boiling in situations such as these but felt mad at himself for feeling that way about her. She didn’t deserve protection.

“She left?”

“That is what the servant told me. Some sort of family emergency. Doesn’t matter, I’ll call her agency tomorrow and have her things delivered to her”

“I can handle it, mother. Just give me the agency’s number.”

“Are you sure? I can just ask Michelle, she’s the one who booked her in the first place. Wonderful job, don’t you think?” His mother’s assistant was an angel to be willing to run such petty tasks, but he had other plans for the duffel bag delivery.

“Yes, mother. I’ll call Michelle in the morning.”

“Good. Now come, I want to introduce you to Felicia”

“Who?”

“Daughter of the Jacksons, son. Where is your head at?”

“Right. It’s nothing, let’s go back”

Chris was reluctant to leave the room, but there was no point in waiting there if she was gone. He could always come back later to get her stuff.

Soon after they left, a sweet little servant got into the room and began to organize the scattered pieces of clothing and makeup. 'Her show was amazing, but she is one messy woman!' thought the oblivious girl. Even her cellphone was carelessly thrown over the nightstand.

The bed was also a bit messy, but that was probably not her fault. It wasn't as disheveled as she thought it would be when the artist told her a couple had been there doing nasty things, but it wasn't neat either. She opted to change the bedding altogether, unwilling to touch much of what others have played upon.

When she was done, the room looked good as new and she let out a satisfied smile. She grabbed the freshly packed duffel bag and got out, closing the door behind her. The kind artist would be happy to get her things back and she hoped they could be friends. She always wanted a famous friend. Was she famous? She sure deserved to be.

# Chapter FIVE

The party went late into the night, and each passing minute was hell to Chris. He had only one thing in his mind, and those clueless guests were keeping him from it.

He had to entertain the Jacksons and their daughter way longer than he'd planned, and couldn't take it anymore. To make things worse, his father decided to make an appearance right as the conversation was organically coming to an end, which added new fire to the dying dialogue.

Of course, the theme shifted to business right away, since Mr. Jackson was one of his father's many business associates. It was Chris' business as well, but he was not as enthusiastic about the theme as the old dinosaurs of the construction industry.

"Christopher, how are you adapting to the managing director position?"

Mr. Jackson was a decent man, but he was clearly trying to impress the infamous Edgar Wright by showing an interest in his son and shamelessly parading his daughter as a prospect daughter-in-law. Chris was not in the mood.

"I'm not. I was just promoted last week"

He was not usually that harsh, especially towards his father's acquaintances. The belligerent look Edgar gave him was enough to immediately regret it, and he tried to fix it up.

"But I hope to get settled rather quickly, Mr. Jackson. I've been working hard to earn the position and I'm confident the business will thrive"

His save earned a satisfied smile from one man and a slight nod from the other, and he was glad to have averted the crisis. He needed an excuse to leave, otherwise he would keep falling out of line.

"I am so sorry, but I have to go. My neighbor just texted me saying my dog is barking non-stop, I need to get back to check on him"

"I thought your apartment was soundproof" His mother intervened.

"It is, so he must be barking really loud" Not even a child would buy that one, but a child wasn't restrained by the rules of diplomatic behavior. Calling him out on his bullshit would show a complete lack of social decorum.

He moved away from the group just in time to hear his mother's last charming remark.

"I don't know why he keeps that humongous dog"

Chris rushed upstairs to get the prized possessions of the fugitive, wanting to get it done quickly so he could head home. His dog might not be barking, but he was definitely missing him. His mother's tone was malicious, but her words were accurate; the dog was colossal.

When he reached the room, the unlucky desk was once again a target of his frustration. None of her things were there, the bag, the phone... nothing. Did she come back?

He looked around again trying to see if she left a clue or took anything else, but something was different. The bedsheets were changed. Why? Fuck, a maid. A maid who took all of her stuff away, possibly under his mother's orders. She wasn't there.

He drove home way faster than the speed limit, gripping the wheel like it needed punishment. The oblivious doorman was mentally cursed when he dared say good night, and the poor digital lock almost crashed under his recognized fingerprint.

The only one who escaped his rage was Batman. He could never get mad at him. The almost ninety pounds dog woke up to the sound of the opening door and lazily stood to greet his owner. Thankfully, he wasn't the most active dog anymore, because his suit wouldn't survive the stamina from his puppy days. Not that a forty-pound dog could ever be considered a puppy, but still.

"Hey Batman, missed me much?" the dog answered with a resounding bark. "Me too, buddy. You know, today was fucking weird"

With the anger subsided by the presence of his dog, Chris was able to think through the events of the day. He only needed to close his eyes to get back to that moment. The performance was so hauntingly beautiful, and the woman displayed a mysterious aura that called to him. He wanted to touch her so badly, just to prove to himself she was real.

But then the glass shattered. Couldn't she have taken anything else from that drawer? He had literally filled the thing with millions worth of jewelry and stones precisely to keep the ring safe.

He knew there were better ways to do it, probably an actual safe or something, but he didn't think a thief would pay much attention to it with so many valuable items at display around the house.

Despite his late bedtime, Chris woke up at the usual time. For the past several years he hadn't been able to escape the affair his internal alarm clock had with early mornings. When he tried really hard, he could stay in bed until seven. Usually, he got tired of trying by six-thirty.

He decided to go for a run before placing the calls he needed, knowing it was too early to bug Michelle for the agency's contact. He got the leash and called for Batman, who was loudly playing with a squeaky toy. The dog was a great partner for longer runs.

The park across his condo was small but had a nice tracking course between the trees that guaranteed a comfortable shadow for their ride. He didn't mind the sun, but Batman had a thick fur that wasn't suited for the heat.

He tried to build a steady pace but was feeling off his game. After forty-five minutes of a run that would be forever engraved in his tracking watch as his worse time ever, he decided to call it quits. Batman was clearly tired of following his erratic rhythm and the usually soothing environment was getting under his skin. And he knew exactly who to blame.

He checked his watch, hoping the time was decent enough to call his mother's assistant. It was Sunday, but he knew the woman didn't believe in weekends. If he had to wait another hour, he'd probably kick something. Lucky for him, it was already eight in the morning.

"Hi Christopher, how are you doing?"

"Hi Michelle, sorry for the early call"

"Nonsense, I've been up for hours. What can I do for you?"

"I need the contact of the agency you used to hire the performer last night"

Before he could provide the sensible explanation he devised during his run, he heard a beep.

"There you go. Ask for Michael; he was the one who helped me out"

Damn, the woman was efficient. No wonder his mother kept her around for the last twelve years.

"Thank you, Michelle"

"No worries, kiddo" She replied before hanging up.

He wanted to hate how she called him kiddo, but the truth was she met him when he was only sixteen. She couldn't help it. He checked his cell for the contact and took a deep breath before placing the call.

After over fifteen useless minutes of explaining the situation to an inefficient attendant, he finally got her to transfer to Michael. He could feel the thief getting closer, he was waiting in line to talk directly to her agent. His lips were suffering from all his anticipation biting.

"Michelle, my darling, how did you like my girl? Perfect or what?" The voice on the other side of the line was high pitched and loud as hell. He fumbled with his phone that almost dropped from his hands at the tone.

"Hello, Michael?"

"You are not Michelle"

"No, I'm Chris. I was wondering if you could help me out with the contact information on the girl that performed last night"

"Sorry, I can't help you" There was a clear shift in tone, several tones lower than the first time he spoke. It seemed to hold a note of… annoyance? Why?

“You don’t understand, I need to reach out to her”

“Do you know how many times a day I get on the phone with people with that same issue?”

“Listen to me, Michael. She took something from me.”

“Let me guess, your heart?” Chris let out an exasperated sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

“She stole something from my house. A valuable item, personal. I need to get it back”

“Ok. I suggest you call the police because I won’t give you her number”

And without further ado, he hung up. The idiot had the guts to hang up on his face.

# Chapter SIX

“Kiara, you dirty hoe! What did you steal this time?” His words were aggressive, but his tone was absolutely flooded with inquisitive humor.

“Hello to you too, Michael,” She said over the burner phone she bought to call him.

“Don’t you dare hello me right now, bitch!” Kiara loved Michael’s flamboyant personality, especially when he faked being angry to get a juicy gossip out of her. Unfortunately for her, this time there really was one.

“Did they call?”

“Oh, no. Not ‘they’. He. I don’t know his name, but his voice was so damn sexy. And demanding”

“What did you say?”

“What do you think I said? He didn’t get anything from me. Though with that voice I wouldn’t mind giving him something of my own.” She could almost picture his wiggling brows following the words. “Especially after he went ballistics over the ‘precious personal item’ or whatever. I can just feel he’s sexy”

“You bet” She murmured to herself. But Michael was too eager to let it slide.

“Hmm, so you met Mr. Sinful Voice… Tell me everything”

“Stop, Michael. I won’t go down that road again, last time you snatched that cute Italian guy away from me”

“No hard feelings darling, he was more into me anyways” She laughed, recalling the handsome blond she lost to the other side.

“But seriously now, do you think he’ll pursue it? Should I be prepared?”

“Oh, he will. That was a man on a mission”

“Shit”

“Can’t you give it back? Just this once. You know I never mind you klepto ways, but that guy meant business”

“I’m not klepto!”

“Sure darling, whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Fuck off” she motioned to hang up, but heard him calling her back before she could

“Wait, wait! Before I forget. I know what you’ll say but that club downtown asked for you again. Vexon, I think it’s called.”

“Still don’t do straight clubs, Michael”

“Thought so. They doubled the offer, though.”

“Won’t happen”

“Fine, I’ll let them know. Take care baby doll”

Kiara was stressing over everything. The ring, the man who apparently owned it, and her inability to think about anything else. She decided to do the one thing that always cleared her head, practice.

She headed to the circus studio, hoping to have at least one training partner available. Luckily, Kate was there.

“Hey girl, early training today?”

“Got a lot on my mind. What are you training?”

“Hoops, want to train a duo?”

Kiara was more of a solo performer, but she didn’t mind practicing a few tricks with Kate every once in a while. She was hoping to get on the hoop to spin her soul out on the instrument. It usually worked wonders to clear her head.

The girls warmed up, stretched, and hopped on the big metal hoop attached to the ceiling. They practiced a few transitions, but neither was specialized in duo performances, so they kept it simple.

Resting between exercises, Kate decided to break the silence.

“So, how about you tell me what it is that you came here to forget?”

“It’s nothing”

“Kia, I’ve known you for what, five years now? You can share”

“It’s fine, really”

“Damn girl, I’ve told you my whole life ten times already, how come I know virtually nothing about you?” She was technically right. Kate tended to overshare, but her stories were always funny and light. There was not much Kiara could share anyway.

“Money is short, that is all”

That old excuse came in handy once again. She loved that one because nobody could pry into it. Everyone had money issues – at least in her inner circle - and there was nothing her friends could do about that.

For a brief moment, Kiara thought about sharing her turbulent experience from the day before with her friend, but decided against it. She would probably have to explain her nasty habit of 'prize collection' and then talk about the handsome man that was after her in the worst possible way.

No, it was bad enough that Michael knew about it. Against her will, of course. But being her agent, he was bound to get a few missing object's complaints. He would have fired her if she weren't a damn good artist. More often than not, the complainers called to have her again.

"Yeah, not many shows are coming along" Kate responded after a while. That was not really true for Kiara. She wasn't swimming in money or anything, but she had enough to go by.

After a moment of silent reflection, Kate's smile grew wider and she wiggled her eyebrows. Kiara knew there was some dirty story coming along and she was eager to hear it.

"So, let me tell about this uber driver I met the other day"

"Fuck, the uber girl!"

"What?"

"I forgot to call the girl who called me an uber yesterday"

Kate had a curious expression that suggested she would ask for details, but Kiara was faster to call it off.

"I'm so sorry Kate, I need to head back home. Loved the training, let me know the next time you're performing for an open audience. Bye!"

She left leaving behind a mildly stunned blonde girl. She would feel bad, but Kate should be used to her by now. Running home, she got the little piece of paper the girl gave her the night before. Carina. Even her handwriting was sweet, dotting the 'I' in her name with a heart.

She took the burner phone bought in the morning to call Michael and typed it in.

"Hello"

"Hi, is this Carina?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"Hi, my name is Kiara. You helped me out last night with an uber"

"Oh my god, hi!" Answered the girl in an excited voice. Kiara heard a not-low-enough whisper on the other side, 'Mom, it's the artist!', and stifled a laugh.

"Hey. I was wondering if you were able to get my things from the room upstairs"

"Yes! I have them right here"

“Oh perfect! Could we meet somewhere so I can get it? I also wanted to pay you back for the ride”

“That is a wonderful idea”

“Are you free today?”

“Not really, today we have church. But Monday after work is better, if you are free. I know just the place for us to meet.”

They arranged the details and Kiara let out a satisfied sigh. She had a few hundred dollars’ worth of clothes and makeup in that bag, and losing her cellphone wasn’t on her plans either. She was glad it all worked out. Who said crime doesn’t pay?

# Chapter SEVEN

Frustration seemed to be the only word in Chris' vocabulary that weekend. Sunday had come and gone, and he seemed to have hit all the possible dead ends regarding the damn woman. By Monday, he was beginning to think he would never see her again. It. The ring.

Work was hell. All his associates who didn't come to the party were passing by his office to congratulate him on the promotion, preventing him from getting any real work done.

To make things worse, he could feel the suppressed hostile glares from a few employees. They clearly resented being overlooked for the promotion due to what they saw as nepotism. It wasn't.

It would have killed his mood on a different occasion, but he had too much on his mind already to allow some frustrated old men to get under his skin. He knew his worth within the enterprise but really wanted to create a better environment than the one his father imposed. The harsh dog-eat-dog company culture was probably what he hated the most there.

Unable to get anything done that faithful Monday, he opted instead to pursue the matter that truly occupied his mind. He called the agency a few more times, but they were useless. Asking Michelle for the girl's name was also a fruitless job. How come she hired someone she didn't even know the name?

His only other option was to go back to his childhood home and try to find the maid who cleaned the room. Maybe she still had the stuff and the thief's phone could be a major source of information. He chose to leave work early, earning a few more dirty looks from the employees.

During the twenty-minute drive, he kept wondering how he could avoid the questions his mother would have. The last time he saw her during the party, he was still talking to the Jacksons and their daughter… Florencia? Fernanda? Whatever. And he was sure Mrs. Patricia Wright would have a full interview ready for him.

He planned on getting in through the backdoor and make his way to the kitchen, where he could ask Gloria about the room. The chief housekeeper ran the staff with an iron fist and was his best option at the moment. Life didn't smile his way, and the first voice he heard when he got to the kitchen was enough to know his plans would not run smoothly.

"Gloria, the duck was awfully dry today. I hope you have better plans for dinner"

Chris knew the duck must have been spot on, and the only reason his mother was troubling the poor woman was that she was bored. Letting out an exasperated sigh, he opted to fall on his sword for the sake of the old maid.

"Mother, so great to see you" She turned around wide-eyed and strolled to him, forgetting all about her previous rampage. Mission accomplished.

“Christopher! What a nice surprise. Did you decide to leave work early to spend the day with your mother?”

“Slow Monday, you know how it is.”

“I do” She didn’t. All her Mondays were comprised of bossing the staff around and restocking her already filled to the brim closet. “Come, make your mother some company over afternoon tea” The figurative sword he fell on twisted inside his guts.

“Of course, Mother. Why don’t you go ahead and sit? I’ll bring it over in a minute”

He watched his mother leave the kitchen and turned to Gloria. He only had a couple of minutes before his mother came back to complain and he planned on leaving the kitchen with the information he came to get.

“Gloria, I need your help. Who cleaned my old room after the party yesterday?”

“What kind of question is that, young man?” She always had that slightly pissed off tone with him, but it was obviously just a front. Despite having to clean up most of his messes from his childhood years, the woman adored him. She was always the first to provide an excuse to rid him of his parents’ scolds.

“I just need to know who cleaned it up.”

“Sorry honey, I don’t know. Why do you ask? Is there something missing?” She assumed an outraged stance, clearly mad at the prospect of an immoral member among her staff.

“No, nothing like that.” Well, actually it was exactly that, but not in the way she was thinking “The artist from last night. She left her stuff here; I’m trying to find it to give it back to her”

“Oh, why didn’t you start with that?” She turned to one of the other girls in the kitchen “Get me Carina, will you?”

Then she turned back to Chris and casually said the words that made his heart speed inside his ribcage.

“The girl just won’t shut up about how she’s meeting that circus girl today”

An awfully shy girl came into the kitchen, scared to have done anything wrong to earn her a summoning in the middle of the afternoon.

“Carina darling, Mr. Wright is looking for you” He hated being called Mr. Wright, but let it slide to pay attention to the shaking girl in front of him.

“Hi, Carina. Don’t worry, I just need your help. Gloria mentioned you’ll be meeting the artist from Saturday’s party. Can you tell me why?”

“Hi, Mr. Wright. I… I helped her out the night of the party because her sister was ill, and she needed an uber. Then she couldn’t get to the room to get her bag because there were people inside and I called the uber and gave her my number and she called”

The girl didn’t even catch a breath between sentences, and by the end of her speech, she was sucking in air as if she just ran a marathon.

“Calm down, beautiful” He flashed that million-dollar smile. He knew it was unfair to charm up the girl, but she clearly had the information he needed and that was just the easiest way to get it. If her widened eyes and crimson blush were any indication, the girl was ready to talk.

“Now, tell me about your plans to meet her”

# Chapter EIGHT

Once he sorted things out in the kitchen, Chris proceeded to the tearoom to talk to his mother. He was not in the mood for it, but she was expecting him and there was no excuse he could think of to get away from it.

Patricia was leisurely preparing a backgammon board for them to play together, a habit they acquired during his father's long trips abroad. It was a fun activity and a great distraction from the impending sense of abandonment that surrounded the house during those periods.

That specific board was a gift from Edgar after a particularly long trip to Japan. It was his mother's favorite, with several emeralds encrusted in the marquetry and pieces hand-carved by some famous dude. For Chris, it was just another reminder of his father's absence.

He sat across his mother and prepared her tea the way he knew she liked it. 'Two cups of sugar to sweeten this bitter life', as she liked to put it. She didn't seem bitter at all, but that was just his opinion.

"How are things in the company?" His mother was not usually one for small talk when it came to family, so he knew there was more coming.

"Great. The transition is being handled smoothly"

"I'm glad. Is there any problem with the international clients?"

"Not yet. Can we talk about something other than work today?" He was not in the mood to get into details about his new position, nor discuss the intricacies of the construction business. Especially after his day with an unwelcoming staff.

"Fine. Then tell me, son, how was your chat with Felicia at the party?" Right, Felicia. Not a better subject, but he knew there was no escape from this one.

"It was fine, Mother. Seems like a nice girl" he replied dismissively.

"Just nice?" Patricia's eyes were inquisitive, as if she knew something and planned to use it against him soon.

"I didn't have much time to get to know her, considering her father's eagerness to be noted in the discussion"

"That man can be annoying, but he has good business with your father. So, it isn't Felicia then?"

"What?" He diverted his eyes from the board, trying to read into his mother's statement. She never wore that careless façade unless she was ready to pounce and he wanted to avoid being caught off guard.

"The one you're making plans with"

“Mother, you are not making any sense”

“Stop being so hard, son! I know you took that engagement ring or yours out of the drawer and that could only mean there is someone special in your life” Shit. What did she know?

“How did you know about the ring?”

“I am your mother, Christopher, I know everything” Well, clearly not everything. Not the fact that he hadn’t taken the ring off its place, but it was rather taken by someone else.

There was absolutely no way he would tell his mother about the theft. Not when he already had a plan to get it back. She was constantly nagging him about placing it inside the vault, and he actually said he did it last time she brought it up. Now he realized she knew better, and he would never hear the end of it if she found out she was right.

“Right. I took it out to have it cleaned up, that’s it”

“Stop lying to me! I know how you cherish that damn thing and I know you would only take it out if there was someone special”

“There isn’t”

“If you don’t want to tell me who she is, fine. But know that you won’t be taking your father’s place in the company if you are not properly married, so you should hurry”

“I didn’t think there was a deadline, mother” He knew sarcasm would only escalate the level of stress in their conversation, but was too worked up to be polite.

“Well, now there is. If you don’t have a serious girlfriend by the end of the year your father will be looking for other candidates”

“Wouldn’t that be his decision?” Wrong answer. Really wrong. He knew it before the words even came out of his mouth, but he was feeling awfully provoked by her statement and wanted to give back a little of the humiliation.

“How dare you? You better believe that I can make good on my words, son. Don’t you think for a second I don’t have the means to stir your father in that direction” She did. Shit, she did.

And now there was nothing he could do to take it back. His pride wouldn’t allow another hit, so he opted to leave with his chin up, knowing he had already hit her where it hurts.

Chris was still worked up when he reached home. That ultimatum changed everything, and he was not prepared for it. His mother knew how much that ring meant to him, and it was not that long of a stretch to think its absence meant he was getting serious on the relationship department.

That fucking thief messed yet another part of his life by taking it away. His plan to get the ring back was still on, but regardless of his success, there was a permanent change triggered by it. Now he needed a fucking woman.

He thought about the women in his life, considering if any would be a potential girlfriend material. He had no short supply of contacts on his phone that would gladly take over the position, but he couldn't suppress the urge to throw up considering a long-term relationship with any of them.

He scrolled through his phone trying to remember the faces on the other side of the names, but he hadn't been very selective in the past few years when it came to fucking. Some of them rang a bell, especially the selected few that performed above average in bed. He only had two months before the end of the year, and he needed to produce a girlfriend out of thin air.

His last long-term woman, if you could call six months long, had moved to Italy a few years back and was out of the race. Not that he was willing to get back with her after the unfortunate incident that led to their break-up. Her very public speech about seducing his father if Chris chose to quit the company was not that easy to forget. But being in that shitty position, he would have to settle for a gold digger anyway.

Taking a look at his watch, he decided to get going to his next destination. Despite his mother's deadline, he had a more pressing situation to attend to. He would go back to his search after he was done.

# Chapter NINE

Kiara got to the coffee shop earlier to grab a bite to eat. She was on practice all day and was eager to reward herself with a nice meal. The place Carina suggested was really cute and had an extensive menu of light and healthy options. The girl must have thought she was all into healthy food, being a circus artist and all. Kiara snorted at the idea, thinking about her undying love for good food in all its forms and shapes.

She chose the avocado toast with smoked salmon but asked for a poached egg on top to make it more interesting. It was still healthy, but at least it tasted like real food. If she had to eat another bitter melon, quinoa, and black beans mix with no seasoning whatsoever, she'd kill someone.

Halfway through her dish, she heard the door opening and hoped Carina had arrived, preferably with her bag attached to her arm. When she turned around, the small piece of avocado that was halfway through her oropharynx decided to avoid her esophagus, falling straight into her trachea.

She started coughing so hard, the whole establishment quit their activities to pay attention to her. She would have hated the commotion if she were able to think about anything other than preventing the encounter of her once cherished food with her lungs.

The waitress that helped her out before came to the rescue, giving her some water and patting her back, but as soon as she was able to go a second without coughing, she told the girl she was fine, motioning for her to leave. Her teary eyes caught sight of a moving male figure approaching, and she almost wished the choking had been her ticket to the afterlife. Death would definitely outclass that encounter.

Unfortunately, her struggle subsided in a few seconds and she was left to face that absolutely gorgeous man who would most certainly accomplish what the toast failed to do.

"I believe you have something that belongs to me" His voice was deep, and she could see he was struggling with something. Probably the urge to murder her.

"Likewise" She retorted, unable to hold her tongue.

"What?"

"I suppose you have my bag, considering Carina is not here"

"How dare you…" his voice began to rise, causing Kiara to uncomfortably shift her weight. People were staring.

"Stop yelling, you are calling unnecessary attention. It's clear we have some business to discuss, so let's do it outside" The street was not deserted enough to make her scared to be out, but not as crowded as the coffee shop where people would hear the fallout.

“Don’t you dare…” She had already left a few dollars on the table and proceeded to the exit, leaving him no choice but to follow her.

Finally outside, she took him out of the passage and stood in the open parking lot, where people wouldn’t hear them out.

“Where is Carina?”

“You don’t get to ask questions here!” His fists were clenched, and his face was turning red, but somehow, she wasn’t scared of him. Despite the clear depiction of anger, he seemed in control. Just in case, she grabbed her keys between her fingers.

“I just want to know she’s ok. It wasn’t her fault, we never met before.” She felt the need to explain, hating the idea of getting the girl in trouble due to their association.

“Of course she is ok, who do you think I am?” His voice was outraged, and she felt he was truly offended by her assumption.

“I have no idea who you are”

“Yet you had no problem taking something that is mine”

“Damn you, I saw your house, I saw that drawer full of jewelry. What difference does a single ring make?” She knew she was wrong, but couldn’t help trying to defend herself.

“It is mine, and I need it back”

“Fine! Jesus, what is it with you rich people? Don’t you have enough already?”

“You don’t know what you are talking about” She expected him to be mad, they always were when she attacked the lifestyle of the one percent.

“Whatever. I don’t have it with me right now. I can give it back to you tomorrow”

“No. We will get it now” There it was again, that commanding tone that both she and Michael noticed. She began to think it was his standard voice. He didn’t ask for things, he simply demanded it. Well, she wasn’t one to comply that easily.

“I won’t take you to my house, I don’t even know your name”

“Chris”

“Christian?”

“Just Chris”

“I bet it isn’t. Rich people are never called ‘just something’. What is it?”

“You are a fucking pain in the ass”

“Is it Christopher?”

His silence gave her the answer. Christopher. It suited him, though she really preferred just Chris. It didn't matter though; she was still not willing to let him push her around.

"So, Christopher, I won't bring you to my house. We can meet tomorrow and you can keep my bag as collateral" She was searching her memory for the negotiation talk her father once taught her and was glad to remember a few terms.

"That ring is worth a thousand of your bags"

"Maybe, but I want the bag back" and she'd never sell the ring or any of her prizes. That would mean she was a thief, stealing for money. She wasn't, they were just her private collection. Still, he didn't need to know that.

"Fine"

"I need my cellphone back"

"No" His voice was final, but she was not one to let people impose their wishes upon.

"I need it to call you, so we can set the exchange" She knew it was reasonable enough to pass, but truth was she just wanted to win over him. He was already getting his ring back; she needed a victory of her own.

"You are so damn annoying"

"Thanks. Can I have it now?"

He sighed heavily and walked towards an Aston Martin Vanquish she was almost certain came from one of the James Bond movies. If her memory didn't fail her, it was the one from Die Another Day. What? She hated the rich, but she sure as hell loved the richness.

"Here" he spat, putting the phone on her hands. She noticed how big his hands were in comparison to hers and wondered how she escaped his grip the night they met.

"What is your number?"

"What?"

"I'll call you so you can save it. Then you text me where we can meet."

"Oh, right" He seemed a bit uncomfortable ever since he agreed on giving her the phone back. She couldn't help the satisfied smile that reached her face. Good, a little taste of his own medicine. No doubt he enjoyed making people uncomfortable with his tough attitude.

He hissed the number, and she immediately called him. She saw his phone vibrating and decided to head off, despite enjoying the view of that clearly dominating man so off his game.

"You didn't tell me your name" He shouted when she was already a few feet away

"Kiara" She shouted back, shooting her signature wink.

# Chapter TEN

Chris was left dumbfounded next to his car. That wink sent an electric shock down his body, landing right on his crotch. He shifted his weight, suddenly uncomfortable in his tight jeans. Shit. What the fuck was that?

He tried to replay the scene of their encounter to understand how things so indisputably fled his control. The goal was easy: meet the woman, get his ring back, make her feel sorry for her petty existence. The final result was her number saved on his contact list and a semi-hard cock.

That last part wasn't his fault. The woman was a damn seductress, standing there with her sports clothes and messy after-practice hair. She was clearly coming from training, but he could just as easily imagine it as her after-sex look. And then she spoke with that silky voice and winked with those deep blue eyes just to throw him off. Fucking nightmare.

After the initial daze cleared, he got inside the car and drove home. He was horrified by his own behavior and needed to figure a way to get the control back. They would meet again the next day, which meant he still had one last chance to show her where she belonged.

He saw her bag on the passenger seat and almost threw it out the window, thinking how weak he had been to just offer it in return for the ring. He tried to think of possible punishments, but all he could come up with was either too harsh – he wasn't a monster, after all – or too light. That perfect middle ground was still escaping his grip.

Tuesday morning was rough. Every day in the office was somewhat rough these days, but that was worse. He had a major meeting with the board of directors and was dreading the presentation on his plans for the company as the new managing director.

Before it began, his mind wandered back to his time in business school, where he loved to present ideas for his teachers and classmates. It was all very theoretical, with no real company at stake, but he always took it seriously and was praised by his professors.

He remembered fondly the exhibition of his final project, when he designed from scratch a sustainable energy company focused on solar power. He was particularly proud of its focus on rentability and profit prospects, a theme underexplored by the field at that time. It was open to an external audience and he even got a job offer by an interested businessman. Unfortunately, his path within his father's company was already set by that time.

Unlike that presentation, his father would be present for this one. His presence alone imposed an aura of inadequacy in the room, making him doubt his whole plan regardless of the effort he put into it. It was almost pathetic how Chris could project natural authority over any audience he spoke to, except when it came to Mr. Edgar Wright.

Either way, he delivered the speech he had planned and answered all the questions from the board without hesitation. After the meeting, all the directors congratulated him again on the job and the plan, boosting his confidence in the future. The few that had given him an odd look the day before were more docile after the display of his skills, which was one of his goals with the meeting.

His father remained seated while everyone else left, and after a couple of minutes, it was just the two of them.

“Christopher, a word” He didn’t take his eyes off the paper, but Chris was used to it by now. The man had two settings while in the office: piercing stare or blunt indifference.

“Yes, Edgar” He had a hard time adjusting from dad, to father, to Edgar while growing up. The last one began after he joined the company, in order to keep things professional between them. Now, Chris didn’t know if he could ever go back to calling him anything else

“About your speech” He braced for impact. “It was fine. You should work on your posture. You can’t look them in the eye as if they were your equals, it allows for questions where there should have been none”

“Understood” It was better than he expected, perhaps he was in a good mood. He prepared to leave, considering his father’s dismissive look, but then the man switched to an intense gaze that froze Chris on his spot.

“Another thing before you leave” He paused, building a thick layer of anticipation in the room.

“Yes?”

“Your mother mentioned there is a woman. I expect to see her on our family holiday on the island”

Fucking hell, now he was thoroughly screwed.

“Of course, she will be there” Why in the name of baby Jesus did he say that?

“Fine. You are dismissed”

After over an hour of inner debate, he was still void of ideas. The family vacation was on thanksgiving, meaning he had barely a month to find someone to bring. The loss of a whole month to figure it out and the fact he would have to bring her to a four-day trip messed up with his plans, and he was seriously considering getting an escort.

After giving it some thought, he scratched that idea, knowing his mother would spot her a mile away. She had a keen eye for that kind of trouble, which was probably a necessary ability to sustain his parents’ marriage.

Hoping the answer would present itself, he went back to girlfriend searching through his contacts, playing Match Game with the names. Ananda. Best friend’s cousin. Courtney. Blonde

from that shady bar. Gaby. Ex-secretary with sexy glasses. Katya. Russian student, eager for some cultural interchange. Kiara. Fuck.

He kept staring at her name, recalling the moment she turned around to shout it to him. It was flashing vividly in his mind, alongside some of the few other memories he had of her. Especially that sinful body rolling down the drapes back at the party, looking at him in search of his soul.

Then, out of nowhere, he had a lightbulb moment. A perfect idea, falling onto his lap like Newton's apple fell on his head or whatever happened on that story. Bottom line was, he knew exactly what to do to solve both his problems.

# Chapter ELEVEN

Kiara felt like she was heading straight to a prisoner exchange that sunny Tuesday afternoon. A ring for a bag. Surprisingly, she was feeling more excited about it than scared. Their last encounter was interesting, to say the least. She had a blast seeing that bulked man caving to her, giving her phone back and getting nothing in return.

She was hoping to get that thrilling sensation again. It felt like those times in her childhood when she took her father's weapon from its not-carefully-enough hidden spot and just held it in her hands, hoping the man didn't wake up from his lazy Sunday naps.

They had agreed to meet in the same spot as last time, the small parking lot in front of the cute coffee shop. She grabbed a latte to go and sat at a bench to wait for him. Turning the ring around her finger, she thought back on the moment she found it in that cluttered drawer.

She had decided to bring the shinning object as it was made to be worn and was perfectly aware it would make him mad. Perhaps that was even one of her reasons to do it. The main reason, however, was her sadness in letting go of her prize. She always chose them based on instinct, relying solely on the connection she felt with the item at first sight. She just wanted to feel it against her skin a bit longer before letting go.

The Aston Martin parked in one of the vacant spots and Kiara checked the time on her phone. Seven o'clock on the dot. At least he was on time, and not one of those snobs who believed in the concept of 'fashionably late'.

He got out of the car without her bag and she began to tap her heels on the floor, wondering if he had a reason to leave it in the car. Maybe he didn't bring it at all. There was a real possibility that she would leave that parking lot empty-handed, but she would not let him go unscathed if that was the case.

"You are early" his tone was undecipherable, she couldn't even sense if being early stroke him positively or not.

"You are on time" She tried to give it back on the same tone, but it came out weird and she felt a bit stupid about her answer. Not the best start for her plan to show power.

"Where is it?"

She smiled. That was a good moment to get her leverage back. She extended her hand like a newly engaged bride showing off her big diamond ring to her friends. She paid close attention to his face, knowing he was determined to keep his emotions in check this time. It would only make it better when she saw him losing it.

To her utter frustration, not only did he not give in to anger, he began to smile mischievously like she was right where he wanted her to be. Fucking hell, what was that man thinking?

“Good, you are on the right state of mind to hear my offer”

“What?” Not only was she losing the battle, but she was also absolutely lost in the conversation.

“Come, I’ll get a coffee so we can talk” She wanted to argue, but he strode off into the coffee shop and left her hanging much like she had done to him the day before.

The whole thing was beginning to feel awfully uncomfortable and Kiara thought about fleeing the scene. But then again, she really wanted that specific pair of fake lashes that were inside her bag and costed a small fortune considering her limited budget.

Once inside, he ordered a coffee and sat at a vacant table, dismissively motioning her to sit across from him. In clear opposition to what she first imagined, she was the one trying to control her rising anger. Did she really miss the mark that much on reading the man? She actually thought she could have some fun getting under his skin, but man, was she wrong.

“Where is my bag?” she crossed her arms, trying to get some answers from the man.

“In my car. You’ll get it soon enough, provided you are a good girl” Good girl? That was an awful sugar-daddly talk, and she was not up for it. She knew her light skin was getting increasingly red with frustration, and she hated how he noticed.

“What the fuck?” The only thing that kept her from screaming those three was her irrevocable aversion to making a scene. She was so against calling unwanted public attention that sometimes she questioned why she had become an artist in the first place.

“Don’t worry, you’ll catch up in a moment. I have a deal for you”

“We already had a deal, your ring for my bag”

“Well, I was getting the worst end of that deal. See, I didn’t steal your bag”

“What’s the deal?” She gritted.

“I need a girlfriend to accompany me during a small family vacation” If she was lost before, now she was absolutely clueless.

“What does that have to do with me?”

“You will be that girlfriend. Fake girlfriend, at least. I believe you have enough acting skills to make do, considering your line of work”

“Are you insane?”

“No. You will do it” There it was again, that tone. She had to break that tone, no one should be allowed to order people around with that much confidence.

“Oh yeah? And what if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll have to send you to jail for stealing”

The was no force in the world that could prevent her jaw from dropping to the ground with his words. Was he serious? She was losing that sense of safety she had around him before, noticing for the first time how much power he had over her. He was stronger. Physically, socially, economically. She was nothing in comparison, and she knew his threat could be fulfilled if he really wanted to.

“You wouldn’t do that”

“Try me”

“Why me? I just stole something from you”

“You won’t dare do it again. I’ll know if you do”

“I can’t be your fake girlfriend! What the hell? I don’t even know you”

“We have a month until the trip, we’ll spend enough time together to get the details straight for my parents”

“That is not the fucking point! Why are you doing this to me?”

“I am doing it because I can” At that moment, enlightenment came upon Kiara’s mind and she saw clearly for the first time since he began that crazy talk about fake girlfriend and jail.

It was an all-is-lost moment, and she saw clearly for the first time since the beginning of their conversation. She understood the cards that had been dealt with a clarity she didn’t think was possible in such a stressful situation. It was either complying with his demands or going to jail.

She took out the ring and placed it on the table.

“Fine. Call in the cops.”

# Chapter TWELVE

Kiara was taken into custody by a surprisingly gentle officer, who didn't even cuff her to take her in. When she virtually told Chris to shove his crazy deal up his ass, she knew he'd make good on his word, but was kind of hoping he didn't. Despite the thrill that came by standing up to that man, she was absolutely terrified.

Having grown up around police stations, she thought it might be easier to face the whole going to jail procedure. But she was never on the perpetrator's side of the table and it wasn't the same station she used to know like the back of her hand. It was a whole different feeling.

To make things worse, she didn't set foot on a precinct since her father's accident. She was quite sure the gigantic ball being cooked up inside her stomach had more to do with the faint memories of her childhood than the prospect of spending some time in a cell.

She remembered fondly how her father used to scold her for trying to sneak into the temporary holding cells of his station. Not her fault though, there was little she could do to entertain herself while he worked and there were rarely any occurrences in that part of the city. Well, not that rarely.

Kiara felt the lump growing when the memories began to stir in that direction, so she opted instead to focus on the one-way mirror in front of her. The nice officer left her in the interrogation room promising to come back shortly, but those few minutes alone were not allowing for her to keep her cool.

She went for a technique that always got her into a peaceful state of mind, replaying her favorite routines in her head and thinking of small changes that could improve both the performance and the message she wanted to convey.

Russian climb, double footlock, kite split. Pose. Inversion, double crochet drop to knee lock. Maybe add a split? People love those damned splits. Split to Pegasus was probably a nice touch. If she could…

"Kiara Winter?!" The startled voice brought her back from the secluded space she reached in her head. Her eyes widened with recognition, bringing her to stand from the metal chair a bit too hastily and almost send the object down to the ground.

"Uncle Harry?" She hugged him tightly, forgetting where she was for a second. He responded with a bear hug, but she backed away quickly when reality came knocking

"Hi, troublemaker" She smiled, reminiscing the many times he called her that during her most misbehaved years. It was either that or straight-up punk, but she knew it came from a place of love.

“Hi” her response was delivered looking at the floor, knowing he would be a witness to another one of her shenanigans. Perhaps the most uncomfortable of them all, since she was a grown woman now.

“Would you care to explain why I am standing here looking at a petty theft charge against you?”

“Sorry Uncle Harry” This was jogging up memories from her early teens that did nothing but increase the redness in her face. A particular memory came to mind and she knew exactly what his next words were going to be.

“Do you remember what I told you would happen if you ever got yourself arrested?”

“Don’t come calling Uncle Harry from a prison cell, you’ll waste your call”

“Precisely.”

“I didn’t call you” She murmured, feeling he would get angry but unwilling to let the moment pass. She hadn’t called, he just showed up.

Instead of the disapproving sigh she expected, she heard a loud laugh that her ears hadn’t listen to in seven long years, but were just as soothing as she remembered.

She looked back up, trying to understand why he was not chastising her for getting herself arrested in the first place.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes darling, I just missed your spitfire personality. How come you never called? I tried reaching out so many times, you just disappeared” The last sentences had a hint of pain that struck her right in the gut. She didn’t have an answer for him.

“I’m sorry”

“It doesn’t matter, we can figure it out later. Come, tell me what happened”

Kiara proceeded to explain the series of unfortunate events that led her there, subtracting from the story the vast majority of facts that would either earn her a nasty scold or make her even more embarrassed.

At the end of it, he basically knew she had stolen a ring from a rich man and gave it back, but the man decided to press charges anyway.

“Ok Kiara, you are an adult now, so I’ll talk to you as one. The man that called for your arrest is powerful, but he didn’t strike with full force. I still believe you can get a lawyer and ask for a conciliation conference. Are you willing to do that? Can you face him?”

She was never good at hiding her emotions, so she had the hardest time trying to school her smile. Truth was, she wanted to face him. She was actually dying to see his explanation for throwing her in jail in front of lawyers and judges or whoever was present at this sort of

meeting. It would be the ultimate delight to see him fumbling with the explanation of his deal, pressuring her to be his pretend girlfriend in exchange for freedom.

“Yes, I believe I can face him”

“Good. Now comes the hardest part. You’ll have to spend the night in the holding cell. They won’t transfer you to an actual prison until the hearing, but it won’t happen today. I can try to call in some favors to have you out by tomorrow, and then I hope you can sort it out in the conference”

“That’s ok”

“Did you hear me? You’ll spend one night in jail. Possibly more.”

She shrugged.

“Father never let me do that when I asked him”

“You are a lost cause, child. Your father would be…”

“Well he isn’t” She cut him off, unwilling to hear the end of that sentence. That was one of the reasons she cut everyone out after the accident, people were awfully keen on telling her what her father would or wouldn’t have done on any given situation and she was just not having it.

She felt bad for causing that hurt look in Harry’s eyes, but some habits had to be cut off by the root. However, she was not willing to part with her father’s former best friend in bad terms and opted for a softer addition.

“I am so glad you are here, Uncle Harry. I don’t know what I would have done without you”

That did the trick, his smile came back, and he hugged her once more before leaving to take care of the paperwork.

She was scared to be left on her own again, even though she believed there were other officers on the other side of the mirror. She went back to the deep corners of her mind and allowed that sinking feeling to wrap around her. Spending the night in a cell would be absolutely terrifying without her dad there to let her out.

# Chapter THIRTEEN

The public defender assigned to handle Kiara's case was sketchy, to say the least. She disliked him immediately but was unwilling to pay for a lawyer for something so petty, as the charge's name suggested. It was not even considered a felony. It was classified as a misdemeanor, whatever the hell that meant.

Those were the terms that shady lawyer was telling her non-stop for the last half an hour, making her head throb with a crushing headache. It was worsened by the fact she couldn't speak her mind to the man, who insisted she called him Greg instead of Gregory.

"Gregory, I already understood the charges. Can we please move on?" Her voice began with an undertone of passive-aggressive, but with each passing minute, the 'aggressive' part was getting more prominent. She was probably just a couple of sentences away from a straight 'go to hell, Gregory'.

However, the jackass seemed to miss all the clues of an impending punch to his face and kept talking like he couldn't get tired of his own voice. The only thing that allowed Kiara to keep her stress in check was the fact that the conciliation conference would begin in less than an hour.

Uncle Harry really sped things up on her behalf, getting her a lawyer and a scheduled meeting in only three days. She made a mental note to thank him properly, maybe over dinner with his family. Auntie Carol was always fond of her and often took her side on arguments against her father.

She checked the clock on the wall again, anxious to be out of the room. And if she was being honest with herself, getting away from that endless speech was just one of the reasons. Facing Chris was making her heart race an F1 track, mostly because she was dying to see him ever since she left that coffee shop.

For dramatic purposes – and perhaps fear of giving up - she left without looking back, and ever since she kept wondering if she was successful in causing turmoil in the pretty boy's head. She knew he wouldn't have the same look on his face anymore, but she still wanted to see the effect it had on him.

Taking her out of her revenge daydream, *Gregory* snapped his finger in front of her face. Fucking idiot.

"Are you nervous, Kiara?" His voice was sly, much like everything else about him.

"No. Can we go now? It's almost time"

"Sure, but can I ask you something first?"

Then he reached across the table to place his hands above her own, causing her to immediately pull away and hide them under the table. What the hell was he thinking?

“Don’t worry honey, I don’t bite. Much.”

She cringed at the line, only now realizing the nature of his odd behavior. She replayed their conversation in her mind to search for any previous indication the man had that sexual assaulter vibe, but she was not really paying much attention before.

“I can see you are agitated about the hearing. We can talk later, when that pretty little mind of yours is more cooperative”

Her fists were already balled from before, but after that sentence her nails began to drill through her skin like they belonged between her metacarpal bones. She stood up, heading towards the door. She didn’t know the way to the conference room but was more than willing to ask around if it meant distance from that prick.

Much to her dismay, the man followed right after and began leading the way. When they reached the room, the moderator was already there. She had been instructed not to speak to him without the other party present, but at least her jerk attorney would refrain from talking gibberish in the presence of another person.

After a few silent minutes, the door opened to welcome two suited up gentlemen. Does he know the concept of casual wear? Her eyes diverted to the clock for a split second to confirm her suspicion. He was, once again, perfectly on time.

The process of getting him bent out of shape began as soon as he entered the room, and Kiara almost forgot the shitty incident with her lawyer when she saw him. She plastered the most innocent smile she could come up with and waved at him. He was wide-eyed in surprise, definitely not expecting that sort of reaction, but soon enough his jawline sharpened with the force of his gritted teeth. Score!

“Good, we are all here. Sit down gentleman, let’s begin” The moderator was an older man with an overall pleasant energy, which was a nice change from the atmosphere she was in for the last couple of hours. Chris and his million-dollar-suit lawyer sat across the table from them.

“Right, I’ve read the charges and interrogation report already, and I believe your lawyers are also up to speed on the topic, correct?” They all nodded affirmatively. “Perfect, so let me begin by asking you, Ms. Winter. Why did you steal the engagement ring from Mr. Wright?”

“I thought it was really beautiful and didn’t think it would make a difference for him, considering it was among millions worth of jewelry” She chose the honest approach regardless of Greg’s instruction not to. His idea was for her to play the poor artist card, saying she needed it to pay rent or something. Incredible agent of the law, that man.

“I see. You do realize that was wrong, don’t you?

“I do sir. That is why I gave it back” She mentioned, trying to convey guilt she didn’t actually feel. She vowed to speak the truth, but nobody said shit about honest body language.

“Wait, you gave it back?” The moderator seemed confused and went through the papers in front of him frantically before turning to Chris and his lawyer.

“Mr. Wright, why is that information missing from the police report?”

“I didn’t think it was important” He shrugged, but his lawyer shot him a glaring look that didn’t go unnoticed by her.

“What my client means is that the damage occurred prior to the return of the object, therefore it wasn’t vital for the comprehension of the case”

“Mr. Miller, this is not the Supreme Court, we are just trying to understand what really happened and if there is a way to avoid involving a judge. There is no need for fancy words”

Chris’ lawyer murmured an excuse and began to write on a piece of paper in front of him. Kiara was dying to see what he was writing, but by the irregular movement of his hands, he was probably just doodling to seem busy.

“Very well. Mr. Wright, why did you press charges after she gave you the ring back?”

“She needed to pay for stealing” His voice was acid, and Kiara trembled a bit with the tone. She still wasn’t scared of him, despite knowing he could send her to actual prison for it. Something in the way he carried himself told her he wouldn’t go that far.

“Understood. Is there a monetary value you would be willing to accept as penalty instead of prison?”

Kiara saw the engines turning inside his head before a mischievous smile came out. Fuck.

“Yes, I believe that is a possibility”

“Sir, I don’t have access to the amount of money that would make a difference in Mr. Wright’s bank account”

“What is the amount you have in mind, Mr. Wright? Please consider Ms. Winter’s condition in your offer” The moderator was doing a fine job, and he clearly had experience with financial deals. But that was not his usual custody after divorce case, and the interests behind it were not so clearly stated.

“I would say five thousand dollars”

It was her time clench her teeth and her heels began to tap against the floor like a woodpecker. It was not absurd, and she knew the moderator would be pleased by it. But it was more money than she ever saw on her bank account, apart from the never touched life insurance from her

father's accident. It would take at least a year to pay it all, and only if she made major adjustments to her lifestyle.

"Perfect. Ms. Winter, would you rather pay five thousand dollars for damages instead of going to jail?"

There wasn't really a choice there, her night in the holding cell was enough of an outlaw experience for her.

"Yes sir, I believe that's a possibility." She sneered.

"Then it's settled. The details regarding the transactions can be handled by your lawyers, and it shall be done within the next ten days."

"Mr. Miller, I believe Ms. Winter and I will be able to handle it by ourselves." He had such authority in his voice, speaking on her behalf, she almost contradicted him and asked the layers to take care of it. Presumptuous prick. But she was desperate to cut ties with Gregory, so she kept quiet.

The final details were arranged, and Kiara was the first to exit the room, running towards her onerously bought freedom. As soon as she was out of the building, she took a deep breath to steady herself. But her soothing moment didn't last.

"Kiara, wait. We need to talk"

# Chapter FOURTEEN

“What now?” She demanded. Chris watched her turn around rolling her eyes and was glad to hear the annoyance in her voice. She was incredibly underdressed for a day in court but still had been more comfortable in that room than the four men in suits. He was utterly delighted when his move threw her off and hoped to leverage it now that the legal part was over.

“We need to sort the payment out” He didn’t try to hide the amusement in his voice, and it did the trick. Her eyes squinted into thin lines and… did she bare her teeth? Oh god, that was perfect. He almost wished she would growl.

“Do we need to do that right now?” She didn’t growl, but the way she hissed out the words was just as enjoyable.

“I don’t see why not, today is as good a day as any” He pointed towards the clear skies above as if the absence of clouds was a perfect reason for her to be led into an excruciating conversation. Because it would be, he’d make sure of it.

“Is that man bothering you, Kiara?” Chris turned around to meet the odd lawyer that defended her, annoyed to have an intruder in his private conversation. He didn’t say much during the meeting, not even to try and drop the agreed price. His own lawyer advised the other party would do it, so they pumped up the initial offer.

When he didn’t counter, Chris was a bit stunned and for a brief moment thought the woman would choose prison again. That just couldn’t happen, an inmate would make a terrible fake girlfriend. That freak decided to open his big mouth precisely when he got back in the driving seat.

“Excuse me”

“I am talking to Kiara, Mr. Wright. Kiara darling, are you ok? You didn’t wait for me at the end of the session”

What the fuck? That man was in for a punch. Were they seeing each other? He was definitely eye-fucking her, so that could mean something.

Chris turned around to wait for Kiara’s response, but was rendered even more puzzled after he saw the look in her eyes. She was displaying a mix of angry and fear, which caused her hands to slightly tremble but her eyes to squint, poking holes through his skull.

So she didn’t like the lawyer? That made no sense at all, why would she pick an attorney she didn’t like? Unless…

“Kiara let’s get some coffee to discuss the terms of our agreement. Since we chose not to involve the lawyers for this part, I believe your help is not needed, sir.”

She pondered over it for a moment, and Chris hoped he had read into the room well enough to predict her answer. By going with him, she would lose another battle in their little unspoken fight, but it was a perfect excuse to get away from the strange lawyer.

“Sorry Gregory, I’ll be discussing the arrangements with Chris now. Bye”

She began to power walk away from them, and Chris shot a smug glare towards the lawyer. Fucking weirdo. He followed right after, leaving behind an apparently disappointed Greg.

“Talk” She blurted out after they were comfortably seated in the pastry shop she picked for their chat. He was surprised by her order, a cake and double scoop ice-cream, but supposed it was only fair after the tons of stress she was going through. He laughed at the irony, considering if he should advise her to get herself a milkshake already. The stress was just beginning.

“First things first, what kind of fucked up lawyer was that? Why in hell would you pay for that?”

He wanted to start strong, but that man was bothering him, and he thought insulting her attorney’s choice was just as likely to annoy her. He could always circle back to his initial plan later.

“Well, I didn’t get to choose, did I? I got the one that was assigned to me” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm as if it was his fault she ended up with a shitty lawyer. She was the thief there, not him.

“If you couldn’t even pay for a decent counselor, how do you expect to pay me back?” Much better, the aggravated look on her face was exactly what he came to see.

“I’ll pay” the words almost didn’t pass through her gritted teeth.

“How?” He raised an eyebrow to defy her just a little bit more. He knew it was getting awfully dangerous for him. If she were too mad, she wouldn’t even consider his new offer. But he was getting rapidly addicted to seeing her fuming figure and couldn’t help but push it a little further.

“Give me some time”

“A month”

“Are you insane? Do you have any idea what normal people earn in a month? I bet you old-money jackasses don’t even know how much you spend in that period”

He tried to suppress his annoyance at her comment. If there was one thing he hated was being considered lazy because of his money. He might be the heir to an empire, but he worked his ass off to get where he was. That being said… he didn’t really know how much he spent in a month.

“How long do you need?”

“Six months?” She clearly meant to say it with more certainty, but it came out as a question. Perfect time to drop the bomb.

“There is another option, you know” Her face contorted into a grimace, and he knew she was trying to avoid the display of hope.

“What is it?”

“You could accept my previous offer and be my pretend girlfriend for the holidays”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Will you do it? I’ll cancel your debt” The expression on her face was priceless. It was a mix of horror and irrevocable disbelief.

“Why?”

“I told you, I need someone to bring to the family vacation”

“Why in the world do you need that?”

“Because my family requested”

“Jesus Christ, rich people are absolutely insane” She murmured to herself. He was about to protest, but she was actually accurate about the slightly deranged aspects of his family.

“So?” He tried to keep his cool, but truth was he really needed her to say yes. He actually tried to contact a few girls from his past, but he was positive they would try to poke a hole in the condom when they saw his family’s island. No way, he was better off with the rich-hatter. She might steal a piece of jewelry, but she’d probably hate everything else.

“I’m good. I’ll pay you in six months” No fucking way! She was doing it again.

“Damn woman, what is wrong with you?” He coursed his hands through his hair. Why was it so hard for her to just say the word ‘yes’? He could swear he never had a harder time making a woman cave. And now she was looking at him weirdly.

“What are you looking at?”

“You” Her tone was off. He could understand if she were mad, considering the offer on the table. There was a real possibility she would be feeling helpless, which was what he had hoped for. But she was simply curious, as if she just found out something new and too interesting to look away.

“Why are you…” He didn’t get to finish his sentence.

“I’ll do it”

“What?”

“I’ll be your whatever for the holidays”

# Chapter FIFTEEN

Kiara sat at her small kitchen table literally bumping her head into the wood. Several times. Why the hell did she agree to spend four days in a fucking island with loaded snobs she knew nothing about? Of course, she didn't know exactly what she signed up for before she accepted his offer, but she knew it came from the guy who sent her to fucking jail and said yes anyway.

And based on what? A hunch. Something so intangible and arbitrary she would be unable to explain even to her dad, who used to be a firm believer in following your gut. But she saw it, right there hiding behind his handsome stoic façade. He was… desperate.

After she said yes at the pastry shop, he was quiet for at least a full minute. She could tell how hard he was trying to keep his cool, but the new sparkle in his eyes proved her right. He was dying for her to accept his offer, and it was not just to win over her.

Either way, her acceptance didn't seem to change the dynamic of their unspoken battle. Kiara was determined to make him lose it and he was definitely trying to drive her crazy. The only change was that now they would do it under the same roof for a couple of days.

His explanation of the tasks she was supposed to perform during that period was vague and she barely understood where they would be going, but she knew her usually peaceful thanksgiving was bound to have something she got progressively unaccustomed to: people.

They agreed to meet a couple of times before the trip that was bound to happen in three weeks, to sort out some details about their story. Apparently, the show was mostly for his parents but there would be friends and business partners coming and going throughout the extended weekend.

Why they invited business partners to a thanksgiving holiday was beyond her comprehension, but then again most of that plan was. She couldn't say she wasn't curious, though. Chris was a powerful man, with a merciless arrogant attitude. Why would someone so high-and-mighty be willing to get a fake girlfriend to please his parents?

More so, why did he choose her of all people? There must have been tons of girls dying for a chance to sign up for the job. After all, he was a devilish mix of filthy rich and obscenely handsome. The first part was a giant red flag for her, but hey, to which his own.

When they arranged the first meeting before the trip, Kiara made him agree on a neutral ground. She suspected he had means to find out her home address but refused to tell him willingly. She questioned her own decision now that she was standing in front of a library alone at seven pm, but she was not caving after the heated text exchange they had before.

The wind was howling in the street and she was ready to yell at him for asking her to dress nicely. This time, in person. Being Kiara, she seriously considered wearing a circus costume

and call it nice, but it was more likely to embarrass her than piss him of. He had mentioned a 'restaurant he liked', so it was probably fancy as hell. She couldn't live through the stares that would come if she wore a performance clothing.

Soon enough, the Aston Martin parked outside the library and she took a deep breath before getting in. She couldn't shake the bond girl vibe she was getting, and she only hoped to be more on the Elektra King's side than Stacey Sutton's. At least Elektra tried to kill the man.

"Are you getting in or what?"

Way to break the fantasy, prick. She was annoyed by his comment, but it went away when she sat on the fancy leather seat and took a closer look at the panel. She wanted to touch it, but the smug look on his face stopped her.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise"

"I am not your real girlfriend Christopher; you don't get to do surprises"

"Don't call me Christopher" She was surprised by the stern tone he used. She knew he preferred Chris but didn't think it would be such a sensitive matter. She'd definitely do it again.

"Ok, where are we going?"

"Madelaine's" He hissed out, probably mad because she did a double strike by ruining the 'surprise' and calling him Christopher.

"Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"It is a restaurant, Kiara. Now can we please move on to what we came here to do?"

"And what is that?"

"We need to get our story straight"

"Right. Do you have an idea of what you want to say?"

"No" Still angry. Awesome way to start the night.

"Maybe we could say we met at a bar" She began to feel excited. There was an opportunity of creation there, and she rarely let those pass her by.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. I could be from a Russian background; I can do a sickening Russian accent if you want me to" When he didn't stop her right away, she felt allowed to keep building up her character. "Oh, perhaps I came to the US to escape my family, and they are still looking for me…"

Kiara was losing herself in the idea, already imagining the dark make up she would use and the tight dress that would match the persona she picked…

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Twice now he was breaking the fantasy. And by the look on his face, he wasn't getting her point at all. Where was that guy's imagination? Jesus.

"I'm impersonating a character. What else? You had no idea to begin with, so I'm brainstorming" She shrugged, trying to get back to her provoking self. She forgot for a second to keep herself in check during her monologue and needed to earn back her stance.

"Shit, do you have multiple personalities?"

"Now, wouldn't that be fun to show your mom and dad?" There it was, furrowed brows and thinned lips. Much better.

"You are so fucking annoying"

"Thanks"

They reached the restaurant without another word, and she began to feel uncomfortable when a valet came to take the car. It only got worse when the hostess led them to a table with a view of the city and provided them a menu without price tags.

She noticed a few people staring at them tried to assess if her clothes were adequate for the place. As much as she tried to be cool with people watching her, she was only ever fine with it when she was performing. And that was only because she was damn good at it, or else it would be excruciating.

"Are you alright? You seem like you could throw up"

"Just thinking about the disparity of wages between guests and workers here. Makes me a little sick" Nice save Kiara.

"Why do you hate money so much?"

"I don't hate money, just people with it" She winked. Hoping to kill the subject, she decided to bring back the reason for their dinner. "So, no Russian runaway then?"

He clearly had something to say about her first comment but was forced to accept the change.

"You won't play someone else. Just be you, but my girlfriend"

"Yeah, that won't happen"

"Why the fuck not?" He pinched the bridge of his nose. Damn, could she make a job out of annoying him? She'd love it.

"I would never date you and I'm pretty sure you wouldn't date me either"

"Why?"

"Well, despite your pretty face, you must have noticed I don't like the whole moneybag situation you have going on and…"

"No. Why wouldn't I date you?" Oh, that.

"I… you know why!" That was a shitty answer and now she was looking stupid.

"You're wrong, I'd fuck you in a heartbeat".

'I bet that's what you'd last' Kiara thought sarcastically. Her real answer was not far behind on the sarcasm, though.

"I'd fuck you too honey, but that doesn't mean I'd date you"

# Chapter SIXTEEN

That woman was sent straight from hell to make his life miserable. She was progressively becoming his least favorite person to be around, earning several points at that race by causing him a hard-on in the middle of his favorite restaurant.

This time, unfortunately, he couldn't say it was entirely her fault. He asked her to dress nice, and she kind of did with that blue dress and heels, and then said he'd fuck her. It was not the first time he'd been so blunt, but it usually caused the woman to blush and change the subject.

Not that incarnated devil. Oh no, she had to look him right in the eye and make the promise they never make. Just sex, no dating. To make things incredibly worse, it was all in the world of ideal forms, nowhere close to reality. In short, she dressed up, made the golden promise, and placed it just outside his reach. No man in the world could survive that triple kill.

"Are you ready to order?"

The waitress pulled him out of the daze and only then he noticed the victory look on Kiara's face. Fucking hell she wouldn't let a single thing pass. That was precisely why he wouldn't even fuck her. The woman had one of the worst personalities he has ever had to deal with, always shooting sappy remarks to annoy him or throwing blades at his social status.

"I'll have the steak and she'll have the fish." He answered, closing the menu.

"Actually, I'll have the lamb, please. And could you get me a matching wine? Whatever your sommelier suggests"

"Of course, Madam"

The waitress walked away to take care of their orders and Kiara had the nerve to wink at him. Again. He wanted so bad to grab those damn eyes and clamp them open clockwork orange style.

"Already spending my money, darling?"

"Isn't that what girlfriends are for?" It probably was. Either way, he was spending way less with that one than he was used to. If all she asked for was a bottle of wine, she would stay a few million below his last girl.

"Fake girlfriend"

"Amen, sweetie" She raised her water glass, toasting to their fraudulent relationship.

"No pet names" There was no way in hell she would call him sweetie in front of his family.

"What?"

“You call me Chris. I call you Kiara. End of discussion” He could only hope she would accept this one, he was beginning to notice she would fight over every little thing that was vital to him. Luckily, she only nodded.

“Anything else?”

“Yes. We met at a club you performed a while ago, and we had a few drinks. Then I saw you again at my house’s presentation and tracked you down. We went out a few times and we’ve been dating since the party”

“Did you think about all this during the car ride? Impressive. But I don’t do straight clubs”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t perform in straight clubs. Nor do I go to them”

“Are you a lesbian?” That was a possibility he hadn’t thought about. It would mess up his plan royally if she wasn’t able to at least fake an attraction to him.

“You don’t really pay attention to people, do you? No, I’m not a lesbian, I just said I’d fuck you not three minutes ago”

“Why don’t you go to straight clubs then?” He sounded like a curious boy and it was extremely annoying. Why the hell did he care what kind of clubs she went to or her sexual preferences? They just needed the story to last four days and a few random dinners after that.

“I just don’t. Can we get back to how we met? Why can’t it be a Tinder match or something?”

“I don’t use dating apps, Kiara” His voice came out harsher than he intended, but the woman was implying he needed technologic assistance to get laid and that was simply ridiculous. She was quiet for a moment, and the silence was nerve-wracking. He decided to keep it simple.

“Then we just met at the party at my parents’ place.”

“Why does it have to include the party? People were not paying attention; I doubt they’d recognize me” That was odd. Her voice was steady, and her stare didn’t falter but she had a hint of… hurt. Was it possible the artist’s nonchalant attitude was not as indifferent as he was led to believe? Now things were beginning to get interesting. A weakness to explore, if nothing else.

“My mother would” There it was again. Evidence that she not only cared but rejoiced on the attention. Her eyes acquired a new shine that was, for lack of better words, inspiring. It lasted less than a second, but he didn’t miss the passion in her eyes.

“Whatever. We met at the party then” She shrugged, trying to sound dismissive.

“Great. That way we don’t need to know that much about each other anyway”

“Won’t your parents find it odd that you are bringing a girlfriend you met less than a month ago to thanksgiving?”

That woman was in for a surprise when she met his parents. They were more likely to give him a hard time for not having proposed yet.

“It won’t be an issue” However, there was a slight possibility they would be unhappy about her manners. Thinking back to his mother’s last attempt to pair him up with a suitable bachelorette, it was clear she was searching for a less imposing woman.

“I expect you to be at your best behavior in their presence. Those sarcastic comments won’t sit well with them”

“Are you kidding me? I can’t be a Russian fugitive, but now I need to change my personality?”

“Yes. And also, use whatever acting skills you have to appear fascinated about me”

“I will not follow you around like a damn puppy dog, Chris” He had to school the amused smile that was crawling into his face. It would be a blast to see her trying to hide traits that were second skin to her. And he knew she would, even if just for the sake of performance. She was clearly dying to play a character, and now she could.

“That reminds me of something. I need you to come to my apartment before the trip. There’s someone you need to meet.”

# Chapter SEVENTEEN

Kiara was, to put it in simple terms, dodging Chris. She did not want to go to his apartment, so during the following weeks, she craftily made him believe she was too busy. Luckily for her, his work actually seemed to be chaotic during that period. He had no idea how flexible her schedule was, but she wasn't about to tell him she spent his only available hours binge-watching Netflix.

Sooner than she expected, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving was there, and she saw herself preparing a small bag of clothes for the trip. A quick call to Michael was enough to clear her performances for the long weekend and she was ready to go.

Against her better judgment, she provided Chris her home address so he could pick her up and drive her to the airport. When the clock hit three in the afternoon, she left the building and waited by the sidewalk. Surprisingly, there was no sign of the Aston Martin, and she couldn't wait to point out he was late.

She was thinking of ways to rile him up about his lack of punctuality when a large SUV parked outside her building began to honk. Son of a bitch, the fucker had another car.

"What are you waiting for?" His sunglasses were hiding his dark brown eyes, but if she had to guess, they would show his amusement by her hesitation.

"Where should I put my bag?" She lifted her one and only duffle bag, trying to show him why she was still outside the car.

"Do you want help to pick up the rest?"

"What rest?"

"Is that all you are bringing?"

"Yes. Now can I put it in the trunk?" She went to the back of the car and placed her bag on the floor to find the opening button. She heard Chris opening his door and telling her to wait, but she was not in the mood for prince charming to come help her.

She found the button and clicked it, but as soon as the door was lifted her view of the car was quickly replaced by the clear skies above and a four-legged giant pressed her chest to the ground.

Something wet and textured got in contact with her left cheek and her hands instinctively darted up to protect her face. Only when she touched the softest of furs and noticed the immense weight, she realized the situation she was in.

"Batman!" His voice was commanding, but with a hint of worry. The answer was a rough bark and the giant dog moved to her side. She sat on the street, and her first instinct was to touch that fur again.

“Are you alright?”

“Hm? Oh, yes!” She was still looking at the furry ball in front of her and wondering how weird it would be to sink her head into the fur. She used to do it all the time with her childhood dog, but it might seem weird. But the best kind of weird.

“Hi fluffy dog” Her recently licked cheek was pressed against his neck and her arms darted around it to increase the contact. So soft, so fluffy.

“Kiara?”

If his voice were annoyed, she would probably stick to hugging the dog just to irritate him a bit. But he was worried, and she couldn’t help but look up.

“Yes?”

“You are in the middle of the street hugging my dog”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Are you hurt?”

She took a second to understand his question, but then remembered how she was projected into the ground by the immense thing. Her hand darted up to check her head, but she actually fell on her butt first.

“I don’t think so” She got up and looked back at the dog, that was sitting patiently looking at her with a cocked head and wagging tail.

“This is Batman. Your encounter is long overdue, but I can see you didn’t need much to get familiar”

“If I knew that’s who you wanted me to meet, I wouldn’t have ditched you the whole week”

“You what?” Oops.

“Never mind. Where should I put my bag then?”

“Back seat. I was wondering if it would fit but you seem to pack light”

He double-tapped the trunk and Batman got in again, visibly used to the whole car drill. She ignored his comment about packing but deep down wondered if maybe she should have brought more stuff. It would be awful to have the whole thanksgiving crowd looking down on her clothes.

Once inside the car, she took a look at the mirror to see if the fall caused any damage. Fortunately, the worst part was her still wet cheek, which suffered the love attack from Batman. The name was cute as hell, she’d give him that.

“Do you have baby wipes or something?”

“Glove compartment”

Besides the wipes, she found a not-that-hidden stash of condoms and a Star Wars’ thermal bottle. She couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“I can’t believe you get laid keeping a Star Wars bottle and condoms in the same place”

The sunglasses kept her from seeing his expression, but the light tone of red that climbed up from his neck was enough to see her goal was attained. Whatever comeback he was hoping to shoot would be nothing compared to that.

“Never had any complaints. They are not paying attention to much else by the time we get to the condoms”

Fine, that was a nice comeback. And she could definitely imagine that. The SUV was huge, and she could bet the seat reclined all the way to the back. She pressed her tights together, recalling the last time she had sex in a car. It was a Toyota Yaris and it was hot, steamy, and cramped. She could only imagine the mess she could make in a less compact vehicle.

For a while, the only sound that could be heard in the car was the soft pop music and loud snores of a now sleeping Batman. But silence was not comfortable for them. Silence was personal.

“So, tell me their names again so I don’t miss anything”

“Right. Patricia and Edgar are the only important ones, the rest doesn’t really matter”

“I know, but you said your best friends will pop up there. I should at least know their names; you’d probably mention them a lot to a girlfriend”

“Marcus and Luke. Marcus is the life of the party. Luke is the smart one.”

“Right. Marcus and Luke. Anyone else?”

“Just some people from the company, but you don’t need to know their names”

And just like that, the conversation died again. The man seemed annoyingly comfortable cutting the conversation short, but Kiara couldn’t stand the quiet.

“So, isn’t it a problem, to flight with Batman? I don’t see a transportation cage here”

“It’s on the plane, but he rarely stays inside”

Kiara took a few seconds to understand what he meant and was glad to be able to hold her tongue. It would be plain stupid to ask if they were flying commercial when they obviously weren’t. Fucking rich people, he didn’t even think to tell her they would take a private jet.

# Chapter EIGHTEEN

Kiara was not one to panic, so she didn't. Instead, she appointed Batman as her therapy dog during the flight. She was not completely new to flying, but private jets were way out of her league and it was throwing her off a bit. There was some comfort in knowing you will die with a bunch of other people on a commercial flight if something goes wrong. Flying private didn't give her that.

Chris told her it would be just the two of them because his parents decided to fly earlier. He didn't get into the details, but she understood it had something to do with flying with the dog. Go figure. Either way, the flight was only three hours long and she could handle herself.

Batman had a proper cage for safety reasons, where he could stay during takeoff, landing, and turbulence. But, as Chris mentioned, he preferred to stay at his owner's feet most of the time. Kiara really wanted the calming effect of the giant furball, so she began to 'pss pss' him as soon as Chris closed his eyes.

"What are you doing?" His eyes were still closed, but there was an amused smile on his lips.

"Nothing"

"Right. So you are not trying to call my dog?"

"I might, but that's between me and him"

The dog, almost as if realizing he was the topic of the conversation, lifted his head and looked at her.

"Come here, Batman!" She baby-voiced, but only accomplished a cocked head from both dog and owner. It was awfully cute if she were being honest, but she would never tell him that. The dog then looked at Chris, waiting for instructions. Damn, he was an obedient dog. Couldn't he just come to her?

To make her situation worse, Chris tilted his head, motioning in her direction and the well-trained bastard jumped up to go lay by her side. Now she had to decide between petting the fluffy mountain, losing a little bit of dignity along the way, or faking indifference and letting the dog go uncuddled.

She chose the only reasonable course of action and practically laid on the aircraft's floor to get the most out of the black rug that sat by her feet. No amount of dignity could win over Batman's exposed belly.

The three hours went by rather quickly and soon the pilot warned about landing. Chris ushered Batman back to the cage and got back to his seat. She did not expect that neat-freak domineering man to have a dog like Batman.

She always had the impression that the more money someone had, the smaller their dog is. With his Everest-size pockets, she expected no dog at all. Maybe a German Shepard she could understand, to match his stern personality, but Batman wasn't even a known breed. That man was full of surprises.

Kiara was too curious about their landing spot to remember she should be scared, so she peeked through the small window to catch a glimpse of the island. A private island. That was pretty much all Chris told her about their destination, which annoyed the shit out of her.

It was almost seven, so she could only see the general shape of the island, with an elevated center covered by a large forest. There was a river there too, or maybe it was a lake. Then the jet turned, and she could see the lit landing strip. From that spot, she couldn't see any construction, but there was a large part of the land hidden by the higher terrain and fading sunshine.

"How many people live here?"

"Only the staff, though most of them go back to the continent when we are not around. Except for security. They are always here."

"You mean it is just… you? On the whole island?"

"If you need stuff from the city, we can either ask the staff or get the boat"

"Jesus, you are absolutely clueless" She didn't mean to say it out loud and in such a nasty tone, but it came out anyway.

"What?"

"I didn't ask it because of things, Chris. I asked because it's huge, I just assumed other people would live here too"

She didn't know why she took the time to explain, it's not as if he could understand the concept of sharing beauty. The island was gorgeous, and it was a shame only one family got to enjoy it. Well, family and staff.

He looked away annoyed, visibly failing to understand her point. There was a car waiting for them and soon they were moving through a poorly lit path next to the ocean. Chris was quiet and Kiara could see his apprehensive look. She didn't know him enough to pinpoint the reason, but if she had to guess, it was about her impending encounter with his parents.

She couldn't say she was nervous about it, mostly because he wasn't her real boyfriend and she didn't really care if they liked her. But she was anxious to get into character, even if the character was basically a better-behaved version of herself.

After a couple of minutes, she saw a beautiful fountain, with warm lights and dancing waters. It was in the middle of a roundabout driveway and the car circled it before parking. The entrance of the house was beautiful, and she wondered how it was not the first thing she spotted.

The front was huge, with at least ten balconies at each side of the imperial door. There was clearly an antique vibe, but it didn't seem old at all. More like vintage chick if she were to name it. Probably a recent construction made by the family's company. Chris told her the family company was in the construction industry. Not the most interesting job and the man didn't seem passionate about it either, but her opinion was irrelevant there.

Chris was seated by her side in the passenger seat, and as soon as they parked, he got out. She took it as her cue and left as well, standing in front of the double doors a bit stunned.

She felt his eyes poking holes on her neck and turned to meet his gaze. Much to her surprise, he seemed mad. It was one of her favorite looks on his face, but usually when it was put there on purpose.

"What is it?"

"You didn't wait for me to open the door" He hissed through gritted teeth surprisingly low, considering there was no one around to hear. Except for the driver, but he was occupied dealing with Batman on the other side of the vehicle.

"So? I've done it before, and you didn't seem to mind"

He got closer and grabbed her arm, whispering in her ear.

"This is different, they are watching"

Kiara plucked his fingers from her arm with a disgusted look on her face and got closer to him, staring straight into his eyes.

"Ok, ground rules. You do not touch me in a threatening manner. Not ever. Do you understand?"

He was definitely surprised by her tone and looked at her arm as if only then realizing how aggressive his gesture actually was. Good.

"Now, if you want me to behave like a nineteenth-century submissive wife, I will. But I honestly didn't think a man like you would comply with such archaic rules just to please his parents"

# Chapter NINETEEN

The nerve that girl had was simply out of this world. She might be right about him holding her arm, and Chris got the message, but talking about his parents was a step too far. It was just a fucking car door; he didn't ask her to walk two feet behind him or whatever.

Chris held her judgmental stare for a bit longer, until she looked down and… bowed? Fucking hell, she was choosing to get into a damsel character now. To make it worse, he knew his mother was spying through the window and would be actually pleased with the gesture.

For a brief second, he considered why he was going through such lengths to get his parents to like her. Truth was, the threat his mother made only involved a girlfriend, she didn't say a word about her being well-mannered or appropriate. But he knew her atypical job and humble background wouldn't go unnoticed and perhaps wanted to compensate on the other side.

Regardless of their opinion, the lie would only last for a month or so, when he would miraculously find out something that would kill the relationship. Something his mother would stand by, like she was barren or something. Yes, that would do the trick and buy him some time to take over the company before she determined he was ready for another girlfriend.

Pushing those thoughts to the back of his mind, he got around to where the driver was standing with their bags. Batman was already out of the transportation cage and, much to Chris' delight, he was peeing all over the garden around the fountain. If he couldn't escape his parents for forcing his hand on a girl, he could at least get his mother mad about something harmless. His father wouldn't care, so he could stay out of trouble.

The door was opened by Gloria, but he wasn't surprised. It was almost expected his mother would fly in their home's chief maid to the island to oversee the thanksgiving party.

"Welcome home, Mr. Wright" He knew she was only keeping the formal stance to please Patricia. But as soon as they crossed the doorstep, he watched her wiggling her eyebrows indicating Kiara. He laughed silently; glad the old maid liked his date. Her opinion was golden, even if that was not an actual relationship.

"I see you brought Batman. Is he staying in the room with the two of you?"

"Yes, Kiara won't mind him" He answered absentmindedly, recalling how she connected with the dog in the weirdest of ways. But still.

"You might want to check with her, Mister" Gloria's voice was low, but she indicated something with her head. Nate followed her gaze and noticed Kiara had an odd expression, as if she was mad or something. But why would she be mad at sharing a room with Batman when… shit.

He really didn't think about the shared room situation. It was obvious to him that they'd share, considering the relationship status they were faking. Perhaps he should have cleared it with her first. He approached her in a gesture that would seem cute from the outside and whispered just for her.

"Don't worry, I'll figure it out. Let's just go upstairs" He thought he heard a chuckle, but it was most likely a sneer from her.

Then he held her by the waist and turned back to Gloria

"It's alright, Batman will stay with us. We'll head upstairs to freshen up"

"Alright. Don't take long, dinner will be served at eight"

When they reached his room, he tried to gauge her reaction. The space was perfectly organized, and he hoped she would keep it that way. He disdainfully remembered the mess she made back at his parent's house and hoped she'd behave better. He dropped her bag on the floor, realizing he was holding the same one he found in his childhood room. Didn't the girl have other bags? Jesus.

Unfortunately for him, she had no reaction whatsoever towards the room and her expression was simply annoyed. Maybe he'd have to reinforce the rules for keeping a neat environment after they sorted out the impending issue.

"We'll figure out the sleeping arrangements, I can sleep on the couch."

She kept staring at him impassively for a whole minute and he began to think this wouldn't be so easy to solve.

"I can maybe sneak out at night and get another room, then I come back early and…" He hated having to cave and try that hard to come up with a solution, but she was probably within her right to want some peace in her sleep and…

A sudden burst of laughter broke his train of thought. She was staring at him as if he had just cracked the funniest joke in the world. Great, now the woman was crazy too.

"What the fuck Kiara?"

"I'm sorry I really wanted to keep in character and see you sleeping on the couch but then I imagined your sorry ass tiptoeing around the house and couldn't hold it in"

She was still laughing, and Chris was failing to understand her point, so he just kept staring at her with his go-to expressionless face.

"Chris, you have a king-size bed and enough pillows to make the Great Wall of China between us. We'll be fine"

"I don't… what?"

“Oh my god, you should have seen the look on your face”

“What are you, twelve?” He couldn’t decide between being mad at her for making him look stupid or glad the issue was solved. There was also a bit of confusion in the mix as to why she didn’t care about sleeping in his bed.

“If I was twelve, it would be a big problem for us to sleep on the same bed. So be happy I’m not”

Chris was a quick thinker but even he had to admit the woman kept him on his toes. To avoid looking at her smug face, he strode to the bathroom to brush his teeth after the long flight. It was half-past seven already and dinner would be served in a few.

Looking at his wrinkled airplane clothes, he decided to leverage the situation to win back his advantage. He stripped off his dress shirt and finished his business in the bathroom before walking out with an exposed torso. There was a reason behind his regular work-out sessions, and it wasn’t to ace his blood tests.

Usually, he wouldn’t resort to such petty techniques to throw someone off their game. But that was far from a regular situation for him and he was not unaware of the effect he had on women. Granted, that woman was different from the ones he was used to. For starters, she seemed to despise his money instead of craving it.

And he was rewarded after all. She tried to hide it, but he could see how her eyes widened in surprise and a light redness climbed towards her face. She looked towards her bag in a failed attempt to avoid staring, but he saw when her gaze diverted down his body for a second.

But then, he was glad she turned away because his shot at her almost backfired when he noticed that involuntary moment of distress. The woman was always spiting fire and she had literally agreed to sleep on the same bed as him. He just thought she would yell at him or something, but instead, she became… shy. And damn, he lived for it. He could almost fantasize her cheeks blushing if she saw his girth and…

He had to readjust his hard-on inside the tight dress pants since it was becoming awfully uncomfortable. Luckily, she was too distracted looking through her bag to notice.

# Chapter TWENTY

“You didn’t tell me there was a dress code” Her voice had a strain that wasn’t there before, and it was all his fault for just seconds ago coming out of the bathroom practically in his birth suit. Fucking tease.

“I told you to dress nice”

“I think our concepts of nice are different” She assessed his three-piece suit with a judgmental look. When he stripped down after the flight she thought he’d lighten up the work clothes, but he put on an even fancier dress shirt and blazer.

“Don’t worry, that dress you wore to our dinner at Madelaine’s will be fine for today. I got something for you for tomorrow.”

“Wait, what?”

“For thanksgiving”

“I understood that, Chris. Why did you buy me clothes?” What the hell was he thinking, dressing her up like a barbie doll?

“You needed them”

“No, I didn’t” She kind of did, but not from him.

“Fine, then don’t wear it. Let people stare at the odd one out” Shit.

She got the blue dress from the bag and went into the bathroom. She planned to wear it for the big event but now she realized how out of her league she was.

Kiara considered playing the same trick on him and walking out on her underwear, but she was still cringing from her schoolgirl’s reaction to his stunt. It shouldn’t have thrown her off, but there was a couple of months since her last fuck, and turning away was the best she could do to prevent him from seeing how turned on she was. Couldn’t he be ugly, for fucks sake?

Looking in the mirror, Kiara considered exposing the sidecut she kept hidden most of the time. It would be a nice comeback against him, but it would probably undermine her first impression with his parents. She decided against it, and just changed her clothes and applied some makeup.

She left the bathroom to head downstairs with Chris, drawing a large breath and making the same mental preparation she did before any performance. She wouldn’t dangle from the ceiling today, but it was just as likely to go wrong in such unfamiliar territory. They left Batman in the bedroom to sleep and Chris led her to the dining room, holding her by the waist before getting in.

“Be nice”

"I always am" and she flashed a smile that could pass any girl-next-door audition.

Patricia Wright was exactly as Chris described her to be. The aura of elegancy that emanated from her was not welcoming at all, but in comparison to the male figure by her side, she exuded hospitality.

Edgar stood by his wife's side, analyzing the room as if he intended to buy it. Chris was so different from them, in all aspects. Well, perhaps not the entitled pose. But everything else was as like as chalk and cheese.

It was clear to Kiara that they didn't come to greet her when they first arrived because that setting wouldn't favor them as much as the dining room did. There, they were kings, not hosts. She waited patiently by Chris' side, hoping the introductions would provide some insight on the behavior they expected from her.

"Mother, Edgar. How are you doing? This is Kiara, my girlfriend"

"Nice to meet you, darling" A charming smile flashed on Patricia's face as they approached her, and she air-kissed the two sides of Kiara's face. If Kiara had any inclination to like the rich, she would have thought it was a sweet gesture. But she didn't, and could only think of how long the woman must have practiced it to make it that perfect.

"Welcome to our humble home!" Argh. Kiara had to control the urge to roll her eyes.

"Thank you, Madam, it's a pleasure to be here"

"Oh, please, call me Patricia. How was your flight? I hope that dog didn't bother you much"

"It was great, and Batman was a good boy" Patricia's expression hardened almost imperceptibly. Apparently, the dog was a sensitive subject.

Edgar approached her and took her hand to his lips to place another kiss in the air above her skin. They were not fans of touching people, apparently. She was not complaining though, the further the best.

"Kiara, what an exotic name. May I ask what you do for a living?" Much to her surprise, his tone wasn't that from a condescending prick. Perhaps he was waiting on her answer to begin the judgment.

"I'm a circus performer"

She couldn't gauge his reaction because there was none. It was Patricia who spoke next.

"I knew I recognized your beautiful blue eyes. You performed at Chris' promotion party!" Kiara stared back at the man by her side with an amused look. He failed to mention that was the reason for the party. Promotion party at daddy's house. How sweet.

"Yes, mother. She was magnificent in her performance and we bonded after the show"

She felt a tingle of pain caused by his words. He didn't seem fake but any reference to her performance in a phony environment made her cringe to the core.

"Now I understand why you didn't mind Felicia. You had another young lady in your mind"

Kiara noticed Edgar staring intently at her and wanted so bad to hold his gaze, perhaps allow some venom to slip out of her glare. But she knew it wouldn't suit the role she was playing. Her eyes diverted down, and she clung a bit on Chris' arm, like the powerless girlfriend she was.

"Dinner is ready, Madam Patricia" Announced the same maid that welcomed them earlier. Kiara took her place by Chris' side and watched as the entrees were served. At least the food was nice.

"Tell me, Kiara, how is it that you began to work in the circus industry?" Patricia asked in sculpted curiosity. Maybe etiquette classes taught her that.

"I was always an artistic kid, with lots of energy to spend. So my parents enrolled me in gymnastics classes. I guess I was too wild for the harsh discipline of the sport, so I drifted off to the circus" She wasn't sure Chris wanted her to be honest about her background, but he hadn't instructed her otherwise.

"Not one for discipline, then?" Edgar's words might suggest he skipped the etiquette lessons altogether, but then his tone was… indifferent. Not critical, as she expected.

"Not in my art, Sir. It requires a colossal dose of discipline to master the skills needed to perform in the professional circles. But when it comes to creation, I prefer to color outside the lines"

He gave out a satisfied smile, and Kiara was having the hardest time reading the man. Did he judge her for her job or not? Was he cool with a lack of discipline in her terms? Maybe she could ask Chris later.

The conversation switched to business from that point forward, mostly comprised of Chris explaining the prospect profit of a new client. Edgar was quiet most of the time, but his son seemed to be playing safe and keeping him satisfied. Patricia decided to change the course of the conversation back a Kiara, apparently bored by the work talk.

"Tell me, sweetheart, will you be able to spend the whole holiday on the island?"

"Yes, I canceled all my shows for the period"

"But it's thanksgiving, what did your parents say about you spending it away?"

"Nothing, they are dead" Kiara stuffed her mouth with another piece of chicken.

# Chapter TWENTY-ONE

“Wait, you are an orphan?” Chris was stunned and didn’t want to say something so harsh. But it came out anyway and he had to wait until she chewed on a piece of poultry for a whole minute of awkward silence.

“People are not orphans after they turn 18, Chris”

“You didn’t know your girlfriend’s parents passed, Christopher?” His mother chastised, but Kiara spoke before he could.

“I didn’t tell him. The subject never came up”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m glad we can host you during this period” Patricia’s use of sweetheart was clearly annoying Kiara, but he had to praise her for not letting it show. The only clue he had was the whitening of her knuckles from clenching her hand too tight.

Dinner was already close to the end, so Chris used their flight as an excuse for them to leave. When they reached the bedroom, Kiara stood in front of him as if she knew he had something to say. He did, but the words were failing to come out. A rare occasion, but it was her fault for dropping that bomb.

“Just say something already”

“You didn’t tell me your parents were dead” He didn’t know how to feel about it, her attitude always made it seem like the biggest problem in her life was the existence of rich people. Not even jail threw her off.

“Well, I didn’t know your parents hated your dog. Now can I take a shower?”

“What the fuck Kiara! Why are you like that?”

“Maybe because my parents are dead” Her voice was but a crooked whisper.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…”

“Jesus Chris, you are too easy to play with” She laughed, drying fake tears from the corner of her eyes, and pointing to his concerned expression. It soon turned into a grimace and with a quick move she grabbed a few clothes from her bag and locked up in the bathroom.

Chris began to pace around the room, trying to concoct a retort to her little stunt. It was pathetic how he found himself mad at her so many times in such a short period. To make things worse, she took her sweet time in the shower. By the time she left, his anger had receded to a mild annoyance, making it impossible to carry the speech he had prepared.

He opted instead to shoot her a murdering glare and stride into the bathroom. His shower was short, and he hoped to convey a message on adequate water usage. But by the time he got out, there was a huge pile of pillows dividing the bed and a laying figure on one side.

He approached her to confirm she was sleeping and almost instigated Batman to bark just for the fun of waking her up. But then he noticed her face was contorted in an uneasy expression. It didn't seem like she was crying, her eyes weren't puffy or anything. But she looked sad.

He laid on the other side of the pillow fort and turned off the lights, thinking about the aggravating day they had. She would be on the next flight home if it were up to him, but for his career's sake, he would have to endure another four days.

Chris woke up to a staring figure hovering over him. Instinctively, he darted his elbow up barely missing her eye but striking the side of her cheek instead.

"What the fuck, Chris!" Kiara's hands were up to her face, covering the part he hit with a pained look.

"What the hell? You were lurking over me!"

"Shit, sorry I just wanted to see if you were up" So she knew how to apologize. Now, that was a surprise. Her hand was still hiding her left side, so he got closer to check on it.

"Is it bad?"

"Not really, far from the worse face hit I've taken" She laughed, but he got worried. Now she had dead parents and was hit in the face? He could feel the disgusting idea of domestic violence crawling under his skin and it must have shown in his face.

"No, nothing like that! The lyra is actually my assaulter" He was back at simply confused.

"Lyra?"

"Oh, sorry. The aerial hoops? You know, that circus instrument that looks like a metal hula hoop and spins?"

"I have no fucking idea what you are talking about" He didn't, but the enthusiasm in her eyes when she spoke about the whole thing was fascinating. It probably meant she was telling the truth, so he relaxed a bit. He leaned against the headboard and she grabbed a pillow from the barrier to put on her lap while sitting cross-legged.

"Damn Chris, if I knew you were so distant from the performing arts I wouldn't have slept in your bed"

"What does that have to do with anything? And why did you agree to sleep here?"

He didn't fail to notice they were talking in bed without the usual back-and-forth of sarcastic comments. It was their least aggravating conversation so far, and it felt different. Nice.

“Well, I’m used to sharing bedrooms and even beds with other artists. Sleeping is not a sexual act; I don’t know why people make it out to be. I wouldn’t even put the pillows if I were sure you weren’t a night kicker”

She had a playful smile on her lips that was familiar by now, but for the first time, she wasn’t using it to annoy him. More like laughing together, if that was possible.

“Are you telling me you artists are not promiscuous degenerates and actually sleep when put in the same room?” He joked around the common stereotype and heard her laughing legitimately for once, not sarcastically like he was used to.

“Well, it’s not a convent either. We are allowed a little bit of fun too, don’t you think?” She wiggled her brows and Chris began to worry their laugh would be heard wake the house up.

“That is a story you better not share with the guests today” He teased, almost expecting the pillow that was thrown in his face.

“You didn’t tell me the schedule for the holiday. What’s the plan?”

“Right. Thanksgiving lunch is today, I think we’ll have around ten or fifteen people tops. Just the closest business associates. Then at night is the big party, but I have no idea how many people are coming. Tomorrow begins the actual fun, my parents will leave early, and I’ll have a few friends coming over”

“Wait, what about family?” Chris knew the question might come; he was aware the Wrights didn’t have a typical family holiday.

“It’s just the three of us, Edgar, Patricia, and me. And you, of course. You’ll be in the spotlight, that’s for sure”

He noticed how her expression darkened a bit with his statement and realized it was not the first time it happened. At the restaurant she was also uncomfortable by the public stare, which was odd considering her job. If they were friends, he would ask, but he knew better than to think a lighthearted morning chat changed the status of their business arrangement.

# Chapter TWENTY-TWO

Kiara felt better after their talk in the morning. The night ended on a bad note and she just hoped he hadn't read much into her while she pretended to sleep. Her shower did little to soothe the rise of emotions she didn't want to feel, but at least sleep did what the water couldn't. She was actually excited about the day.

Chris indeed bought her clothes for the Thanksgiving celebrations. Or rather, had someone else buy it, because the sense of fashion of the chosen outfits was simply too accurate to be his own. The man knew only business formal and full black-tie, for fucks sake. Since the day was divided into two fairly different events, he got her two sets of clothes appropriate for each occasion. She had to admit, the pieces were fantastic.

The cocktail dress was a light blue shade that matched her eyes and the mix of knee-length and plunging V-back made it appropriate to both her age and the composed occasion. She wasn't sure he meant for the dress to be hers after the event, but she wondered if she could keep it. It was a precious little thing and she could easily put it in her bag when she took it off, nobody would even notice.

To match the set chosen for the Thanksgiving lunch, she put on a light make-up and added heels to her look. She braided one side of her hair in a way that hid her sidecut, but still added spirit to it.

Chris was fixing up his tie when she left the bathroom, and she took a second to really look at him. The man was gorgeous, and that perfectly cut beard was sexy as hell, but she was getting a bit tired of the businessman look he always had on. If it were up to her, he'd remain on those sweatpants he slept in. Now, that was hot.

"Hey, handsome, ready for some family time?"

He looked up and smiled, drinking her in inadvertently. It was only fair; she was smoking hot in that tight dress and he better praise her for it.

"Maybe we can revisit the pet name prohibition if you go with handsome, kitten"

"Oh, hell no. No kitten. Nor baby or sugar for that matter" He laughed, but she saw a glint of mischief in his eyes that told her she let out a soft spot. He would most certainly explore it and she could already see him calling her cringe-worthy names in front of other people.

"Let's go, I'm not paying you to be pretty inside my room" He shot back, but she smiled at the compliment he smuggled into his fake complaint.

"You are not paying me at all"

“Aren’t I?” He raised a brow, reminding her there was indeed a financial arrangement behind their holiday.

The lunch was being hosted in the yard, where a big table was set for twelve. The chilly November air was subdued by beautiful fire heaters spread evenly around the big table, and the large pool was decorated with flower arrangements that matched the centerpieces.

People Kiara had never seen before were standing in conversation circles, sipping their drinks like they owned the place. She didn’t fail to notice the absence of the hosts and elbowed Chris to call his attention.

“Where are your parents?”

“They only come down when lunch is about to be served, to be sure they make a worthy entrance” He whispered into her ear, in what would have looked like an intimate gesture to everyone around. Chills ran down her body at the close contact, and she blamed it on his cheek-scratching sexy beard.

Chris led her to one of the guests’ circle and made the expected introductions, receiving compliments that made Kiara feel awkward. It felt like they were congratulating him on buying a new apartment. She noticed the guests were mostly middle-aged men, accompanied by their lovely wordless wives.

The theme was strictly business and it didn’t take long for Kiara to realize Batman’s company would be much more enjoyable. She would gladly switch places with the maid that was put in charge of the dog for the day since he was not allowed at the festivities, but unfortunately she had a role to play.

“How about your lovely girlfriend, Christopher. Is she involved with the construction industry somehow?” Her focus went back to the conversation and she regretted zoning out.

“No, I wouldn’t be able to handle more business talk when I’m off the clock”

“Nonsense, you are always on the clock” The bald man with the oddly large nose retorted.

“Business won’t run itself, will it? Money still doesn’t grow on trees.” Chris let out with a political tone she had never heard before. She decided to pay more attention, simply because it was interesting to see how he didn’t shy away from men twice his age when it came to business.

“Speaking of trees, don’t you think your reforestation wood strategy was a major setback? The new suppliers take twice the time to deliver and the construction is delayed even more”

“Quite the opposite, actually. The government benefits associated with the green initiative reduced our damage fines and increased the regulatory approval speed. Our total building time will decrease by ten percent”

Interesting indeed, the pretty boy had brains. And she did enjoy the grimace on the old man's face when he noticed there was no retort possible. She would have loved to see the development of that particular conversation, but before it could go on the hosts made their expected entrance.

Patricia and Edgar stood together like a picture, to which the doorstep was the frame. A perfect portrait of elegance and power, patiently expecting all conversation to end and the guests to look at them.

"Please, carry on talking! Don't mind us, enjoy the cocktails!" Patricia's voice was dismissive, and Kiara wondered what would happen if she called her on the bullshit and actually resumed chatting without complimenting her for the lovely lunch.

The couple sat on the table in a clear display of power, and everyone else took their assigned seats. Kiara tuned out again after they served the entries, enjoying the delicious food placed before her. If she got nothing else out of that crazy experience, at least the food was good as hell.

"Christopher, we will have to withdraw from that save the trees initiative of yours"

That got her interest back on, and she was dying to hear him go at it again, with his father this time. Edgar was clearly tougher than the bald man before, but Chris' arguments were spot on.

"Why is that, Edgar?"

"Because our old supplier offered a five percent discount"

There it was, a perfect ball for him to swing right back at his pretentious father. Kiara was on the edge of her seat. She was an artist after all, and she loved a show.

"Ok, I'll make the call next week."

Wait, what?

# Chapter TWENTY-THREE

Kiara was dumbstruck in the worst possible way. Did he really cave just like that? From what she gathered from the previous conversation, this was a project Chris invested a great amount of time and money on. He spoke of it with such conviction and pride that she thought it was his masterpiece within the company.

If she was in a similar situation, she'd probably tell his father to fuck off right away. Of course, that was not possible in corporate business but still, there were diplomatic strategies that could be used to convey the same message. She couldn't help herself and approached his ear to avoid being heard by other guests

"What the hell was that?" He surely had an explanation.

"What are you talking about?" He seemed genuinely confused and that only riled her up further.

"Why didn't you question him? His arguments were shit"

"You don't know what you are talking about Kiara" His voice was angry, but it only served to get her incredibly frustrated. Keeping her tone down was getting harder by the minute.

"I might not, but you sure as hell did. I heard you talking about it earlier, but now you just budged like the whole thing meant nothing to you" Whisper-yelling was tough at that point, but she didn't care if people noticed anymore. Chris, on the other hand, was constantly looking around to see if anyone was staring.

"That's none of your business" He hissed back

"That's bullshit, and you know it" She went back to eating her turkey, but it was harder to enjoy the perfectly cooked meal with the boiling frustration pilling up inside her.

She was not sure why it annoyed her so much since it really was none of her business. But she saw how enthusiastic he'd been about the project just minutes before, and her whole personality clashed against the idea of cowering away from passion.

She had only two explanations for that behavior, and both were pathetic. Either the man was afraid to upset his father, or he was willing to accept anything from the man that paid his bills. She didn't know which was even worse. Was he a daddy's boy or a greedy bastard?

The theme was still cooking up in her head when she heard someone saying her name. Patricia.

"Kiara? She's an artist!" Oh, she was talking to someone else. She kept paying attention but looked the other way so they wouldn't know she was prying.

"Really? And what can she do?" The other woman replied. Kiara recognized her as the wife of the chubbiest businessman, and she seemed oddly interested in the subject.

"Yes, you might have seen her in Chris' promotion party last month. She was the performer"

"Oh, I see. That circus thing, right?" Kiara was already annoyed before, but now she felt nauseated by their tone. Patricia was talking about her like she was a new exotic pet she was allowed to play with, and the other woman had a creepy expression Kiara was having a hard time reading.

"Kiara, darling, Cynthia and I were talking about your performance on Chris' party!" She called her attention and Kiara cringed internally. She was fine dreading the conversation from afar, but now she'd have to school her disgusted reactions. The other woman extended her hand across the table to greet her.

"Cynthia Jackson, pleasure to meet you, Kiara"

"Did you enjoy the performance, Mrs. Jackson?" Nice and pleasant.

"Yes, sure. I didn't get to see the whole thing though" Of course she didn't. Nobody did, she remembered. Well, Chris did… but that was different.

"I hope you enjoyed the part you watched" She smiled, but made sure to keep her eyes ice cold to let out a psychotic vibe only to the woman's eyes. She rejoiced when the once composed Mrs. Jackson widened her eyes in confused fear.

"Kiara, what do you think about performing tonight at the party?" Patricia was oblivious to the unpleasant exchange between the two women. Was she kidding? She had to be. Kiara laughed, dismissing her invitation, and hoping the older woman got the message.

"I'm serious, I didn't get a performer for tonight so it would be lovely to have some sort of entertainment."

Hell no! There was no way she would perform to that bunch of snobs just for their leisure. Damn, she hated that word. *Entertainment.*

"I'm sorry Patricia, I can't. I don't have any of my stuff here"

"Nonsense! Make a list and give it to Gloria. She'll make sure to provide it before the party"

Kiara's eyes widened in desperation, searching for Chris for some sympathy. Unfortunately, his stare was as impassive as the beautiful marble statues in the garden and she knew he was holding a grudge because of their little fight minutes before. Well, she wasn't too keen to talk to him either after his stunt either.

She tried hard to find a way out, but in her role as Chris' compliant and polite girlfriend, it was expected for her to accept Patricia's requests. As much as she loved to perform, it would be torture to do it for those soul-crushing reasons. For a paycheck? Needed. For the sake of art? Her ultimate passion. But for a bunch of loaded bastards that just wanted a peculiar touch to their phony party? Plain torture, with hints of sadism. And not the good kind.

“I didn’t prepare anything” It was her Hail Mary. If that didn’t work, she’d probably have to do it. She noticed another odd smile growing in Mrs. Jackson’s face and before Patricia could seal the deal, that devilish woman intervened.

“I’d love to see another performance from you, Kiara. I’m positive you don’t need much preparation at all, just throw in a few tricks”

What was the problem with that woman? She was clearly trying to sabotage her, but Kiara had no idea why.

“Then it’s settled!” Patricia clapped her hands, amused with the turn of events. Chris remained impassive. Kiara knew he noticed her distress and chose to ignore it. Prick.

“Now tell me, Cynthia, why didn’t Felicia come today? It’s Thanksgiving, it should be spent with family!” Was Kiara really the only one to notice the hypocrisy? She almost snorted but covered it with a cough and drank her water.

“Actually, she’s spending it with some friends in Cancun. Chris here was supposed to join them, but he didn’t reply to the invitation” Her tone was acidic, and Kiara could feel the shade pouring out of her words. If Michael were there, they would have a blast adding her name to their ever-growing list of shady bitches to avoid.

When lunch was finally over, Kiara was led to that sympathetic maid that greeted them when they first arrived. Gloria was put in charge of arranging everything necessary for her performance and Kiara felt bad for the woman. Circus apparatus were not easily found commodities and time was not exactly on their side.

It was four in the afternoon and the show would take place at midnight, per Patricia’s request. Kiara decided to take the opportunity to take a break from the opulent dynamic of the household and help Gloria out in the task.

The chief maid was pleasant, and her down to earth attitude would be a nice change for the zoo she found herself in. It was a zero-sum game; she could get a little room to breathe and the woman wouldn’t be sunk into the task of finding all the items of Kiara’s list alone.

Side bonus, she would avoid running into Chris before the party. She was clueless as to why he was so aggravated by her comments on his lack of spine. Oh well, maybe not clueless. But she expected him to defend his case, instead of letting her think he was a chicken.

# Chapter TWENTY-FOUR

Chris was glad Kiara made herself scarce for the rest of the afternoon. He was not in the mood to face the know-it-all expression she was sporting when in fact she knew shit about him and his life. He knew she had a strong personality from the beginning, but he didn't imagine the amount of stress she'd put him through.

The reasons for choosing her as his fake girlfriend were getting blurred in his mind. Sure, she was hot enough for his parents to believe he'd date her and yet sufficiently different for them to see the breakup as inevitable. It would be a perfect situation if she were just a tiny bit more cooperative.

Perhaps she should learn a bit from the hole she was playing and accept his commands as she did with his parents… He chastised the thought as soon as it was fully formed. He had his fair share of obedient ladies and it tended to get boring really fast. Kiara was not his girl, and her personality was annoying as fuck, but he wouldn't wish on her a more docile profile. It would kill the fun.

It was almost eight when Chris decided to get ready for the party. His mother asked him to come down at nine because Kiara would have to take an early leave to get ready for the show.

He laughed, recalling the desperate look she threw him when his mother cornered her into performing. Truth was, his irritation was only one of the reasons he didn't intervene. He was captivated by her last performance and got excited about the idea of watching her again. It was only a bonus to have her worked up because of it.

The suit for the party was hanging in his closet, and Chris got in to check if everything was in order before taking a shower. Before he could head out, he heard a familiar voice coming from the room.

"Michael, stop bitching about it. I called you for support, not for a way out. I'll perform anyway, I just want you to let me throw my fit"

Chris chuckled at her words and almost forgot how mad he was at her. Was she talking to her manager? He didn't know they were that close but was curious to find out more about that relationship. It sounded fun, so he stayed back to listen. She had pried into his life earlier, who was to say he couldn't do the same?

"I thought about performing that trashy routine with the see-through bodysuit just to hear the scandalized gasps of the rich prudes. But it would ruin all Chris' hard work on getting his parents to like me. You know what, maybe that's exactly why I should do it."

He was glad she was taking their arrangement seriously. That last part was clearly a joke, and his anger towards her had subsided considerably. But that sappy remark server to remind him what an annoying pain she was. Either way, he mourned over the scandalous routine he'd miss.

"Stop calling him sexy voice, it makes him sound like a phone-sex attendant."

Wait, what? He decided he had heard enough and opened the door from the closet to the room. Her comment on him was amusing, but he felt it was getting too personal for him to listen.

To his utmost surprise, the woman was laying on her belly in bed facing the opposite direction and had only a towel loosely wrapped around her body. He could sense that if she turned to face up, the towel could easily slide and show more than she intended him to see.

She didn't notice his presence and he certainly didn't want to be a creep and keep staring. But he also didn't want to scare her and cause a stark-naked accident. Or did he?

He cleared his throat, turning away to let her have some space.

"Shit! Michael, I'll call you later. Hi, Chris. Sorry, I didn't see you there." He laughed internally and turned around, considering any slip of the towel would be fixed by then. She got up from the bed and was still adjusting her cover. Damn, she was hot.

Her hair was wet from the recent shower and her sidecut was exposed. He wondered how she could ever hide it, considering it matched her personality so categorically. The towel was short, stopping around her midthigh and showing way more skin than he'd seen so far.

Proof of that was the beginning of a black and grey tattoo that climbed up to unknown parts of her body. Fucking hell, he wanted to see the rest of that tattoo so bad.

"Eyes up here, Chris" He would have felt embarrassed by looking at her body, but her voice was breathier than usual, which could only mean she was at least a bit turned on by the way he was looking at her. She was still out of limits, but it didn't mean he couldn't do some harmless play.

He took a step in her direction and looked into her deep blue eyes, noticing she wasn't cowering away from his stare even in her almost naked state. That damn woman didn't have an ounce of self-consciousness in her sinful body. Nor should she.

"I didn't know you were inked" His voice was low, and he was amused by the way her eyes glinted at his words.

"Unfortunately, it's not for your eyes to see, lover boy" She winked and strode to the closet, locking the door behind her.

That wink was definitely crafted in the deeper corners of hell. The woman was a tease, and a fucking sexy one. Her dress for the party was inside the room she had locked herself in, so she would probably get ready inside. That meant the best course of action for him was to go on with his shower, since their playtime was over before it even began.

He turned the water cold in an attempt to cool down. She played dirty with that little trick and he could imagine her laughing it off in the closet. What made the situation worse was the desire he saw reflected in her eyes. There was also something else there, but he couldn't quite place it. Like she was annoyed to be attracted to him. He supposed it was fair, considering he was out of her reach just as much as she was out of his.

They knew better than to mix business with pleasure. If they got tired of each other before the deal was done, his parents would push him to get another girlfriend in order to assume the company. If it were the other way around, he would be encouraged to leave the exotic girl to find someone more suitable. Trouble either way.

Nevertheless, his cock was still rock hard even after reasoning it out. Not exactly his fault considering the images of her newly found tattoo that kept popping into his head. It probably climbed up her thigh and who knew where it ended?

Maybe she had other hidden treasures in that sensual body of hers, and he could imagine how soft it would feel against his hands. He wondered if her ass would bounce when she rode his dick. If, Chris.

Fucking hell, he began to stroke his cock with one hand while steading himself on the shower wall with the other. She was probably right outside the door getting ready for the party and that thought got him going even harder.

He once again went back to the first time they met. Her performance in that black outfit, her final drop from the silks. The way she looked right into his eyes, how she winked at him for the first time. He felt his release coming and increased the pace, keeping that image in his mind. So close. He thought about how he tried to catch her before she left and saw the ring that meant the world to him in her hands and…

"Fuck" he breathed out, feeling the spurts coating the wall in front of him. That was not the image he wanted to cum to, but hell, it was needed release. He cleaned the wall and went on with his shower, hoping it was enough to appease his desire of her.

# Chapter TWENTY-FIVE

Kiara was out of the room by the time Chris left the bathroom, and he wondered where she might have gone without him. She knew they were supposed to arrive together at the party and hoped she didn't spoil his mother's entrance plans by getting down to the main floor too early.

He was fixing his hair when he heard the door opening, and almost choked on thin air when he saw her. Why dear God would allow that vision from heaven to be standing in front of him was beyond his comprehension. He had literally jerked off to her almost naked body not half an hour before, now he was just as willing to do it again to that fully dressed image in front of him.

His secretary was the one who chose the dress, and he would have to give her a raise for the choice. Kiara was wearing a dark red lace gown that screamed beauty. Chris wasn't a makeup expert, but the woman definitely was. Her face was breathtaking.

"Like what you see?" She was smiling mischievously, fully aware of her allure.

"I do, actually. You look stunning." There was no point pretending she didn't, so he called it as he saw it. Her reaction, however, was something new. She was taken aback by his lack of a smart retort and actually stood a bit stunned for a second. That was all it took to rend her speechless? He could definitely have some fun with that new intel.

"Can we go now? Everyone is there already"

"Where were you? My mother is expecting us to do a grand entrance or something, I hope you didn't show up without me" He joked.

"I didn't, I was just checking with Gloria if all the safety measures were in place, so I don't have to do it right before the show"

"Oh, right. I didn't know you had to do that"

"You don't want your beloved girlfriend to fall and break her neck because of a faulty carabiner, do you?"

They both laughed, but Chris made a mental note to ask about those safety measures later. Was she always her own safety team?

The ballroom was meticulously organized by his mother's party planners, and he was surprised to see the guests had arrived already. The ones from lunch never left and were assigned rooms around the mansion to prepare for the party. The others came on two private planes his mother chartered for her beloved attendees.

It was a comparatively smaller party in comparison to the one they held back at the continent, but still had too many people for Chris' comfort. His own friends were probably there already, and they'd be the only ones to stay the night. The following day was when the real party began.

Chris felt Kiara's arm entangling his own and proceeded to walk down the stairs towards the crowd. The music switched to a slower one to create a Cinderella effect and he rolled his eyes at his mother's antics. It was so like her to create a scene to introduce her poster child and his beautiful woman to society.

At the same time, he felt Kiara stiffen by his side. The room was eyeing her from head to toe and not all looks were amicable. He turned to her and whispered into her ear.

"Can you imagine their faces if you performed that scandalous trashy routine you mentioned?"

It did the trick and she laughed heartily, throwing her head back a little.

"You heard that, didn't you? I can assure you we'd have at least two heart attacks and a lawsuit if I did that one"

"Now I have to see that routine. Perhaps you can give me a private show one day" He winked, glad she was more at ease.

It was interesting to see how they went from an unspoken battle of getting under each other's skin to a back and forth of sexual innuendos. This new game they had going on was way more interesting. Considerably more dangerous too, if his urge to touch her was any indication.

The beginning of the party was much like lunch earlier. Lots of business talk, discussing company matters with important associates. It was a bit pathetic how the guests would throw away their plans for the longest US family holiday to suck up to the Wrights. If he were in a similar situation, he'd never comply with such an invitation. But then again, he also hated to host the party, so perhaps that kind of social event just wasn't for him at all.

Kiara was brilliant in her hole, entertaining the guests and staying out of the business talk. He noticed her grip on his arm getting tighter when certain topics of discussion came up but didn't do much more. There were times he regretted cutting off her wings on behalf of social diplomacy. It would be incredibly entertaining to see her biting the head off of some chauvinistic bastards.

There was a time he would snap at that kind of remark as well, but that was back when he was in business school, where having ideals didn't make him lose real money.

When Chris deemed his needy guests had enough of his attention, he decided to go find his own group of friends. He saw Marcus and Luke a while back and knew their most likely location. He nudged Kiara in the direction of the pool table outside the party premises and just as predicted, his friends were playing snooker.

"Careful there, I might have you arrested for wandering in a private island outside allowed premises" Chris joked and greeted his friends.

"What's up Chris and… lovely lady in red. I'm Marcus." He caught Kiara's hand and placed a kiss on top of it. Always a charmer, that bastard.

“Hi, I’m Kiara. Glad to hear I’m not the only one Chris threatens with jail from time to time” Oh fuck. Damn woman, she didn’t need to bring it up. Now he’d have to explain himself to his friends.

“I’m sure there is a lovely story behind that introduction. I can’t wait to hear it. I’m Luke, nice to meet you” Luke was decent, and didn’t touch his woman when introducing himself. Not his real woman, but still.

Chris didn’t tell them about the pretense status of his relationship, but he probably would. There was no point hiding it from them, the pair knew him too well to fall for it.

“Tell me, Kiara, how did you manage to get that man-whore under your spell?”

“Shut up, Marcus”

Kiara smiled and looked up at him with a loving expression.

“I’ll let him tell you that story” Smart girl. They didn’t discuss the approach to his friends, and she was letting him stir the pot in the direction he wanted, keeping all options open.

“You know what, I’ll tell you the whole story tomorrow when it’s just us. But you’ll have a preview of my first sight of her tonight. Kiara, I think you should get ready”

She looked at the clock on the wall and widened her eyes.

“Shit, I’m late. Will you watch it?” Was that hope in her eyes? That was awfully sweet, not at all like what he’d seen of her so far. Was that part of the act so his friends would think she was nice?

“Of course.”

She walked back to the ballroom and out of his sight.

“Damn Chris, that is some sweet arm-candy you got this time”

Chris punched Marcus’ arm, but laughed at the comment. He knew his friend meant no harm and Kiara was indeed easy on the eyes.

“Come on, you don’t want to miss her show” He wouldn’t miss it for the world.

# Chapter TWENTY-SIX

Kiara was sad to take out her dress. She felt amazing in it, especially after Chris' heartfelt compliment, and was determined to keep it. She didn't think she'd have another opportunity to use it, but she could always crash a fancy-ass party if she had to.

Now that she was alone, her mind wandered back to their earlier encounter. After that shit show with his father, she was determined to distance herself until the 'job' was done. But when it was just the two of them, he went back to being… fun. She still didn't like him, mostly because he was an entitled prick, but she couldn't deny how interesting it was to be around the man.

Truth was, their little war was thrilling and she found herself looking forward to it ever since their first chat. The shift into a more sensual kind of provocation was new, but just as exciting. She looked in the mirror, thinking about her options. Perhaps if she stayed away from him whenever his father was around, she'd still be able to have a good time.

She went into the closet to get ready. The presentation outfit was simple, but it was the best she and Gloria could do in the little time they had. She opted for a white chiffon bodysuit with an iridescent skirt that flowed around her body with ease. She chose to wear thick skin color tights both to hide her tattoo from the moneyed prudes and avoid most of the impact of the show on her bare skin.

It was impossible to find an aerial silk with the right size in such short notice, so she opted instead for an aerial hoop routine. The lyra was flown into the island, which made her feel the power of money. How nice it would be to avoid all the hard work of carrying the metal hoop on her shoulder through the subway.

The thing she hated about performing in parties – apart from the rich snobs – was the lack of interest. What was the point of doing art if there was no one there to see it? Not watch it, but really see it. Back at Chris' parents' place, she thought no one would pay attention to her… but he did.

This time she wouldn't perform in the middle of the ballroom, but in a huge winter garden right beside the party. It would work like a stage, so people would watch her from the main room. Unfortunately, that meant even fewer people would pay attention to the show, because she wouldn't swing above their heads. But on the bright side, the beautifully illuminated garden would frame her performance like an ethereal vision.

She got downstairs through an outside stair that connected directly to the glassed room. The place was essential in her choice of the routine she'd present. It was too beautiful to be just a background, the number had to talk to the flowers and the leaves, the glass and the stars above.

She loved how inspiration hit her as she got ready to convey the message she prepared for the night.

The music changed to alert the crowd. A little light game directed the audience to look at the previously unnoticed hoop hanging from the fairly high ceiling of the winter garden.

Kiara assumed her position bellow the hoop exactly at midnight and signaled Gloria to push the buttons they had rehearsed. The lyra attached to the metal structure bellow the glass ceiling began to ascend slowly taking her with it until she was hanging only by her right hand five feet above the ground.

And then it began. It was a song they wouldn't recognize, but it had the power to talk to people's souls. The violin was beautiful and the whole arrangement was made to bring a smile to the face of whoever listened to it. She moved from her one-hand hang on the lyra to sit in the middle of it and looked at the crowd.

That night she would portrait the adventure of life. Enjoying the pain and the beauty, the sorrow and the joy. She smiled at her audience and closed her eyes, feeling the cold metal against her fingers and inhaling the perfume of the flowers around her.

When she began to move, there was only art. By the time she was done, there was no art at all. She gave them all she had in the world, and all she had was her art.

A panting Kiara met Gloria on the outside of the garden. That was a very emotional number for her and there was no way she would go back to the party after it. Gloria helped her get out through the winter garden's door and breath some fresh air.

"You are amazing" The older woman was looking at her in a funny way. It was not the usual cheerful look she got out of those commercial performances. It felt more like the ones her colleagues and mentors threw at her every once in a while. The woman was not entertained, she was moved.

"Thank you, Gloria. It really means a lot to me"

"You are something special, aren't you? God, I pray you stay in his life"

Kiara felt bad for the woman. She was praying for the future of a relationship that didn't even have a present. She couldn't tell her the truth, but she wouldn't entertain the lie either.

"I'm really tired Gloria, I don't want to go through the crowd right now."

"Come, let me take you upstairs so you can rest a bit. You can go back the way you came in"

She was usually a fan of going around the crowd to gather people's opinions on the performance and to get the eventual praise from the audience. She was an artist after all, and loved the applause. But that was no ordinary show for her, and she knew people weren't looking at her as an artist that night.

She was there as Chris' girlfriend and was paraded in front of the guests for entertainment purposes only. Sure, she made the most out of it and was happy with the result. But she was not in the mood for fake compliments and was better off without the whole bootlicking atmosphere that would be created around her and Chris.

No, Gloria's compliment was more than enough for her and she'd rather close the night on that amazing note. She had already asked Patricia to be excused from the party after the show, so she could simply take a shower and rest.

Before she could so much as strip out of her outfit, the door swung open and Chris got in like a raging storm, his dark brown eyes piercing through her own like he was reaching for the skull behind it.

# Chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

Before the show, Chris positioned himself on the virtual front row of the stage, with his friends plastered on his side waiting for answers.

“Chris, what are you doing?”

“You’ll see” He looked at his watch to confirm the time. Two to midnight, any moment now.

The lights shifted towards the object in the middle of the winter garden and his breath was caught up on his throat. He smiled at the memory of her explanation on the round metal thing he couldn’t remember the name. He was never that into circus, but ever since she mentioned that particular instrument, he got curious to see her perform on it.

Despite his lack of knowledge on that specific field, Chris always had an interest in the moving arts. He’d choose dance and theater over painting and sculpture whenever given the opportunity. His mother was to blame, always taking him to appreciate the fine art of performance whenever his father was out of town.

He noticed Kiara moving to hold the lower part of the ring with one hand and heard people gasping when the structure began to move up, taking her with it. It would take more than that to surprise him, considering what he’d seen of her before.

When she began to move, however, there was not a single bone in his body that wasn’t paralyzed in awe. See, he was always one to face the mystery of art interpretation as a puzzle. On all his favorite pieces, the artist had a meaning to convey that sometimes was hidden and sometimes was not, but it was just as hard to find. Those were his favorites because he could methodically organize the clues from the whole thing and discover something few people were seeing.

But this was different. There was no code to crack, nor a hidden meaning to dissect. It was all in the open, the meaning and the purpose. There was not a clue to be found because each and every movement she made was a straightforward statement of its goal. The goal to bring joy.

He didn’t see the time pass by, but he definitely felt the ecstasy forming in his core. The performance was raw, and he never thought he would enjoy something so blunt. But how could anyone fail to cherish that which brings happiness to the soul?

When the music faded, Chris stood craving for more. The feeling was too good to be simply over and he couldn’t accept it lasted no more than a single song. Other songs came on the speakers, but it didn’t match the state of spirit he found himself in.

He felt the magic breaking when the beat of electronic music started pumping into his ears and felt the anger boiling inside from being taken away from the bliss he found himself in.

“Man, your girl’s got some wicked moves on that thing” Marcus comment served to shatter the last piece of fantasy he was holding on to, and he turned to the man with an impassive expression.

“I’ll go find her”

“Good luck with that, I’m sure she’ll be surrounded by handsy old men as soon as she’s back here”

He wouldn’t allow that to happen. But she wouldn’t either, would she? He relished on the thought he knew her well enough to understand she would not be showing herself again at the party. But that meant he didn’t get to see her, and he needed to.

Was she back in their room? It was likely. The easy path by the external stairs would grant her access and Gloria would have led her there. But in his rush, he found himself closer to the inside stair. He dashed through the ballroom and brushed past his mother on the way. If the crowd wasn’t so tight, delaying his progress, he might have escaped without a word. But luck was not in his favor.

“Christopher, Kiara was divine. She is excused from the party, but you are not, don’t you dare flee your guests”

He would have paid more attention if he wasn’t a man on a mission, but he was. He nodded to his mother to appease her and went back to struggling against the crowd. He climbed the stairs two at a time and reached his room in seconds, feeling his heartbeat on his throat and absolutely clueless on his next move once he reached her.

When he opened the door, he locked eyes with her bewitching blue orbs and his body acted on his own. He slammed the door and closed the distance between them, bringing his lips to hers in a fervent display of gratitude. His hands held both sides of her face to appease his own burning need for contact.

He felt her surprise at first, but she was a damn smart girl and it didn’t take her long to answer back to his desperate calling. Her lips started moving against his own, and she parted them to let him sink into her mouth.

His hands flung to her hips to pull her closer, and the feeling of her body against his own brought him back to the blissful state of her earlier performance. When her arms shot around his neck, loosely placed above his shoulders, he decided it was too far, too casual. That was not a casual kiss, it was a statement, an expression of how glad he was for the gift she gave him.

He pushed her against the closest wall and heard her gasp at the impact, or perhaps at the increased contact of their bodies. That was supposed to be a thankful kiss, a way to cherish that amazing woman, but he found himself getting even more out of her delicious lips.

He bit her lower lip and felt her grip on his hair tighten. If he could, he'd smile at the discovery of her preferences. And he planned on finding out even more of what made that sinful body respond.

His hand was already moving from her hips to the back of her thigh when he heard a knock on the door.

"Oh, for fucks sake" She breathed out his exact thoughts. It sounded way better on her silky voice.

"What is it?" He shouted in clear annoyance at the disturbance across the door.

"Your father requested your presence back at the party, Sir."

Shit. He backed away from her body and ran his hands through his hair, that must have been an absolute mess after she played with it.

"I'm coming" He stated loud enough for the other woman to hear, and began to straighten his suit.

"What the fuck, Chris?" Her tone was coated with hostile disbelief, but she wouldn't understand. There was nothing he could do about that at the moment, but they could pick it up later. Yes, he just needed to get down there and smooth things over with the guests.

"I'll be back, don't worry"

He adjusted his tie and darted to the door.

# Chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

Did the fucker really just leave? At that point, Kiara didn't know if the redness on her face was due to arousal or rage. Either way, the anger was definitely there. She was minding her own fucking business before the idiot stormed into the room like a lustful animal but he sure as hell wasn't allowed to quit that whole shenanigan before she was done.

And she was far from done, considering the heat she still felt on her pussy even after his ludicrous stunt. She looked into the mirror noticing the redness on her lips and cursed again. The bastard knew how to do a damn good make-out session, and she was sure he would have some tricks up his sleeve for the actual did if it came to it.

But then it didn't, because the asshole had to go see his dad. Now she was as turned on as a fucking lighthouse and refused to finger-fuck herself to the fantasy of that prick. Since there were no other delicious bearded fellows available in her imagination, she would just have to cold shower it off.

After the shower, her lust had mostly subsided, but the indignation was still there, alive and pumping. She wouldn't go back to the party, nor was she willing to wait up to confront him. Frustrated, she closed her eyes and hoped to be tired enough to sleep.

She imagined if he would wake her up when he came back. She had a whole string of curses ready to be unloaded into his stupid face in case he did, but she knew he was too much of a gentleman to disturb her for a fuck. One he would definitely not be getting.

As expected, Kiara didn't wake up until morning. Chris was sleep-beautying across his side of the bed and didn't flinch when she got up and went to the bathroom. After her morning routine, she pondered over waiting for him to wake up or exploring the house by herself.

If Patricia or Edgar hadn't left yet, it would be incredibly uncomfortable, but maybe Gloria would be the only one up that early. She left the party around the same time Kiara did and was probably up getting the household back in place. She liked her odds, so she hopped on her jeans and t-shirt and went downstairs.

Much to her surprise, one of Chris' friends was already in the kitchen talking to Gloria. Luke, the blue-eyed blond that looked like a beachwear model. She remembered thinking he had a mysterious vibe, like he knew more than he should about everything.

"Morning" She greeted, in a lighter mood than she should have been after last night.

"Hi Kiara, did you sleep well?" Gloria was serving a large portion of scrambled eggs and Kiara's mouth watered at the smell.

"I did. Hey Luke, are you in the mood for sharing food?"

Luke didn't get a chance to answer.

"Nonsense honey, I'll make you a fresh batch. Bacon or toast?"

"Both?" She made her best pleading eyes, but it wasn't needed. Gloria was visibly happy to comply with her big breakfast wish. "Where are Mr. and Mrs. Wright?"

"They left already. Madam Patricia has a Black Friday tradition she doesn't like to miss, so they took off before dawn" Gloria replied, but soon strode away from them to prepare her food.

She was glad his parents were already gone, and she could be excused from her role for a while. She still didn't know if he would tell the truth to his friends, but at least she wouldn't be forced to act like a passive doll anymore.

Kiara sat on the chair by Luke's side but didn't know how to start a conversation. Per Chris' explanation, he was the 'smart one', but that wasn't enough to get the chat going. Luckily, he was the one to break the silence.

"Your show was nice last night"

"Oh, thanks. I'm glad you liked it"

"Nice tricks. I once dated a circus girl, but she was not an aerialist"

"Yeah? Acrobat?" She asked, and he nodded. Acrobats were fun.

"Always up for a roundoff-back handspring or whatever the name of those twists and turns."

Kiara laughed, but was actually surprised he got the name right. She could tell he was sure of it, and just added the 'whatever' to avoid sounding like a smarty-pants.

His voice was low and didn't have the same domineering presence Chris' personality tented to bring. Luke's vibe was easy, and they soon got into a comfortable conversation on his ex-circus-girlfriend and the party the day before.

She was glad they got along, considering they would spend the day together. Apparently, he had a girlfriend named Amanda who would fly in before lunch. The girl had a normal family that didn't let her skip a family thanksgiving.

Kiara was almost done with her breakfast when she heard someone entering the kitchen.

"Who's ready for Blackout Friday?!"

"Keep your voice down, man" Luke reprimanded.

"Blackout Friday?" Kiara laughed about the way Marcus entered the kitchen shirtless and looking like he already had three shots of tequila. Luke was the one to answer, because the other man stuffed his mouth with an apple from the counter. Her kind of man, finally!

"Well, it's Black Friday. But instead of shopping, it's the day Marcus drinks like a fish and ends up collapsing on the floor. Therefore, Blackout Friday."

"Blasphemy! Chris drinks as much as I do" Marcus tried to defend himself from the accusation with his mouth still half-full.

Speaking of the devil, Chris entered the kitchen with a tired face, making Kiara wonder what time he got to bed. He fist-bumped his friends and came closer to her, leaning against the counter.

"Hey, why didn't you wake me up?" She arched a brow at his friendly tone, so foreign to her ears she had to double-check if it was really him talking. Shrugging it off, she stood to put away her dishes.

"Chris, Amanda just texted me she'll get here right before lunch. Can I borrow one of the cars to pick her up?"

At Luke's words, Marcus leaned against the wall with his hand on his heart and made a poor imitation of his blond friend.

"Oh, Princess Amanda, I can't stand to be away from you for a single minute. No driver is good enough to pick you up at the landing strip, even if it's only a fifteen-minute ride"

"Shut up, Marcus!" Chris reprimanded, but Luke was fast to provide his own answer.

"Let him, he's not wrong. No one is better than me to welcome my princess to a paradise island"

"I can see why they call you the smart one" Kiara smiled in approval. The man sounded lovestruck, and it was adorable. Not her style at all, but she could totally cherish cheesy love in others.

Marcus and Chris sat down to eat their breakfast, but Kiara didn't fail to notice the side glances her pretense boyfriend was throwing at her. He clearly wanted to talk to her alone, so she made it her mission to avoid that at all costs.

"I'll take Batman out for his morning walk" She stated, and began to walk away from the men.

"Wait, I'll go with you, give me five"

"No, take your time. It's not good to exercise right after breakfast anyway"

She strode off before he could protest any further, leaving behind an absolutely clueless pair of brown eyes. To be completely honest, she wasn't sure what the plan was. She was mad at him, yes. But he didn't owe her anything, and he was not under any obligation to fulfill her nasty fantasies, even if it made her livid.

# Chapter TWENTY-NINE

Chris knew his friends were holding back a laugh about his current situation. Right after she left, he explained everything to the two unsupportive asses in front of him. From the ring theft to the kiss the night before. He didn't plan to spill the whole thing, but Luke was sort of a master in reading people and knew he was trying to bullshit his way out right from the beginning.

"Just say it already, I'm an idiot" He was feeling the judgmental stares and knew they would criticize his decision to bring her to his home.

"You are, but not for the reason you think"

"Oh yeah? Then why?"

"You can't expect to put yourself through four days of forced cohabitation with a woman like that and come out unharmed" Who uses 'forced cohabitation to describe a holiday trip? Well, Luke.

"I don't think she'll steal anything from the island; it was very specific…"

"Jesus, get your head out of your ass! She's not a thief, that's not what we are talking about!" Marcus intervened. Apparently, the two of them were ganging up against him. Great.

"Then what the hell do you mean?"

"Let me put it in simple terms so you can understand" Luke was always an arrogant jackass. But a damn good friend, most of the time. "She's beautiful"

"And hot" Marcus felt the need to contribute

"And a damn good artist. If I'm not mistaken, she was able to get your fucking soul turned on last night. I swear I never saw you like that"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Chris, you'll fall for that girl" Luke stated.

"I will most certainly not. You haven't properly met her yet; she is a pain in the ass. I swear to you, it seems like her number one hobby is to get under my skin"

His so-called friends shared a knowing look that only served to annoy Chris even further. And they were wrong.

"She's a thief. Don't you have opinions on that?"

"Man, get over the thief thing. She gave it back, didn't she? And you sent her to jail for something that costs you what? A week's work?" Marcus had a point; she did give it back rather

quickly. And a night in a holding cell was more than enough punishment for that if he was being completely honest.

Then Luke murmured something too low to be heard but sounded a lot like 'it'll be hers soon anyway'. Chris wouldn't dignify him with an answer.

From all the bullshit his friends said, they got one thing right. She was hot. And after their kiss, he was definitely willing to look past the downsides of turning their relationship physical. Shit, he almost needed it. But she was ghosting him since it happened, so he'd have to change her mind.

"It's time to go get Amanda, she's preparing for landing" Luke interrupted his train of thought.

"Marcus, why don't you go with Luke?"

"Nah, I'm good. I don't want to experience their two-days-apart reunion"

"You bet you don't" Luke answered.

So he wouldn't have the privacy to go after Kiara at the moment. But it was fine, he had time. After all, she was trapped on an island with him.

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When Chris heard the front door opening, he assumed Kiara was returning from her morning walk with Batman. It's been almost three hours since they left, and he was getting impatient.

"Finally!" He stood to get the door, but much to his dismay it was just Luke and Amanda.

"Not happy to see me, Chris?" The brunette looked over her sunglasses with an amused expression.

"Sorry Mands! Come in, welcome"

"She's not back yet?" Luke questioned, holding his girlfriend's bag.

"No. Have you seen her outside?"

"Nope"

He began to worry that maybe she got lost or something else happened. It was a big island and a lot could happen in three hours. But Batman was a smart boy, he knew his way back from pretty much anywhere. Unless…

Chris climbed the stairs in a rush and opened the door to his room to find his dog sleeping on his gigantic bed and Kiara laying on top of him playing on her phone.

"What the fuck, Kiara?" She turned to the door to look at him and smiled. That sly devil had the nerve to smile, after deliberately avoiding him for hours. He was positive she used the side

stairs she discovered the night before and probably gave Batman a treat so he wouldn't bark. Crafty vixen.

"I'm chilling out with Batman"

"I can see that. When did you come back?"

"Not long ago. Did Luke's girlfriend arrive yet?"

"Yes, but…"

"Then can we have lunch already? I'm starving"

"You ate less than three hours ago!" She couldn't possibly be playing the hungry card to avoid their conversation, could she?

"I talked to Gloria about having a barbecue. She said you used to do it a lot and I'm craving a nice steak"

It had been a while since he had a barbecue. God, he missed running the grill and having lunch dragging way into the afternoon over beer and music… That was low. She couldn't have known he missed it, but it was low anyway. He couldn't even remain angry with her now that his mind was somewhere else.

"Fine. Let's head down to get things started. But don't think I don't know what you are doing" He gave her a stern look and she had the guts to tilt her head, playing innocent.

They went downstairs with Batman on their tail. It wouldn't be a proper barbecue without the dog getting the occasional leftover. It was almost noon, so they had to get things started if they wanted to eat before one.

When they reached the living room, Marcus was the only one there. Luke was probably getting Amanda settled in their room. If he knew them well enough, it would probably take a long while for them to come down again.

"Dickhead, it's barbecue day!" He shouted from across the hall.

"Fucking awesome! I'll start on the drinks"

"I'll help, I make a sick Moscow mule!" Kiara announced. How long did she plan on avoiding him? Not for long, if he had a say in it.

# Chapter THIRTY

Kiara went into the kitchen with Marcus, sticking to her plan to avoid being with Chris alone. If she were to be completely honest, it was more of a self-preservation move than anything else. She wasn't mad anymore, just a little sexually frustrated, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd allow things to escalate again if they were left alone. Especially after he quit the formal attire and was sporting jeans and a t-shirt like a normal man.

But he had already hit strike three. First by being rich, which was a giant red flag she was only just willing to ignore. But then he screwed things up twice with his daddy's boy attitude, and enough is enough.

At least she was honest about her drink-making abilities, acquired over long show trips and celebrations. Artists were not known for dry parties.

"So, tell me about yourself Kiara" Marcus was awfully tall and just as awfully handsome, with dark black skin and bald head that made him look like D.B Woodside. She would be hitting hard on him if the situation allowed.

"Not much to tell, really. You already know what I do for a living and what I like to drink" She winked, incapable of not flirting at least a little bit with that gorgeous man.

"Don't do that, kitten. You shoot to kill with that blue-eyed wink" Oh, straightforward. Nice. "You might not be his real girlfriend, but you are still Chris' girl to me" She was just playing a bit, jeez.

"Didn't know if he'd tell you"

"I'd say it's because there are no secrets between bros, but it's more because Luke would find out anyway"

"You wouldn't?" She raised a brow, trying to find out a bit more about him. He seemed easier to read than Luke, but appearances can be misleading.

"Probably, but he'd beat me to it. I need solid evidence, like the lack of marks on that pretty white neck of yours"

"Maybe I'm not into love bites" She tested.

"Maybe you didn't get the right person to bite you" He winked back.

"Now who's playing with fire?"

They laughed it off and put the drinks on a tray to take it outside. Kiara enjoyed their little back-and-forth, but much to her surprise it was totally innocent. The man was gorgeous, but

she was just not feeling that fire rising when they talked. Much unlike the sexy view in front of her.

“Took you long enough” Chris mockingly complained.

He was organizing the grill with pork ribs and smoked sausages that were making Kiara drool. She got closer to the pit to check on his work. It smelled like heaven.

“Back to talking to me already?” He asked, taking advantage of her closeness to whisper against her ear. She put her hand on his face and pushed him away. He didn’t get to smooth talk to her after last night. She grabbed a sausage from the grill and walked away blowing on it.

“Is there food already?” Asked a pretty brunette that was crossing the doorstep to leave the house. Luke followed right after.

“You must be Amanda. I’m Kiara, hi!”

“Oh, Chris’ fake girlfriend. It’s a pleasure to meet you” The woman seemed really nice, but also curious. Kiara couldn’t blame her; the whole situation was pretty atypical.

“Damn Luke, you told her?” Chris complained, but got only a laugh back from his friend.

“Do you really think you could hide it from her?” Luke raised a brow and snaked an arm around his girlfriend, giving her a quick peck on the temple. That was a fucking adorable couple.

“Ok, can someone please explain to me why these two are known for figuring things out? Second time I hear it today and I’m beginning to wonder if they’re psychics or something. Should I be worried?” Kiara joked. Marcus was the first to answer.

“You should definitely be worried. They know everything”

“Shut up Marcus. No, Kiara. They are just psychologists. Mands here teaches Behavioral Psychology in Stanford and Luke is a shrink” Chris retorted. It was quite cute to see how proud he was of his friends.

“That explains a lot” Kiara smiled. He reminded her of her childhood therapist, without whom she’d probably grow up to be an alarmingly different person.

They all got some food from the grill and sat around the table to eat. Kiara was feeling comfortable in the environment. She was afraid to be the odd one out among Chris’ group of friends, but they were more welcoming than she expected. The chat was light, and she enjoyed hearing about the highlights of their friendship.

When the clock hit six, they were all fairly drunk and the food was over for ages. The topic of the hour, since they covered most of the embarrassing stories of the trio, was Kiara.

“Now tell me this Kiara, why are you not spending the holiday with your parents?” Marcus asked.

“They are dead” She tried to play it cool as she’d done with Chris’ parents, but it sounded weird in her head. She was going to a place she’d rather not.

“Shit, what happened?” Marcus didn’t mean any harm, he was just too drunk to have a sensibility filter. Maybe if she wasn’t a bit tipsy too, she’d be able to think of something to say.

“Marcus, stop,” Luke said. Amanda glanced her way and Kiara thought she was probably an amazing professional. She wasn’t looking at her with pity or false understanding. She was just open.

Chris was sitting by her side and was looking a little lost, which was normal considering the subject. But then he did something she didn’t expect, he held her hand bellow the table. Her first instinct was to flinch away, but he held it a bit tighter and it felt… nice. His hand was big and warm, and he was drawing circular patterns that allowed her to concentrate on something else.

After a few minutes of a silence that was not nearly as suffocating as she thought it would be, the lump in her throat gave up and she decided to – ironically - kill the death subject.

“Hey, who’s in the mood to dance?”

# Chapter THIRTY-ONE

Among the five of them, only Kiara and Marcus were dance inclined. Luke and Amanda had their own little thing, with weird-cute moves and Chris was more of a watcher, sitting back while others danced.

When Marcus took a break to piss, Kiara felt like sitting by Chris' side to rest a bit. If she weren't three sheets to the wind, she'd probably avoid the one-on-one time with the gorgeous bastard, but she was.

"Nice moves"

"Can't be in the circus business and disappoint on the floor, can I?"

"Dancing doesn't involve splits and tumbles" he retorted.

"That's because I'm restraining myself, you have no idea how wild it gets in an all circus party. Splits and tumbles are a base requirement. And you better not have a place to hang, or else people will swing until it breaks"

He laughed lazily because of the booze and it felt good to hear him like that. She came to like his commanding vibe in a way, but it was interesting to see him relax a bit more. Enjoy himself.

"I trust you won't be giving us a show tonight, then?"

"Oh, do you want one? I'm sure I can amuse my host a little" she winked and stood, assessing the surroundings with a scratch of her chin.

Then, she proceeded to one of the light posts and tested its resistance. It was thicker than she needed, but not so much that she couldn't hold a grip. It was clearly made from high-quality material, so she should be fine.

"Kiara what are you doing?" Luke asked as he and Amanda approached the girl. Marcus came back from his break and was watching her closely too.

"Chris, do you think this is somewhat stable?" She'd already tested it and it would probably stand the little trick, but she was trying to put on a little charm. Their worried faces told her she might have overdone it, but well, can't get it right all the time.

She grabbed her lit imitation of a pole bar and pushed her body up to hook a leg above her hands. She felt her right foot anchoring her against the pole, and tested its stability. Good enough. Bending down to hold the pole, she allowed her left leg to leave knee-hook and opened an inverted split. It was more of a show trick, used to get a few gasps from the crowd. Not that hard to make if you had the right flexibility, which she had. But damn if being upside down didn't cause her head to spin.

“Shit! She’s crazy” Someone yelled. Probably Marcus, she thought.

She was preparing to come down when she felt a presence right by her side. As soon as she was on her feet, she stared back into the deep brown eyes towering over her, trying to get her thoughts assembled.

“Liked the trick?” She asked smiling, but he seemed worried instead of amused.

“You could have gotten hurt, are you insane?” He was holding her by the forearm a bit too tight, and she raised a brow looking at his hands. She had warned him already about aggressive touching and even if it was out of concern, she wouldn’t allow it. He noticed fast enough and let go, but kept invading her personal space with a glare.

“So you didn’t like it?” She pouted a bit and felt stupid about it, but blamed the alcohol once again. She didn’t fail to notice how his eyes darted down to her lips. If he were to kiss her now she probably wouldn’t mind at all.

“Yes, I liked it” He went back to staring at her eyes, and she could see a plea in his eyes. Maybe she should just let go and…

“It was cool as hell” Amanda’s voice shouted, easing the tension between them. Fuck, Kiara, get a grip. She walked away from Chris and mouthed a thank you to Amanda. Maybe she should let go, but that’s a decision better made sober.

Right on cue, Gloria came out with a tray of burgers that smelled like freedom and weekends. It was almost eleven and Kiara didn’t realize how hungry she was. They were surviving on alcohol and snacks since the barbecue food ran out, at five.

“Kiara, please indulge my curiosity. Don’t you ever get hurt with whose tricks?” Luke asked while grabbing a burger for himself.

“Well, everyone falls from the equipment every now and then, but mostly during practice and with some sort of safety device”

“So you never got hurt?” Marcus questioned. She snorted, thinking about all the scratches, burns, and bruises she collected throughout the years. Oh, she got hurt alright.

“Nothing serious… Well, except once.” She recalled her accident with a flinch.

“So you shouldn’t have done that today” Chris chastised. He was sitting next to her again and she could feel he didn’t chill completely after her stunt. Cute.

“My accident was some jackass’ fault, not mine” She sneered.

“Oh, do tell. I love stories about jackasses” Amanda suggested.

“Alright then. I was nineteen at the time, so it was about six years ago. It was a nightclub show and a group of idiots kept harassing me during the performance. Eventually one of them began

to tug at the fabric, so I stopped the routine to shout at him. Then, out of nowhere, the fucker grabbed it hard and pushed it all the way across the room. I fell from around 10 feet, broke an arm and hit my head"

"What an idiot!" shouted Marcus.

"At least it was a sick drop! Don't think I'll ever reach that speed again" She laughed and heard a few tentative laughs around her. Not the best crowd for some dark humor, then.

The conversation naturally flowed into a lighter subject, but soon Kiara felt the weight of the day. Her eyelids were heavy, and her yawns became regular. Chris stood up and, like the perfect gentleman he was, provided her a way out.

"I want to explore the island tomorrow morning, so I'll hit the sack"

"I should probably head out too" Kiara slurped, standing up.

Marcus made a dirty comment about Chris exploring her flexibility on his behalf, but they were all too drunk to respond. The two of them stumbled their way up to the bedroom, and Kiara could only brush her teeth before falling in bed. Chris, unfortunately, seemed to be in the mood for some pillow talk.

"Did you throw the guy in jail?"

"What?" Still talking and she just wanted to sleep.

"The idiot that made you fall"

"Oh, that. Tried to, but the fucker was loaded and you know how these things go" The chill that ran down her spine at the thought was not completely related to that particular incident, but she wouldn't allow her mind to wander back to its true cause.

"Is that why you hate rich people?"

"I'm too drunk to talk to you right now, let me sleep" She wasn't, but he was nudging her in a direction she simply couldn't go. She pretended to sleep for a while and noticed when he sighed and turned off the lights. There was an odd tug in the back of her head urging her to share, but she knew better than to listen to it. Not right now, not with him.

# Chapter THIRTY-TWO

Chris woke up to the weight of a small body on top of him. He partially remembered blacking out in bed before they could put the pillows between them, as they'd done the other night. His eyes, almost naively, glanced to Kiara's leg above his own and trailed up to find a slightly wrinkled top. It exposed a piece of skin and… fuck. A new part of her tattoo was showing right below her waist. He was simply unable to break the stare.

The last time he'd seen it, it was just a few black and grey leaves on her upper thigh, sneaking out of her loosely hung towel. Now he could see the other end of the design. Another leaf and the beginning of a flower he'd never be able to identify. At least not with so little of it showing through the bottom of her sleepwear.

With great effort, he was able to look away from the ink on her skin, but his eyes' next destination was far worse. Her face was so peaceful while she slept, he could barely remember what it looked like when she was taunting him. Her hair was all over the place, exposing her sidecut and a straight scar he'd fail to notice before. Was it from the fall she mentioned the day before? He wanted to touch it, trail the path of pain with his fingers, and feel her skin against his own.

"You can do it" He looked back at her recently opened eyes and wondered why she didn't yank her leg away from him as soon as she woke up.

He also couldn't tell why he indulged in his wish to touch the part of her shaven head marked by the thin white line.

"We should get ready" Her voice was low and uncertain. If she had said it with a bit more conviction, he might have pulled away. But she showed an opening, and just like in any negotiation, he had to explore it. He simply didn't have it in him to let it go.

"Why are you avoiding me?" He didn't mean to be so blunt about it, but truth was she had spent the day before too distant, almost detached. And it was eating him up inside, despite his attempts not to show it.

"I'm not" She retorted, pushing his hand away from her hair.

"Don't do that. Doesn't suit you"

"What is it that I'm doing?" She raised a brow. He propped onto his elbows to look into her eyes, and took a second before answering.

"I can't really tell, but you're not yourself"

"I thought you didn't want me to be myself" She defied in a sarcastic tone. A little more like her, that fire. And he felt that tug in the pit of his stomach he was growing accustomed to, but missed the day before.

"You don't know what I want" He got a bit closer and felt her breath falter.

"Neither do you" She looked at him too deeply, like her words carried more meaning than he could understand at the moment.

"I know what I want, Kiara" He knew what he fucking wanted, and it was her.

"You might, but you won't enjoy it when you get it" She wasn't allowed to say that. She had no fucking clue how much he would enjoy it. And hell, he was going to make her enjoy it too.

He pushed her shoulder down to the bed and hovered over her body, relishing on the glint in her eyes when she felt him pressing her down. He'd been rock hard since he woke up to her body clinging to him, but needed to get her there too. If her speeding breath was any indication, it wouldn't take long.

"Don't you dare say I won't enjoy this" He brought his face down to her neck and inhaled deeply. She smelled so good. But he needed more, so he began to kiss her neck, and trailed down towards her shoulder. He pushed the strap of her top down and he bit that soft spot on her pale skin, desperate for a taste of her.

"Chris" Fucking hell her voice was delicious, whispering into his ear in a pleading warning.

"Tell me," he asked, pulling his head up to level her eyes. He sounded in control, but needed her to say yes. To let him have her. He knew she wanted it, could feel it in the reactions of her body, but… he had to be sure.

"No marks" she smirked. Oh, that devil, giving him what he wanted but trying to remain in charge. He'd have to show her just how little control she actually had. He kissed her shut, pressing her body further down the mattress and feeling her heat through the thin sleepwear.

His hands trailed the path to the hem of her cotton top, that dull thing that shouldn't be allowed to touch her sinful body, and pulled it out of her. She deserved silk, or lace, or nothing at all. His cock twitched at the sight of her bare breasts.

Her breath was caught in her throat when he took her left breast in his hand, pressing her nipple between his fingers. He took the opportunity to push his tongue into her mouth. That's when he felt her pushing back and getting his bottom lip between her teeth. Fucking vixen, she was fighting back. And it felt good.

But he'd have the control back in no time, just as soon as he was done exploring the rest of her body. And hell, what a body. He could feel how strong she was under the soft skin, how the years of practice had molded her body into a sculpture he simply had to commit to memory.

He felt her fumbling with his shirt, but held her wrists against her thigh. Breaking the kiss, he looked at her in warning. He was working on her, not the other way around.

Then, Kiara pushed her body up with her hands still trapped and licked his neck with the tip of her tongue. She laid down again, looking at him with mischief. He felt a shiver starting straight from his cock and climbing all the way up to his neck where her mouth had been. Fuck, he wanted to slam his dick in that pretty little mouth of hers until she gagged.

But there was still too much in the way, and he went down to remove the rest of her sleepwear. When she was rid of it, he returned to the point he was dying to see for what felt like ages now. Her mysteriously sinful tattoo. And damn, it was perfect.

He already knew it went from her midthigh to below her waist, but he had no idea how fucking sexy it was. Two large flowers he didn't recognize covered the upper half of her thick thigh, surrounded by carefully placed leaves and stray petals. It was a masterpiece attached to the work of art that was her body, and he couldn't help but ask.

"What are those?" His voice was rough

"A chrysanthemum and a peony" She breathed out, eyes closed feeling his hand exploring the sensitive skin.

"Is there a meaning?"

"I'll tell you one day" One day. For an unknown reason, that involuntary promise found its way to his heart and he felt it beating faster at the thought. One day.

With one last kiss on each of her drawn flowers, he unwillingly left the inked part of her body to pay attention to other parts he'd been neglecting. The inside of her thigh, for example, was claiming his attention like no other. And he could not find it in himself to refuse.

# Chapter THIRTY-THREE

Kiara was in less control than she wanted to appear. Truth was she didn't plan on fucking him when she woke up. She was still clinging to the idea of keeping her distance, but the man was so damn hot.

Her whole point while talking about enjoying life was for him to see how much he was missing by that constant focus on duty and stability. But then he came onto her like she was the last bite of his favorite candy, and he was desperate to taste it. And hell, she was a sucker for despair.

She was losing her mind over the way he kissed and bit her thighs, hard enough to make her feel it but not too much to mark her skin. That perfect… son of a bitch! Her eyes were closed to focus on the feeling when he suddenly latched onto her clit and licked it hard.

Her hands darted to his hair and she couldn't help but pull at it hard. That was the moment she decided to let go of all control. He was the one that had a problem with not being in charge, not her. Damn, she wouldn't just enjoy it, she'd dive into every delicious sensation he would give her today, to the last bit of her strength.

His tongue circled her clit, and her already soaked pussy answered the call with an involuntary clench. Fuck, she could feel it building up already. All the sexual tension they built ever since they met was getting her closer to a much-awaited orgasm. And then the fucker slid a finger into her slit and she couldn't – or wouldn't – hold back the moan that escaped her lips.

The man was apparently very fond of verbal stimulation, because his tongue picked up the pace along with his middle finger, that was deliciously caressing the walls of her pussy. Her orgasm hit her hard and she threw her head back in ecstasy.

"Fuck!"

"In a minute, babe" he smirked from between her legs. She was barely out of her high, but somehow she found the strength to answer back

"I thought you said no pet names"

"I thought you said no fucking, either" He shot back.

"Never said that" She replied, pulling him up by the hair to kiss him and taking off his shirt. But he only obliged for so long.

"I wasn't done eating you" and he went back down to lick her up again, taking longer this time and prolonging her pleasure in unbearable ways. When she couldn't wait anymore, she moaned his name in a desperate plea, and he took her bud between his teeth, forcing her to reach another orgasm.

Her legs were almost irresponsive, and her whole body was still feeling the aftershocks of the crushing orgasm, but she was done with foreplay. She used her remaining strength to push him down to the bed, and climbed on top of him with a mischievous smile.

His exposed torso was not completely new to her, ever since that shirtless stunt he pulled on her, but it was a vision up close. She wanted to take her time to lick and bite each line that separated his muscles into a six-pack, but it would have to wait. He was too clothed, and it simply wouldn't do.

She hooked a finger into the elastic band of his sweatpants and underwear and dragged them down in one swift move, knowing what would come. When his cock was freed, it struck her expecting face right on the cheek and she smiled knowingly.

"Fuck, Kiara" Perfect.

And damn, he was a work of art. She had to dart her hands around it to check if his girth wasn't just a product of her imagination. When her fingers failed to find each other around him, she was sure she'd have a blast.

Since it was already so close to her mouth, she gave him a lick from the base to the very tip, already expecting the guttural moan that came after. His hand fumbled to his side and she noticed he had reached out for a condom. She got even more turned on because she didn't have to ask.

Before he could put it one, she snatched it out of his hands and locked eyes with him, climbing a bit to have her head just above his chest. She slid her hand down to his cock and heard his heartbeat accelerate at the contact. In an expert more, she rolled down the condom and stroke him a couple of times.

She straddled him again, getting ready to sit on his cock hard and fast, but before she could he turned her around and pressed her against the bed. Fucking hot, that need to pin her down. Just showed her how little control he actually had.

He aligned his cock to her dripping core but didn't slam home. The fucker was also a tease, that bastard.

"Fuck me already" She wanted to sound annoyed at his delay but could only produce a pleading voice that made him smirk even further. Then, finally, he pushed his cock into her in one long, agonizingly slow thrust, causing her to wrap her legs around his torso. Damn, he was large. She could feel her perfectly moisturized walls stretching to accommodate all of him, and her unaware grip on his hair loosening up a bit.

"So fucking tight" He grunted against her neck. He grabbed the back of her neck to steady her beneath him, and pushed his elbow against the bed to take some weight off of her. And then he gave her what she wanted and moved, thrusting hard and filling her up to the brim.

Her heels pressed against his lower back, imposing a frantic rhythm he was not failing to deliver. She felt him pounding inside her like he wanted to reach her throat and damn, she lived for it. Her fingers were leaving marks on his back from the sheer pressure of pulling him closer, and she was using the little self-control she had not to dig her nails into his skin.

He was getting her to the edge and back, reading the signs of her body like he had invented the language she was written in. But that was torture, and she wanted to give it back to him. Just a little play, a small something to make him feel good. She locked him deep inside her with her legs and pushed him to look into her eyes.

At first, he was a bit confused by her sudden interruption, but then he began to feel it. She saw it in his eyes, how they rolled to the back of his skull as soon as she began to move from within. Her inner rings were working his cock from base to tip, clenching around him with precision.

His moans were getting louder and she felt his weight increasing on top of her, caused by his inability to focus on anything else. But the thing about pompoir is that it works both ways. Due to his size, she couldn't even grip with full strength. He was holding her pussy wide open, and it felt so fucking good.

Her own moans began to fill the room and he got possessed by some sort of sex god, because once again he started to move against her, but with twice the energy. She couldn't keep her clenching pattern, but didn't need to. The effect had been felt and they were both on the edge.

"Shit, cum for me, Kiara" That was it for her, and she felt her walls gripping him tight because of her orgasm. But the bastard didn't come with her, despite being clearly on the verge of it. She didn't know whether to give him an award or a slap. She worked him hard and well, the least he could do was cum. Almost as if he had heard her, his sexy voice came down to her ear.

"Don't play tricks with me, Kiara. There's too much I want to do with your body to be ending this early"

Fucking hell, the man was good. She could swear a new wave of pleasure coursed through her after his words, and she was dying to see him live up to them.

"Want me to stop?" She demanded, clenching her inner rings in quick succession to prove her point. She doubted he was serious about her quitting the tricks. He was clearly growing fond of them, if the twitch of his cock inside her were any indication.

"Fuck" He grunted, and in a move she didn't see coming, turned them around so she was straddling him from the top. "Ride my dick"

# Chapter THIRTY-FOUR

Chris was dying to come inside that tight wet pussy of hers. He was aware of her appeal, but he didn't realize what he had signed up for until she began to work him from inside. He almost lost it when he felt her strum his cock with her pussy, and it took all of his control not to cum.

And that devil had the nerve to talk back to him after her orgasm, which only meant he had to push her further. He was fond of that blissful silence he got out of woman after he made them come over and over, but it seemed he'd have to work a little harder with that one.

He grabbed her ass to move her to his rhythm, but as soon as he began to bounce her up and down, she laid on top of him and pricked his fingers from her butt.

"Enjoy the show" She whispered into his ear, biting his lobe and getting up again. She pushed his chest down with one hand and winked, bringing a finger to her lips and in a hush sign. Oh hell.

He expected her to bounce or grind against him, but she began to do both at the same time, and he was fucking losing it. One hand was firmly locked in the middle of his chest, but the other was rooming free on her own body. She played her hair, squeezed her breasts, and went down to stroke her clit. But that wouldn't do, he was in charge of her pleasure today.

He grabbed her hand by the wrist to keep it away from her clit and she gave him a warning look, raising a brow. But to hell with her show, he'd fuck her against the wall with her arms pinned up before he'd let her pleasure herself. Her orgasms were his to take, and she wouldn't rob him of them.

He wanted to feel all her body against him, and that distance she put between them with her other hand had to go too. So he took out her support hand and held them both to her chest, with a single hand. The way she kept riding him even when both her hands were trapped was a hell of a vision, but he needed more.

He pulled her down by the back of her neck and sucked on her shoulder, feeling the soft skin swelling under his touch. Her moans served to show him how little her no-marks rule meant when his mouth was on her body. Then he bucked his hips up to fuck her from beneath hard and fast, wanting to tear her apart after each of her sexy moans. Her ass was bouncing from the impact and he couldn't help but strike her left butt cheek.

"Fuck, Chris!" she blurted out, and it was so sexy, he did it again, slapping with even more strength. Her hips began to shake, and he felt her pussy gripping him tight again, at the foreseen of another orgasm. He wouldn't hold back this time, and picked up the pace to reach his own peak right after her.

She noticed his change and once again began her devilish work of expertly clenching around him, pushing him to finish closer to her. In a few thrusts, he felt her moves getting erratic and her breath faltering, followed by a delicious moan that tore through his ears like the music of a siren. He was too far gone to hold back, and shot inside her with one last buckle of his hips. Shit, that felt good.

She climbed out of him and laid panting on the bed, and the sound of her heavy breath was heaven. Chris got up after catching his own ragged breath to dispose of the condom and turn on the shower. Maybe he could take her again before the end of it. Not his fault she was so damn hot.

"I won't shower with you" She shouted from the bed.

"Why not? Didn't I earn it?" He asked from the bathroom doorstep. He was disappointed, but perhaps she just needed a little convincing.

"Oh, you did. But we're late" Late for what?

Shit, the beach. He closed the distance between them and helped her out of bed. She didn't resist when he led her to the shower. As he soaped her back, he couldn't help but kiss the side of her neck. He noticed the purple mark beginning to form and rejoiced on the thought of her losing her mind over it. He could already feel his dick coming back to life. She raised a brow in warning, an expression he was getting used to defying. But she was right, his friends were waiting.

"Later?" He suggested. He didn't want to sound desperate, but he already needed her again more than he felt comfortable assuming.

"If you earn it" She shot back, with that hot spitfire look in her eyes.

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The walk to the beach was quick, and his friends didn't bitch much about his delay. Marcus was actually glad to be allowed to sleep through most of his hangover. Chris' parents would return to the island for dinner, so the group wanted to make the most out of their carefree time.

Batman was leading the way, as he liked to do, and Kiara and Amanda were deeply engaged in conversation during the whole walk. Chris was feeling incredibly drawn towards her, but his friends were keeping him busy. At least they were discussing Marvel's latest release, a topic he could keep alive for days. It was one of the few interests he brought with him untill adulthood, so he forced himself to look away from the black-haired goddess in front of him.

When they reached the beach, Kiara was the first to kick off her shoes, roll up her pants, and get into the water till it reached her ankles. Knowing her, he should have predicted she'd do it right away. Batman, too, indulged in a little water play with her. It was too cold for them to get

in completely, but the dog was doing a nice job getting her wet. Much like he'd done that morning. He smirked at the thought.

"I could live here" She stated, eyes closed and facing the sun.

"You'd be bored in a month" Chris replied. She opened her eyes to shoot him a disbelieving glare and he motioned around, to prove his point. She simply shook her head.

"That's what I was talking about"

The rest of the group had strayed away, making their conversation private.

"What?"

"About enjoying. Why can't you enjoy this?" She left the water to sit by the sand, and Batman laid by her side.

"You're not making any sense Kiara, I'm enjoying it"

"Then why didn't you get in the water?"

"Because I didn't feel like it" He stated.

"Right. So it had nothing to do with the fact you'd have to put your shoes back with sand sticking to your feet?" That was also true, the walk back would be incredibly uncomfortable with the sand scratching between his toes.

"What's wrong with that?"

"You miss out on a lot of things when you're always planning like that. You should try doing what you want for a change"

He lowered himself in front of her, caging her between his arms and forcing her to lay down in the sand.

"Haven't I done just that this morning?"

"And didn't it feel amazing?" She answered, coming forward and biting his lower lip in a slow and bold move he didn't see coming. Then Batman felt like joining the play, and licked his face like he was part of a triple kiss.

Instead of pushing the dog away, Kiara nudged on one of Chris' arms, making him roll on the sand and fall on his back. Then she proceeded to pet the dog and allow his soaked fur to wet her t-shirt even further. The woman was absolutely insane.

He got up and patted the sand off his body, but came closer to Batman to pet his fur too. He wanted to carry on with the conversation, but the moment had passed, and he couldn't find a way to bring it back. She was wrong. She had to be.

# Chapter THIRTY-FIVE

As the day went by, Kiara got apprehensive about dinner with Chris' parents. She knew things would get complicated now that their relationship was not purely contractual. She had no problem fitting into the whole of compliant girlfriend to help him out before, but now that she knew him better, it felt… wrong.

His goal got pretty clear to her once she understood the family dynamics. Get him some brownie points with his parents by showing them he was ready to commit. But she couldn't understand why he'd go to such lengths to prove himself to them.

She wanted to ask him, but they were not actually friends, were they? So she didn't. When they went back to the room to get ready for dinner, she could feel his stress level rising to the roof. He wasn't even touching her as he did throughout the day.

"Are you alright?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?" He demanded a bit too fast for her to believe.

She shrugged, unable to think of something else to drag the truth out of him.

"Remember your role, Kiara. We won't be alone tonight" He mumbled, straightening his tie.

"That was uncalled for, Christopher" She responded, annoyed by how different he was acting. He only shot her a murdering glare at the use of his full name, but she couldn't care less. He was not Chris at that moment, so she wouldn't call him that. What was his fucking problem with his parents anyway?

They reached the dining room without another word, and she noticed Chris' friends were already there. Edgar and Patricia were absent, but Gloria announced they'd be down shortly. Probably just waiting for the audience to settle down.

When the royal couple finally arrived, she could feel the room's atmosphere shifting into a wary one, more so than when she first met them. She didn't know how the relationship between the older couple and Chris' friends was, but she could sense it was furthest from 'Aunt Patty and Uncle Ed' than it should. Marcus and Luke were their son's childhood friends, and she expected that at least once they wouldn't act like overly priced robots that shouldn't be touched.

Unfortunately, she was wrong on assuming anything normal from them. By the time the entrees were served, she wanted nothing more than to fly back to the continent.

She wanted to talk to Amanda, maybe continue that interesting conversation they had earlier, but the situation didn't allow for parallel talking. It felt like a classroom with an awfully strict teacher, but the teacher was her fake boyfriend's father and the subject was purchase orders and subcontractors. Living hell.

She tuned out of the conversation for longer than socially acceptable, concentrating on the honey garlic salmon in front of her. She was so caught up in helping herself to a second plate that she missed the scrutinizing stares from her hosts. Eventually, something caught her ear.

“You don’t believe the energy-based industrial segment will be shifting, then?” Luke questioned with a nonchalant tone, but an inquiring eye. She wished she were paying more attention, because the question produced the first sign of a human emotion on Edgar’s face since dinner started.

“Why would it? All power plants we build are either natural gas or coal. Nobody asked for others.” Edgar replied with a dismissing attitude.

“Of course. But what about some of the new companies? Haven’t they been building something else?” Luke was truly a remarkable man. Kiara noticed how precise his comments were, hitting a soft spot with a head-down attitude. Anything different would result in a quick dismissal from the older man, but he couldn’t refuse to answer something that was perfectly masked as sheer curiosity.

“There is no evidence that the US will quit fossil fuels in the foreseeable future”

Kiara tried to recall anything from her limited knowledge about electricity generation in the country, but she had no way of knowing if Edgar was right. He sure seemed to be, but then again Luke’s remarks were spot on. She looked at Chris to see where he stood in the disguised battle, but he was absolutely impassive.

“You see, there was actually a presentation I saw a couple of years ago on renewable sources, focused on solar energy. The profit projections were astounding.” Luke was way too engaged in the topic, and she couldn’t quite understand where he was heading.

“Luke” Chris warned with a strict glare, and Kiara was rendered even more confused.

“Let the man speak, Christopher” Edgar chastised, and Kiara wanted to jump on the man’s throat. It was clear he was also bothered by the topic, but when his son was the one to try to squash it, he decided to show interest.

“It’s been a while already, but I remember the surprising forecasts on the whole chain of production. I’m sure the construction business would benefit too.”

“Interesting. I’d like to take a look. Do you think you can get me access to the work, Lucas?” Edgar replied. She then noticed how Chris knuckles were turning white on his lap and his jawline was sharper than ever. Why was he so worked up with that topic? She thought he was into those green initiatives.

“I believe Chris can get it for you. I’m sure he didn’t get rid of his final project” Oh fuck. Now it was pretty obvious why Luke was leading the conversation that way, but it didn’t explain why Chris was so annoyed by it.

“Oh, that? No need then, I’m sure if it was worth it Chris would have let me know”

“I did, Edgar, it was part of the sustainable project we discussed last year. If you want, I can schedule a new meeting and present the updated data” Chris stated plainly. Kiara expected to hear a little more fire in his voice, but even if it wasn’t there she didn’t fail to notice a bit of hope in his last statement.

“Don’t bother”

“Fucking hell” Kiara shouted, unable to contain herself. Everyone turned to look at her, the Wrights in absolute horror and Chris’ friends in some sort of sympathy. But she couldn’t care less, the cat was out of the bag and she wasn’t in the mood to put it back in.

“Why don’t you listen to your son’s ideas, Edgar? He is a fucking business genius, for the little I gathered in what? Three days? And you are incapable of noticing!”

“Kiara” Chris hissed through gritted teeth

“What? You are the one who should be defending yourself! You have amazing ideas, why don’t you fucking share them?!”

“Language!” Intervened Patricia. Really? She was talking about crushed futures here and the woman was worried about swearing.

“Have any of you ever noticed the things he’s done? Because all those stuck up business partners of yours have.”

“He doesn’t need cuddling, woman. He’s not an artist” Edgar replied in a condescending tone. Showing his true colors, wasn’t he?

“Everyone does, Edgar. It won’t kill you to give your son a word of praise every now and then”

“Enough” Chris shouted, in the first evidence of some sort of spine she’d seen from him all night. Pity it was for the wrong side. He stood and motioned her to walk, leading her outside the room to the utter discomfort of all his guests. At least he knew better than to take her by the arm to get there.

# Chapter THIRTY-SIX

“You had no right to do that” Chris was beyond furious at that point.

“Maybe not, but you had! Why didn’t you?” The nerve that woman had was simply unbearable. And she was saying it all like she was entitled to an opinion, as if he was the one breaking all the rules there.

“Stay away from my business Kiara”

“So you can live on as a coward? No, thank you. You need to stop living the life they chose for you”

“Stop talking about things you know nothing about” He pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing he could talk some sense into her.

“Why do you work so hard to please them? To please him?”

“You don’t know shit about what it’s like. Why do you think you have any right to talk about my father?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” She shouted back, and he couldn’t hold back on his next words.

“Your parents are dead, aren’t they?” Fuck. He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth but was too angry to take them back. However, it didn’t stop him from seeing the look in her eyes.

He didn’t miss how she balled her hands into fists, or the slight shaking of her whole body. When her face contorted and she turned around to hide it, he felt like maybe it was too low of a blow. But she was wrong too, and he wouldn’t back down because of a few misplaced words.

She caught a couple of loose clothes, threw them on her already messy duffel bag, and strode out of the room without a word. Chris had no idea where she’d go, since they were trapped in an island until their flight the next day, but didn’t really care. She could sleep in hell for all he cared, after all, that’s where he’d find himself on his next conversation with his parents.

He laid in bed and stared at the ceiling for an undetermined number of minutes before he heard someone knocking on the door.

“What?”

“We’re coming in” he heard Marcus’ voice on the other side, and knew Luke was the other part of the ‘we’. He was not in the mood, but they got in anyway.

“What did you do?” Luke asked. It was not an accusatory tone, but Chris knew it held blame.

“I didn’t do shit” And didn’t feel like talking about it either.

“Then why is Kiara sleeping with Amanda and Luke is being tossed into my room?” Marcus demanded.

“Plenty of room in the house, she can sleep anywhere she wants”

“Not in the state she’s in” Marcus murmured, and Luke shot him a glare that didn’t go unnoticed by Chris. He felt a sour taste in his mouth, but pride wouldn’t allow him to go crawling back to apologize. Not after what she did.

“Do you need anything?” He asked sarcastically, still laying in bed.

“Nothing we can get today” Luke said, turning around to leave. But Marcus seemed to have other plans.

“The hell we can’t. Chris, you are an idiot. And I’ll tell you why because the other person that would is trash-talking you in the next bedroom. That little reality check for your parents? Long overdue. I wish I had the guts to do what she did. I don’t know what kind of shit you told her when you came up, but you should be sucking face with the girl by now for the gift she gave you”

“Gift? Are you insane? Do you know the amount of shit I’ll have to hear now?”

“Nothing you haven’t heard before” Luke contributed.

“You should know better. I can’t believe you two!”

“How long will you keep using that same excuse?” Luke had that knowing expression that got his anger boiling even hotter.

“Don’t you fucking dare analyze me right now. Get out!” He knew it was wrong to throw them out, especially when they were the only ones who could understand his reasons. But they were taking her side, and that was too much for him to handle.

When he heard the door clicking behind him, he felt the weight of the day taking shape in the form of a throbbing headache. His Saturday began better than his hottest dreams. He didn’t know then that the roller coaster would come crushing so fucking fast.

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Chris woke up the next morning before seven, as he was used to. But instead of feeling impatient to get up and start the day, he was empty. He’d have to face the insufferable atmosphere in the house until their flight back, after lunch. He didn’t know if he could stand being in the same environment as her and his parents again. The thought of her got his stomach clenching, and he wasn’t entirely sure it was out of anger.

He wanted so bad to remain angry at her, but since she left the room the boiling hatred he felt was being gradually replaced by something else. Something that felt strangely like remorse. He wanted to believe it was reasonable guilt, caused by him being a bit blunt on her he night before. But he knew it wasn't just that.

Trying to swallow up his pride, he texted the one person that could always help him in that situation. Luke came knocking on his door not long after, and Chris almost gave up and sent him back. But pride works both ways, and he couldn't think of a rational reason to push him back out.

"Up early too?" He began, motioning to his friend to sit on the armchair by his bed.

"You know how it goes" Early mornings were one of the reasons the two of them became friends, waking up on school sleepovers before anyone else.

"How is Amanda?"

"Sleeping, I think. Didn't check"

"Oh, right" He almost forgot they didn't sleep together.

"So, what's going on?"

"I'm not sure"

"You're not my patient Chris. I won't spend years trying to figure out your life. Give it to me straight or I'm leaving"

"Fuck, how do you get any clients with that attitude?" He joked, but it felt empty. But that was his feeling at the moment, so perhaps that was a good place to start. "I'm not angry"

"Ok"

"But I should be. We had a deal, me and her. She fucked it up"

"She did. Why aren't you angry?"

"I don't know. I was, but then she walked out and now I don't know what to think"

"Why did you bring her to the island?"

"I told you, my parents forced my hand"

"No, why her? I know your she-list, you could have brought someone else, someone you could control"

"It was a calculated risk. She has this thing about rich people, so she'd never want a serious relationship. And I knew my parents would buy it because she's hot. I could fake-dump her later without much trouble because she's not the daughter of a business partner or whatever."

He watched Luke rolling his eyes and wondered how that man could be a shrink with that sort of condemning reaction. But then again, he was probably not like that at work.

“Are you lying to me or yourself?”

“What?”

“You like to think you are all rational and only take ‘calculated risks’. Bullshit” Luke imitated his voice and added the air quotes, which was making Chris lose his already thin patience.

“What is your point?”

“You didn’t bring her here because of logic, you did because you don’t want to be away from her”

# Chapter THIRTY-SEVEN

"You are wrong"

"When I sit and wait for people to lie to me, I'm usually paid in the process" If he didn't need the man's help, he'd throw him out of the room.

"Shit Luke, I'm not lying. I didn't know anything about her back then. I don't even know her that much now"

"Right. What do you feel about her?"

Chris kept staring at him for a while, unsure about what to say.

"She's different" He murmured and thought Luke would give him some credit for opening up. However, his friend's blue eyes rolled up once again. "What?"

"She's different? Really? You sound like a teenage boy trying to get into a girl's pants by saying she's different from the other girls"

"Fuck off! What do you want me to say? I never met anyone like her, so she's different"

"Jesus Chris, it feels like I'm doing child therapy. Ok, let me get the whiteboard for you." The arrogant prick actually mimicked an air pen and drew his next words in an imaginary board. "Everyone is fucking different"

"You shouldn't say 'fucking' in child's therapy" Chris retorted, making both of them laugh, and lighting up the mood a bit.

"But seriously though, people are different. You just happen to like her type of different."

It actually made sense, and Chris thought about it for a while. There was no point denying he felt attracted to her, he did since the very first moment. The only reason he didn't pursue her with his original intentions was because of the ring, but he didn't feel any anger left because of it.

"Fine. But she fucked it up last night."

"Why?" Luke asked in an honestly curious face. Chris knew it was manufactured, because the man had that sort of ability, but it annoyed him anyway.

"Can you stop that? You know what she did."

"I know, but she doesn't"

"That makes no sense at all, man"

"It does if you look at things from her perspective. She likes you. Then you go to dinner and she hears your father talking down on you and your ideas. You don't stand up to defend yourself…"

"You know why I don't!"

"How long are you going to keep using that as an excuse? I've told you to go to a therapist to sort this shit out"

"I don't need it"

"Don't you? You were so caught up on not upsetting your father that you missed some of the amazing things she said about you"

"I didn't" He mumbled. He did hear when she said he had amazing ideas and could be a business superstar. He smiled a bit at the thought, letting the feeling of being believed in sink in for a while.

"Well, good. Now you need to do some thinking. And get a damn therapist to talk about your real issues, because she's not one of them"

"Fuck off" He threw a pillow at his friend's back and waited for him to leave to lay back down.

Luke was a condescending jerk sometimes, but he had some fucking brains. It was not the first time he helped him sort his feelings out, and probably wouldn't be the last. The only thing he never talked about was his parents' issue. They fought hard on the subject when they tried to discuss it, so it was not worth it.

But all that talking led him to a pretty scary conclusion. He liked her. A lot. A lot more that he told Luke about, definitely more than he should at that point. She was not just a great fuck – and it was more than great – or a fun bickering game. She was… a promise.

The way she took life by the throat and made art out of it, the way she fucked with no wariness of the aftermath. The way she stood by him when he wouldn't do it himself. A promise.

Chris got worried when she didn't come down for breakfast, and even more when she didn't show up for lunch. He wanted to check on her, but Amanda was pretty adamant that he shouldn't. He shot her a murdering glare when she said it, but Luke's expression made him back down from the fight.

It was rather ineffective to do all that just to avoid him, considering they'd go back on the same flight. He knew she was upset about that shitty remark about her parents, but if she didn't come out, he'd never have the chance to apologize.

And if he didn't, there was a real and quite scary possibility that he wouldn't be seeing her again. No, they couldn't part on bad terms. It was almost time for them to leave anyway, so he could wait until then.

While he was packing, he noticed Batman was clingier than usual. The dog always loved a petting session, but the constant nuzzling made it seem like he was petting Chris instead of the other way around.

"Hey buddy, I'm not sad ok?" The low bark he got as a response was a clear sign that the dog didn't believe him. Not much he could do there.

When he was ready to leave, he heard the doorknob turning. When he saw her getting in, his heart halted in a way he didn't expect.

"Hey, where have you been?" He tried to check the temperature before getting into unknown waters.

"I'm just getting my dress" Her tone was angry, which was bad. But it was better than apathy, he supposed. She went into the closet and got a hanger with her beautiful red dress from the thanksgiving party.

"I hope I can see you wearing it again" He knew it was a risky move, but went for it anyway.

"No fucking way. You don't get to say that. You just don't" She blurted out in a tight voice.

"Kiara, we need to talk. I'm sorry for…"

"Stop. We had a deal and now it's over. You don't need to smooth things over, since we'll not be seeing each other again" She began to walk away, forcing him to follow right after with his bag. She kept wandering through the corridors with no apparent aim until he called her out.

"You can't run away from me; we are on the same flight home"

"Maybe, but I can ignore you"

"Why are you doing this?" When he said it, she suddenly halted and looked him in the eye for the first time since their quarrel. She was spitting fire, but there was also hurt there, and it killed him a little.

"Because you are an entitled jerk that has the world at your feet! You think you can say whatever you want and get away with it"

"What am I getting away with?" He demanded. It didn't seem like he was escaping any of the blame.

"Fucking hell, you are also clueless. You are just like the man who killed her."

# Chapter THIRTY-EIGHT

Shit. Kiara knew she shouldn't have said that, but all those memories and emotions were prickling through her skin. She thought that at least her mumbled words would be enough to get him stunned for a while, but of course she wouldn't be that lucky.

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing" She closed her eyes hard, trying to think of a way out.

"You said I'm a murderer"

"Well, did you ever kill anyone?" Sarcasm. That was her way out.

"No" He all but screamed.

"Very well then, congratulations" She turned around again and strode back to Amanda's room. This time, she was successful in stunning him long enough for her to escape.

She didn't know he'd want to talk, least of all apologize. Of course she didn't intend to make that comparison, but the idiot had mentioned them and suddenly she was all too aware of the date. In roughly a week her death's anniversary would come and… No. She refused to go down that road.

She was done with all the family drama – hers and his. She was done with the role she was playing, and she was most of all done with him. Or would be, as soon as he stopped being in her line of sight.

At that moment, being done with him was a bit harder than she expected. She was trying to cling to the absurd of what he had said the day before, but her own defense mechanisms prevented her from dwelling over it. If she thought too much, she'd be back to missing her parents, and she couldn't.

When the time came to get the car to the landing strip, she glued herself to Amanda for support. The woman turned out to be an amazing person and had been a real angel to her the night before. Kiara was scared to think she almost shared the whole story with her, but was glad she could suck the words back in before they could come out.

She could almost hear her last therapist saying it was fine to tell other people things about her life, but she still didn't want to share. Not with her. Whenever Kiara thought about it, she went back to that moment she almost said it all to him instead. She could feel the words flowing when she talked to Chris, and it was scary as hell. Especially since he deserved none of it.

Her attachment to him was almost palpable. It felt like the prospect of something unknown, and she'd usually dive into it without giving it much thought. But she couldn't have that, not with that many red flags. That was why all things related to Chris had to go.

She just hoped the Wrights would refrain from talking to her on the flight after her outburst from the night before. Not that she regretted it, because she didn't. But there was a major chance she'd punch one of them in the face if they talked down on her because of it.

Lucky for her, the whole Batman situation worked in her favor once again. Throughout the weekend she noticed how Edgar and Patricia never approached the dog, and it only confirmed her suspicion that money draws dogs away. Except for Chris, but he didn't count. Either way, it meant that his parents would fly on a different plane because they refused to be confined with the dog. Pricks.

She didn't fail to notice how Chris split the seats in a way that would put the two of them together, with a little privacy she wasn't looking for. The upside was that Batman was by his feet, and she'd be able to pet him as much as she wanted during the flight. She'd miss that.

When they took off and Chris didn't say a word, she thought she might get away from the talk she knew he wanted to have. Then the flight kept going and he remained silent, which caused her to shift uncomfortably.

When the pilot announced the landing, she was simply angry. At him, for not talking to her, and at herself for being sad about it. She felt like the daughter of an absent parent, that knows he doesn't deserve her longing but can't keep herself from feeling it.

When they landed, she just wanted to go home and forget about everything they could have been. She was calling an Uber home when she felt his presence behind her. The way her heart sped up made her frustratedly clench her teeth.

"Kiara, we need to talk"

"Why?" She needed to remain at least apathetic if she hoped to get through this conversation.

"You know why"

"We are not friends, Chris. We don't need to talk about our problems"

"Don't do this. Why are you shutting me down?" He was back at that commanding tone, and it made a fire stir inside her. Why couldn't he be like that with his family too? If he were, it might remove enough red flags for her to cave to her wish to try it out.

"What do you want?"

She looked right into his eyes with a fierce expression, hoping to pressure him to give up. Instead, he took her face between his hands and got closer.

"I want to know you. I'll take you to dinner, invite you to my house. We'll do it right this time."

He was looking at her with those deep brown eyes that didn't plead, they demanded. And damn, she enjoyed seeing it almost as much as tearing it apart. It led her back to their first encounters,

filled with witty remarks and sarcastic comebacks that made her feel alive. But she couldn't give in… not unless he knew just how wrong he was.

"What about yesterday's fiasco?"

"Don't worry about that. It was bad, but you can always apologize to them and…"

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" She shouted, prickling his hands off her cheeks, and earning the attention of a few people on the private landing strip. It was incredibly uncomfortable, but that conversation was worse.

"Why can't you…" He began to talk, but it sounded like he didn't get the message, so she interrupted.

"Fucking hell, you are unbelievable. I asked about our conversation's fiasco Chris, not about your parents. Don't you understand? I don't give a damn about them. This is about you and me"

"You don't understand!" He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, clearly annoyed by the course of the conversation. Well, she had the right to be annoyed too.

"It doesn't seem like you're going to tell me, are you?" She waited, staring at his wordless lips. "Didn't think so"

The uber had arrived during their talk, so she turned her back on him and walked away. She wanted to cry, because that was probably the saddest she'd been in a long while. But she knew it wouldn't come, it never did. Maybe when she was back at her place… She hoped, but knew it was unlikely. She'd have to endure the sadness bottled up inside once again.

# Chapter THIRTY-NINE

A week had come and gone after thanksgiving and Chris was still not feeling like himself. The world went on with its business, but he couldn't do the same. He was miserable because the thought of her was keeping him from enjoying the things he loved and making him despise even more the things he hated.

Running in the park with Batman was great, but he couldn't shake the image of her playing with the dog on the beach. Besides, he began to approach every black-haired slim female he spotted on the street, which caused Chris to cut the run short almost every day.

Work was by far the worst collateral damage of Kiara's passage through his life. He wasn't exactly passionate about his father's company, but he loved to work. To develop projects, make them come to life, reap the fruits of a job well done. All that took a sour turn after the holiday.

All the projects seemed dull and the employees, incompetent. He knew he couldn't let his mood affect his people, so he opted for closing the door and working on spreadsheets for the week. However, he couldn't really avoid human contact for long, and more often than not he found himself in a packed meeting room drifting off during a presentation on budget adjustments.

"Chris, Mrs. Edgar is calling for you in his office" His secretary informed through the phone.

"I'll be right there"

He looked at the watch and wondered what his father could need at 4 pm on a Friday. When he passed his secretary's table right outside his office, he remembered something.

"Tina, thanks for the dresses on thanksgiving. I know it's not your job description, but you did great"

The woman's face brightened up at the compliment, perhaps the first nice thing he said to her after he came back from the island.

"No worries sir, I hope she liked it"

"Oh, she loved it. And looked stunning in it too" He remembered in a mix of wonder and hurt, feelings he tried to crush as soon as he identified them.

"I'm glad! Maybe I can meet her at the Office Christmas party" She smiled, but his face must have shown how uncomfortable that statement made him because the happiness faltered in her face and she looked away.

Taking it as his cue, Chris walked away thinking about that damn party and his lack of a date for it. He knew that going alone would be sheer torture, especially with all the single women at the party binding themselves to him like Velcro. It never bothered him before, but now he shuddered at the thought. Yet another drawback of the Kiara effect.

“Edgar, you asked for me?”

“Yes. Sit” The man was still typing something into his computer, and Chris sat for a few minutes, waiting for him to be done. “Have you canceled that green initiative as we discussed?”

“Not yet, I have a meeting scheduled on Monday to discuss it”

“Do it now”

“I can’t, there’s a contract in place. I’m meeting their lawyers next week” Chris was feeling the preface of a discussion.

“Call them and say the deal is off, you can work the details later. I’ll announce the extended partnership with our old supplier during the weekend” That made absolutely no sense, they’d lose even more money in the process. It was simply a bad move.

“Edgar, I can’t do that. The fines from breaking the contract without a settlement would surpass whatever discount the old supplier offers”

“I’m not asking, Christopher” His father’s voice rose, feeling the challenge in his son’s argument.

Chris was feeling the tension increasing in the room, and knew the right move was to back down. But his mind was filled with the image of Kiara sitting in the sand, with Batman by her side. And her words kept playing on repeat in his head; ‘You should try just doing what you want for a change’.

“Then we should call for a board meeting to decide it” He spat out. His heart was beating faster, and he knew he was jeopardizing much more than his position at the company there.

It was the first time he called for a board meeting that wasn’t purely ornamental. Everyone knew the true decision power laid solely on Edgar, and the five members of the board were put there simply to please foreign investors that looked down on family business.

The elder staff was still in the building, waiting for Edgar to leave for the weekend before them so they wouldn’t be caught ‘slacking off’. When the seven of them were gathered in the meeting room, Chris decided to step forward to take the lead.

“Gentleman, we called for this extraordinary meeting to discuss the quashing of the green initiative. Edgar and I disagree on the course of action, so I expect you to act as a decision board”

The panicked faces on the older men showed Chris how unprepared they were for the job. It was a bit pathetic, and served only to prove that his father placed them there based on relationship rather than competence.

“Get on with it, Christopher, so we can leave for the weekend” Edgar barked, in an attempt to throw him off. The man never left before eight anyway.

“Of course” Chris proceeded to explain in detail the differences in profit from both contracts, then the penalties they’d suffer from breaching it. He slipped in the fact that the board had approved his plan in the first place and finished by stating the reputation cost the rupture would cause.

It felt great, and he could see the comprehension looks on the men’s faces. His father was the only one with a closed-off expression, but it was expected. Chris was actually surprised by how little his grimace affected him during the explanation.

Edgar was the next to talk, and Chris expected him to defend his option before calling for a vote.

“Our old supplier is Mr. Jackson, and he’s an old friend”

And that was it. He didn’t argue on the numbers, or the project, or anything. An old fucking friend. Chris was livid, especially so after he noticed the uneasy glances from the board members. They wouldn’t vote for what was right, he knew it.

He couldn’t understand how his father was able to create such an empire when he valued nothing more than politics and authority. It was so fucked up, Chris felt like leaving the room without voting. But he was strict on protocol and stood there watching as all hands were raised to support Edgar’s proposal.

“Wonderful. Now you can place the call” Edgar dismissed the men and turned to Chris with an impassive expression. “Don’t forget about dinner tomorrow night. Come alone” Apparently his father was not up to date on his dating life.

“Ok”

“Mr. Jackson and his family will be joining us.”

# Chapter FOURTY

For some reason unknown to mankind, Chris found himself at his parents' home an hour before dinner, at one of the most aggravating conversations he ever had.

"She's not right for you" Edgar stated clearly. Patricia was awfully quiet.

"And why is that?" He didn't tell them they were not together anymore – or ever – and wasn't sure why. For some reason, Chris was putting up with that torture when he had a clear way out. But he'd go through that if they were a real couple, and maybe he just wanted to know how it'd be like.

"She's alluring, I can see why you'd be attracted to her" Edgar made it seem like she seduced him somehow, causing his anger to rise even further.

"What is your point?" He heard his father clicking his tongue, clearly annoyed at his question.

"She's too different"

"Wasn't too different when mother used her to entertain the guests, was she?" He snapped, raising his tone at the absurd of the whole conversation. His mother simply lowered her head, and he wondered why. She usually was the first to defend Edgar in such situations.

"Don't talk to your mother like that, Christopher". Chris pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering once again why he was going through all this trouble when there was no relationship to defend.

"Fine. What do you want?" Chris asked looking into his father's eyes.

"You should explore other options before committing"

"Kiara and I are done, Edgar, so there's no need to worry" To hear the words coming out of his own mouth gave him a dreadful feeling of emptiness. They were never a thing to begin with but… they could have been.

He exited the tearoom and wandered around the house for a while, stopping at the grand ballroom. The place they first met. He closed his eyes and went back to that moment, to her routine. An ode to struggle, and damn it, he was struggling. He could feel it, trying so hard to reach the top, only to fall again.

"Are you two really over?" He heard his mother's voice behind him. When he turned around to see her, she seemed… worried.

"Yes"

"Why?" There was something odd about her tone that he couldn't quite place.

“I thought that’s what you wanted” The hostility that was seeping through his words was probably misdirected.

“I want you to be happy” She was not being her usual self. Sure, he knew she wanted him to be happy. But it usually came attached to terms and conditions of her own.

“What is going on, mother?”

Before she could answer, the doorbell rang announcing the arrival of their guests. He saw his mother’s face change from that hard to read expression into the usual hostess pleasant smile, and she walked away to greet the Jacksons.

Chris stood stunned for a while, trying to make sense out of his mother’s words. Did she want them to be a couple? Maybe she liked having a performer to show off to her friends. But it didn’t seem like it. She was almost sad, and that was not like her at all. He’d have to find out later.

Mr. Jackson shook his hand with more enthusiasm than necessary, and his wife gave out a satisfied smile after searching the room. She was clearly pleased by Kiara’s absence, and Chris’ humor took another sour turn. He should have guessed Felicia would be there. A bit too fancily dressed for a family and friends’ dinner, if he were to provide his opinion.

“Christopher, I believe you remember Felicia from your promotion party” His father was not being subtle at all, and it was pretty awkward. To be honest, he never thought the man would resort to such absurd tactics to strengthen his business relations. Not when the company was doing well. Unless…

“Sure, nice to see you again, Felicia” He put on his corporate smile, perfectly tailored for strenuous situations such as this.

Dinner was unpleasant. His parents were both acting strange, though the guests didn’t seem to notice. Patricia was missing that typical endorsement on all Edgar’s words and Edgar, instead of sticking to business talk, was showing an unusual interest in people’s lives.

“Cynthia, how are you adapting to the new apartment?”

“It’s marvelous Edgar, thank you for all your help”

So his father helped them get a new apartment. It was not typical for him to help people out like that, but he probably did it for commercial reasons.

“I’m glad. Perhaps soon we’ll be searching for a place for Felicia too” His tone held the standard indifference, but his eyes were more eager than Chris was used to seeing. Something was definitely off.

“Felicia is only moving out when she gets married. But I agree, it might be sooner rather than later” Cynthia was clearly a snake. Chris didn’t miss the glint of trouble that came with her words, or how she looked at him with a knowing smile.

“I think it’s time for dessert, don’t you?” His mother stated, motioning for a maid to speed things up. They had barely finished the main course when a grand apple pie was served by the staff.

Chris took the time to observe everyone in that room. He was more than certain that his father had an agenda for the Jacksons, but he had a suspicion he was not the only one involved.

Mr. Jackson looked like a child on Christmas, eager and cheerful, but unaware of the hidden lie that surrounded the place. If there was a secret in the room, he was not in on it. Felicia was quiet, which he began to think was her default. He didn’t even remember her voice from that one time they met at the party. But if the plot was to get them together – and by that point, he was pretty sure it was – he could understand why she’d chose silence.

Cynthia seemed pleased with the whole situation, perhaps the only one at the table to feel that way. She was getting the better part of the deal, that was for sure. But what the hell kind of deal that was? His parents’ behavior couldn’t be explained by a simple plot to get him and Felicia together.

He noticed how unfazed he was by the thought of being a pawn in their game. That was new. It used to bother him to the core in the past, when he had to bent to all his parents’ wishes.

Now that he came to pay attention, there was actually an explanation for his absolute lack of care about it. He simply wouldn’t do it. He wasn’t going to cave to whatever plan they designed, so it didn’t matter. They wanted him to put a ring on Felicia’s finger? Don’t wait up.

There was only one girl worth of his priceless engagement ring, and she was probably rolling down the drapes at that time… Shit. He didn’t mean to think that, but the thought came anyway. Fuck, he missed her. He thought about what she would say during that dinner, and realized she’d probably call everyone on their bullshit before the entrees were even served.

“What do you think, Christopher?” His father pushed him out of his daze.

“Sorry, what was the question?” He noticed the angry stares from the man due to his lack of attention

“Cynthia asked if you’d like to join them in church duty tomorrow” Oh, for fucks sake.

“I’m so sorry, I have other plans” He politely refused. His father shot daggers at him, but the one to answer was Cynthia.

“Other plans that don’t involve praying on Sunday morning?” Her voice was filled with venom, and Chris couldn’t fathom all that deceitfulness into a church.

He felt like rolling up his eyes, but was able to craft an apologetic nod. If it were up to him, the only thing he'd be worshiping on Sunday morning was his woman. Oh shit, those thoughts needed to stop. Kiara was not his woman. But damn, she should be.

His mother once again rushed the dinner, expertly making it come to an end, and for that Chris was glad. His diplomatic abilities had limits and by the pissed off look on his father's face, it was not holding up anymore. The door was barely closed after the guests when Edgar turned to him with a murdering glare.

"What was that, Christopher?"

# Chapter FOURTY-ONE

"I'm the one who should be asking" Chris retorted, annoyed. Damn, where did that come from? He noticed Patricia's widened eyes, also surprised at his quarrelsome behavior.

"Watch it, boy. You are stepping out of line." Edgar's jaw was clenched, and Chris tried to recall the last time he'd been so worked up because of him. He was probably sixteen, so it was about time to shake things up a bit. But before he could answer, his mother spoke.

"It's late, maybe we should all go to bed." Her tone was never that soothing, another evidence of the shady situation between them.

"Ok, what the hell is going on here?" Chris accused.

"Language!" his mother scolded, on the first evidence that she was really Patricia Wright and not some phony imitation of his mother.

"Look at what that girl has done to you!" His father raised his voice.

"Don't you fucking dare talk about her right now!"

"Why not? You two are done." The words stung in the pitch of his stomach, and he felt like punching a wall. As always, his reaction to pain was to bite back.

"So you are ready with a replacement, is that it?" Chris questioned sarcastically.

"The Jackson's daughter is a perfect pair for you." Edgar went back to his usual dismissive tone, stating it so matter-of-factly that one would think they were talking about daisies.

But then he heard his mother scoffing. She tried to hide it, but Edgar heard it too, and a shade of red began to climb up his neck. It was an opening. His parents rarely disagreed on anything related to him, but now they did. So maybe he could push it back, just this once. Just for that thing that really mattered to him.

"It won't happen, Edgar. Me and Felicia"

"You will do as I say, Christopher." That was pathetic. Sure, his father had basically orchestrated Chris' whole life until that point, but he never interfered in his choice of dating.

"I won't. Will you hold my job over my head again?" Damn, it felt good to be standing up for himself once. Do what he wanted to do for a change, much like she said he should.

"Not only your job, *son.*"

The air became thick with the weight of the threat. There it was, the pressure that lurked in the air during every dispute they had, just waiting for a little reaction on his part to be brought to light.

Chris felt a chill run down his spine, knowing he had reached a barrier he was not able to cross. Fuck, he wished he were strong enough to do it. He wanted to be mad, to blow it all up, but he felt himself sinking into despair. Then, like a lifeline thrown at a drowning man, his mother spoke.

"No!" Both men looked at her, incredulous. One with rage, one with hope. "You will not threaten our son with that again. If you want to fire him, go ahead. It's your company and there's nothing I can do about it. But you will not disown him. I won't let you cut him out."

"It is not disowning if he's not my son."

Chris felt his heart sink even deeper at his words. Never before had it come to the point where Edgar actually reminded him he was not part of the family. Not really. He pressed his nails into his palm, trying to replace his pain with a more physical one. Didn't help.

"He is our son, Edgar. I might not have given birth to him, but he is mine." Patricia turned to look at Chris, who was too stunned to make a move. She had never stood up to her husband before, and it was absolutely paralyzing for both of them.

He felt weak. Weak for holding on to that fear even after he was more than able to go on with his own life. He could have broken free multiple times. But then he had college debts to pay, and not enough of a name for himself to make it alone in this dog-eat-dog world… He knew those were just excuses, but he hated to face reality now more than ever.

"The company needs him," Edgar blurted out.

"Maybe that girl was right. If he is half as brilliant as she believes him to be, he can save the business without your shady schemes"

That got Chris out of his shock. He was still trying to figure it out, but he wouldn't be able to unless he started asking questions.

"What do you mean 'save the company'?"

Edgar took a deep breath and strode to the bar to fix himself a drink. He sat on his usual stool and sipped his usual whisky, but there was nothing usual about that situation. When he didn't speak, Patricia took the lead.

"The company is going through a rough patch"

"No, it's not. I control all the books. We are doing great"

He watched his father's face contort and, with a large gulp, he emptied his once full glass. His voice was dark when he spoke next.

"That part is not in the books"

"Fucking hell, what have you done?" He shouted.

“Don’t you speak with me like that, I am your father!”

“You have to make up your mind, Edgar. Either I am your son, and I will fix whatever mess you made, or I am not. And if that’s the case, I’m leaving the company”

There were three people in shock in that room. Patricia was wide-eyed, but her expression held a hint of pride. Chris was feeling the anger of being lied to, of having his company jeopardized because of someone else’s mistake. But he was also alarmed by his own ultimatum. He didn’t even know if he had the stomach to endure the consequences, but it was too late to back off.

Edgar was by far the most aggravated of the three. He was staring into his glass as if he hoped it would fill itself up. He knew the room expected him to answer, but the man remained in silence as if that would fix anything. Eventually, Chris grabbed the bottle and poured his father another glass of whisky. Then, he filled up a glass for himself and sat by his side.

With the alcohol sorted out, the only thing left to do was talk. There was a decision to be made, but Edgar had a crippling inability to ask for help. Chris raised his glass and stared at the man with expecting eyes. When Edgar raised his own, he knew the deal was done.

“Monday morning I’ll be in your office. You will tell me everything I need to know to sort this out”

Chris left the room feeling the weight of change dawning upon him. Things would shift fast from now on, he could feel it. Stability was an old friend, but it could no longer stay, and he was ready for it. Before he could leave the house, his mother called him back.

“Son, we didn’t get to finish our talk before. I don’t think you need it as much, but I can’t let you leave without saying it”

“What is it?” That conversation seemed to have happened ages ago, and Chris couldn’t even remember what it was about.

“Kiara.” Her name caused a chill to run down his spine. He wished she was there.

“What about her?”

“Are you heading out to see her?”

“No, mother. We broke up”

“You can’t break up a relationship that was never there, son” Chris widened his eyes but before he could protest, she raised a hand. “I’m your mother, I know you.” He simply nodded. Perhaps she did.

“So why are you asking?”

“Jesus Christ, now I understand why the girl swears so much around you!” She laughed. Then she got closer to him, raising her hand to touch him but stopping halfway. It made him realize how little they touched each other. “Do you like her?”

“Yes. More than I should.” There was no point in lying there, even if he never imagined that kind of conversation with Patricia.

“Nonsense. You should go after her. It’s almost midnight, she’s probably hanging from someone’s ceiling by now”

Chris only laughed, trying to understand his mother’s goal with all that. He could not conceive how the same woman could force him into getting a girlfriend for business reasons and then tell him to go after someone like Kiara.

“What’s the catch?”

“I was wrong, you know? To let your father use your adoption against you all those years. I’d never… I love you, Chris. Regardless of your choices.” Damn, that was not what he expected. Chris felt an ache in his throat he couldn’t quite recognize and closed his eyes to swallow the lump that formed there.

“Thank you,” he let out in a crooked voice. Her left hand came up to caress his cheek, and this time none of them shied away.

“Go after her. She can make you happy.”

# Chapter FOURTY-TWO

The loud pop music was ringing in Kiara's ears while she tried to dance her sorrow away. A whole week, and she still felt like shit.

"I'm clocking you on that funeral dancing, baby girl." Michael reappeared out of nowhere after spending a suspicious amount of time in the bathroom of that poorly lit club.

"And I'm clocking you on having a blowjob in the bathroom."

"Touché. But it's my birthday, so I deserved it."

He pushed her to the bar to get another drink, and she ordered herself a water. While she nervously peeled off the label of the bottle, Michael began to braid her hair. The music wasn't as loud over there, and she enjoyed sitting on the high stools to rest her feet.

"Are you sure you're ok to perform?"

"Of course, it's your birthday!" She tried to turn around to smile at him, but he pulled her hair to stop her from moving.

"I wouldn't be mad. I know you're not at your best."

"I'm fine, Michael. I just need to get him out of my system"

It was harder than she thought it would be. She couldn't stop thinking about him. It was not in her plans to tell Michael about Chris either, but the man was awfully inquisitive. His first question when they met during the week was 'did you bed sexy voice?'. After that, he extracted the truth out of her like a dental surgeon, fast and painfully.

"How do you plan on doing that?"

"I'll find myself a man tonight." She looked around determined.

"It's a gay club, Kia"

"A woman, then." She smiled, trying to turn herself around again. It was awkward talking to him facing the crowd.

"Can you sit still for a second, bitch? I'm almost done. Hair tie?" She handed over the band she kept around her wrist and waited for him to finish, taking a look at the bar mirror.

"Thanks."

"Is it as good as when she did it?"

"No, but it's close"

Nobody would ever braid her hair like her mother used to. But that was ok, she didn't want them to. It was a good memory, and she didn't mind going nostalgic with that one.

"Are you ready? I think you're next, after Lady Yaya"

"I don't want to go after the drag! I want to see her show." She whined, but Michael only laughed.

"You already missed her best show tonight." He winked with an amused expression and gulped the last drops of his drink.

"You dirty hoe, I don't want to see that! And I can't believe you banged Yaya"

"I didn't, I banged Nicholas. He wasn't in drag yet." Kiara laughed to the verge of tears, probably for the first time since… Him.

Damn, she missed him. What was he doing at that time? She looked at the watch to see if it was already one in the morning. He was probably asleep, with Batman by his side. Fuck, she missed Batman too.

She went backstage to get ready for the show and saw the drag queen ready for her performance. Maybe she could peak from behind the curtains while she got ready, but it was not the same as watching her from the audience.

Kiara was distracted while she applied her make-up and got into her almost nonexistent costume. The club was small, and she knew most of the crowd because it was Michael's favorite place. She allowed him to choose her outfit, and the sly whore picked a high-cut bodysuit that showed way too much skin. The only nice thing about it was that her whole tattoo was visible.

From the backstage, she heard Lady Yaya singing Happy Birthday, Marilyn Monroe style, and she could almost picture the whole cake stunt. Michael was probably laughing his heart out and enjoying every second.

She took a deep breath and looked into the mirror. She was not in the best state of mind to perform a celebration routine, but it was Michael's birthday and he adored her shows. It was always easier to perform when she knew someone like him would be watching. Her mind wandered back to another person who had a similar effect on her, but shut it down right away. Nothing good could come from thinking about him now.

The music came to an end and Yaya left the stage, stopping by Kiara's side. She was actually dressed like Marilyn, which made things even funnier.

"You were not dressed like that when you left," Kiara mentioned.

"It's not my show if there isn't at least one reveal, darling." The queen winked with her gigantic lashes. "The crowd is amazing today, you'll love them"

Kiara nodded, and went to the wing of the stage. The technical crew was almost done getting rid of the cake. She laughed at their struggle to keep the thing from falling apart. That's why she loved performing in informal environments, everything was raw and real. No blackout to hide the boy's work on getting her silks down, no smoke curtain to prevent people from seeing the artists sweat.

Right there, she felt at peace. She still wasn't fine, and she knew she'd go back to thinking about him when she was done, but at least she was ready to perform. The crowd cheered when they called her name, and she ran to the stage with a smile on her face.

Her routine was easy, and she was planning on having some fun with it. There was no hidden meaning or message in her number, it was just a few of Michael's favorite tricks. As the big drama queen he was, he loved the ones that made the audience jump and clutch their hearts, thinking she'd fall.

She climbed the fabric and tried to locate Michael amongst the crowd, but the lights were too strong on her eyes. She prepared her first move and smiled mischievously at the audience she couldn't see. The first drop was simple, an easy slack drop ending with a split. They loved the damn splits.

When she got up again, she looked for Michael from a different angle. The light wasn't so bright at that height and she scanned the crowd once more. There he was! She smiled, getting ready to do one of his favorite tricks. That was a particularly tricky one, because she had to fully let go of the silks and use her knee to stop the fall. It was beautiful and quite dramatic.

Kiara took a last look at the crowd before letting go, and as soon as she did, she saw him. She let out an out of breath scream when her knee failed to meet the fabric. She tried to grab the silks however she could, but her grip wasn't strong enough to stop the speed she had acquired. She held on anyway to avoid falling, and shrieked as her palms burned.

She let go when she was close enough to the floor, but the damage was done. Then, she heard the crowd applauding and whistling, thinking it was all part of the show. She tried to bite back the tears and bowed to the crowd, but something moved and held her in a tight embrace she was not expecting.

"Are you ok?" Fucking hell he was really there. Chris was holding her like a precious little thing, but she couldn't focus on it because her hands were on fire and she just wanted to cut them out.

"Get off of her!" She heard someone shout. She looked up confused, and through her pain, she noticed a few security guards from the club were trying to prick his hands away from her. Shit.

"It's alright, I know him"

The men seemed a bit uncomfortable letting him go but Chris must have sent them a killing glare because they backed off with their hands up after a while. Chris led her to the backstage while she tried to concentrate. She looked at her hands for the first time since the fall. Alright,

not that bad. Definitely not her worst burn. But it looked like shit, especially on the parts where the skin acquired a leather-like appearance.

“Shit Kiara, I need to take you to the hospital”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

# Chapter FOURTY-THREE

“Can we talk about this later? Your hands are skinned!” His tone was worried, and she closed her eyes to focus. She breathed in and ignored his voice for a second. Water. She needed running water.

She walked towards the small sink backstage and tried to open the tap, but her hands were not responding.

“Open,” she commanded. As she felt the water soothing her wound, she was able to concentrate better. What the hell was he doing there? She almost didn’t believe it when she saw him in the crowd, and his presence made all her concentration go down the drain.

“You bastard! You made me fall.” She shot him a murdering glare, but knew it wasn’t exactly his fault. But there were other things that she blamed him for, so she didn’t take the words back.

“I missed you.” He got closer, and she could see fatigue marks that had been hidden in the poor light of the backstage until now.

“You don’t get to say that.” She wanted to sound strong, and to force him to step back, but she didn’t.

“I’m sorry.” His voice came out hurt, and way more vulnerable than she expected. “I am so, so sorry Kiara.” He held her face in his hands and she couldn’t find the strength to pull away.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to forgive me for being a complete asshole.” He lowered his face until it was inches away from her. “And I want you, Kiara”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t help the shiver that climbed her body. The fucker must have noticed, because the next thing she knew, he pulled her in for a desperate kiss.

Kiara felt him against her lips, and the pain in her hands didn’t seem so important anymore. She wanted to be mad, to trash away and kick him for kissing her after what he had done. But he apologized, and apologized again and she had only so much strength to fight against something she wanted just as desperately. Her hands shot up to grab his hair.

“Shit!” She pulled away, feeling her recent friction burn sting when it touched him. The small distance she put between them was enough to drive her senses back into her body. “What the hell was that?”

He took a deep breath and closed the tap he had opened for her. His eyes were hooded, but when he spoke, his voice was clearer than ever.

“We need to talk. But we can do that on the way to the hospital”

He took her wrists and inspected her palms.

“It looks worse than it feels. I don’t need a hospital, just a clean bandage and some moisturizer. It’s first degree.” She prickled her wrists away from him.

“Kia, are you alright baby girl?” Michael’s strident voice broke her private moment, and she couldn’t decide whether she was glad about it or not. Chris turned around to see who called for her, and she watched Michael’s eyes widen in surprise.

“I’m fine,” she answered but knew his worry about her well being was significantly reduced after seeing Chris.

“I can see you are more than fine, naughty girl. Nice to meet you, sexy voice.” Michael eyed Chris from head to toe, and Kiara was absolutely mortified.

“Michael, I assume.” Chris stretched his hands and the other man smiled, accepting his handshake. “Kiara doesn’t want to go to the hospital to get her hand checked.”

Michael raised a brow and got closer to her. She extended her hands for him to inspect, and the man used his phone’s flashlight to see it better.

“Did you cool it down?” He asked, and she nodded. “She doesn’t need a hospital, just moisturizer and a bandage. And possibly a handsome and strong man to help her out with things that demand a hand.” He wiggled his brows and Kiara felt like shaving them off. Sly bitch.

“Go to hell,” she cursed Michael, then turned to Chris. “I told you so. Now can you finally tell me what the fuck you are doing here?”

“I’ll leave you two to talk, I do have a birthday to enjoy.” Michael strode off and left the two of them in a stare-match that was in a grey area between angry and sexual.

“I came to get you back,” he stated in that commanding tone that had her fuming. Get her back?

“Go to hell”

“Only if you come with me.” Shit, that was hot. He was all domineering and sure of himself. She couldn’t help but dwell on his offer, but then the memory of their last encounter flooded through her head and she stepped away.

“How did you know I was here?”

“Marcus has some crazy stalker abilities.” She wanted to be mad about it, but wasn’t. Why the hell wasn’t she? They fell into silence, and he stepped forward to get close to her once again. “I have an offer for you”

“You have got to be kidding me.” She rolled her eyes. She would have crossed her arms, but to do that her hands would end up touching something and that was impossible at the moment.

"Didn't you like our last deal, Kiara?" She could feel his breath against her skin. Against her better judgment, she was digging this new forward approach he was displaying.

"It was a shitty deal"

"Yes, but you accepted it anyway. This one is better"

"What do you want?"

"You let me take you home and help you out with this." He took her wrist at the sides of her body but didn't lift her hands between them like last time. Instead, he took another step forward and towered over her, forcing her to look up. "And in return, you listen to what I have to say."

"That's another shitty deal, you want both things"

"Yes, but you need one of them." He smirked. Damn it. Damn him.

"Fine"

She allowed him to get her duffel bag and even accepted his jacket to cover up a little. There was no way she could change from the tight bodysuit without harming her hands even further. On the way out, she waved Michael goodbye and tried to throw him the finger when he mouthed 'go get laid'.

The Aston Martin didn't match the neighborhood they were in, nor the club they left. But she was glad to avoid the uber ride home, especially in the clothes she was in.

"My place or yours?" He asked.

"This is not a booty call." She tried to remain serious, but her voice came out between laughs.

"Could be," he murmured. "Batman misses you"

"Are you trying to convince me to go to your place by using Batman?" She arched a brow.

"Is it working?"

"Yes." She gave up. She missed Batman too, and was curious to see his place anyway.

He drove in silence for a while, but it was not nearly as uncomfortable as she expected it to be. It felt almost… familiar. But something was bothering her, and she decided to blurt it out.

"You know I didn't accept your deal because of money, right?"

"Uh?" He was distracted.

"You said earlier I accepted your deal. I didn't"

He raised a brow, and she noticed how confusing her sentence was.

"I didn't accept the whole fake girlfriend thing because of the money"

“Oh…I guess I should have known. I mean, you were willing to go to jail instead of accepting, a few bucks shouldn’t have changed your mind.” The fact he considered five grand just a few bucks did not go unnoticed by her, but she let it slide. “Does that mean you’ll pay me what you own?”

“Never,” she laughed, forgetting for a second all the inner conversations she had about him being a rich bastard that didn’t deserve her heartbreak.

“Why did you do it?” He looked at her, and when she didn’t answer he pushed it a bit more. “Why did you agree to come with me?”

“I’m not sure. It seemed really important to you”

“Oh, so you already liked me then?” The jerk teased her with a smirk.

“You were the one smitten by me there, pretty boy”

“I loved you way before that.” Wait, what?

# Chapter FOURTY-FOUR

She looked at him dumbfounded, but he was looking ahead at the road. Did he realize what he just said? She wanted to ask but didn't really know how. Maybe he didn't mean it. It was just a figure of speech.

It didn't take long for them to reach his apartment, but it felt like hours of excruciating silence to Kiara. She was not one to dwell on words and feelings, but then again, she was not used to those particular ones.

They got in to find a warm welcome – to Kiara. She loved the giant dog and embraced him as best she could without using her hands.

"Traitor," Chris called out, earning himself a rough bark. Was that really the first thing he had to say after… that?

"He can't help it, I'm delightful," Kiara joked. Her face was smashed against his fur and her arms were around his giant neck.

"You are," he pointed out. She tried to hide her smile, but she couldn't help it. Get it together, Kiara!

"Your home is huge! I was wondering how you kept an eighty-pound dog in an apartment. Now I know"

"Ninety"

"What?"

"He's a ninety-pound dog. Are you hungry?" He asked.

"Yes!" She was craving a midnight snack. Or three a.m. snack, to be accurate.

"I'll go get us something to eat from the market across the street. There's gauze, bandages, and ointments here, is there something else we'll need from the drugstore?" She shook her head, and he left.

For the first time since she saw him at the club, she had some room to breathe and think. His presence was a bit overwhelming and she didn't even know why he was there. Well, to get her back, apparently. But why now? Or ever. She was fine by herself. Probably.

She went into an exploration crusade across his huge apartment to find what she needed, and eventually found his first aid kit under the bathroom sink. All the steps were sheer torture, from opening the cabinet to taking out the ointment and bandages, but she had to do it. There was no way in hell she'd have him tending her wounds. That was too much.

Giving her a ride and picking up some food was fine. She knew she could have done it by herself, so there was no problem letting him do it for her. But taking care of her hands would be hard, so she had to do it herself. She simply couldn't rely on someone else for that. She took care of her wounds before – all of them. She'd do it again now.

Flexing her fingers was impossible, so she used her knees and mouth to open the balm and spread it on her palms. The bandage would be trickier, and she took a large breath before embracing the pain. She sat on the floor and relied on her flexibility to wrap the cloth, circling the damaged area a few times as best she could.

The final result was shitty, and she knew it. The wrap was loose and if she moved her hand too much, the bandage would fall in no time. But it didn't matter, she would just eat, talk, and sleep, so it would hold.

She was putting away the first aid kit when she heard him coming back in. Her stomach was dying for some food, so she jumped to her feet and met him at the door. His first reaction was to look down at her hands.

"What the fuck, Kiara?"

She looked down and shrugged, getting close to the food, and peeking inside the bag.

"What did you get? Tuna? Fuck, I love tuna sandwich."

"I was out for five minutes, why the hell didn't you wait for me to help you out with that?" He pointed at her bandages again and she rolled her eyes.

"It's not my first rodeo, I know how to tend to a burn."

"It's not about knowing, Kiara. I'm here to help. You did a terrible job there." He got closer and took her wrists in his hands. Kiara didn't fail to notice he was doing that an awful lot. Then, he began to remove her painfully wrapped bandages and she recoiled.

"Stop!"

"I need to tighten them, that way it'll fall apart while you sleep"

"I can take care of myself." Her voice was higher than she wanted it to be, but then again she was tired, hungry, and in pain.

"I know, but you don't have to." He was looking at her weirdly. Shit.

"Can you just say what you have to say and let me go?"

"Why are you doing this?" There was something new in his face, something she couldn't place. He wasn't mad at her for being stubborn, which she knew she was. He was sad, like she was taking something away from him.

"I told you, I don't need your help." She probably did. She hated it, but she did.

“I need yours”

“What?” Was she in such pain that she was becoming delusional now?

“Shit, that’s not how I had planned to start. Well, fuck it.” He seemed to be talking to himself, but then he looked into her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m adopted”

“What?” She repeated, even more confused now.

“Edgar and Patricia are not my biological parents”

“I know what adopted means, Chris. Why are you telling me this?” She was lost, and a bit too tired for what seemed like an important conversation. But she wouldn’t stop him.

“I know it’s not an excuse, but that’s why I have that fucked up relationship with them.”

“So you know it’s fucked up?” She didn’t mean to be so harsh, but it was an overwhelming conversation.

“I know now. That’s why I need you.” His voice was less commanding this time. She arched a brow.

“What do you want from me?”

“Right now, I want to take care of you.” She was ready to protest, but he spoke before she could. “I know you don’t need it, but I owe you at least that.”

He owed her. She could have that. He wasn’t taking care of her wound because she needed it, but because he owed it to her. He probably did, for everything he put her through.

“Ok”

“Ok?”

“Yes, you can help me out tonight. Now give me my sandwich”

# Chapter FOURTY-FIVE

As they sat down, Kiara realized how hard it would be to eat a sandwich without her hands. She kept looking at it, but eventually heard him laugh and get a knife, fork, and plate to cut it into small pieces for her. When he was done, he took a piece and brought it to her mouth. What the hell?

"You are not hand-feeding me." She lowered her brows. He must have noticed how pathetic it was, so he dropped the fork and sat back. Her hands might be hurt, but she could still get the fork between her index and middle finger.

They ate a few bites in silence, and she felt the need to circle back to what he had said before.

"So, you're adopted." She noticed how he sucked in a breath before answering. Tough subject, clearly.

"Yes"

"Is there something else you want to tell me about that?" It couldn't be just that. Him being adopted explained nothing, except the lack of family resemblance between them.

"Edgar and Patricia are not easy people to deal with," he began. Well, that was not exactly news. But he wasn't meeting her eyes while speaking and she knew that whatever was coming, was hard on him. "When I was growing up, I came to understand they had certain expectations for my life."

"Ok." That was all quite normal so far. All parents did.

"As you might have noticed, they don't really like being questioned. Edgar was especially fond of this plan he had for his own life, and that included some plans for mine."

"Like taking over the company."

"Yes. But it began way before that. Ever since I was a kid, some attitudes and hobbies simply didn't match their view of the future." His face contorted, and she felt her heart sinking at the thought of a shackled childhood.

"That sucks." She couldn't relate, but she could imagine. Her childhood was actually amazing, until… well, until it wasn't.

"It does, but lots of kids have strict parents." Chris stopped talking, trying to gather his thoughts. Kiara knew there was more, so she just waited. "The first time they told me I was adopted, I was ten. Have you seen any James Bond movies?" He asked.

“Let me guess, something to do with Die Another Day?” She said with a knowing smile. She didn’t remember exactly the year it was released, but about eighteen years ago was a fair guess. Putting the pieces together, it must have been about that. His eyes widened a bit.

“How did you know?”

“Well, you do have the car.” She remembered thinking about it the first time she saw it. It was not her favorite Bond movie, but she couldn’t deny the car was nice.

“Fucking hell, can I kiss you again?” Yes. Wait, no. She put another piece of tuna sandwich in her mouth to avoid giving in, and motioned for him to continue. “Right. Yes, Die Another Day was released that year and I was crazy about it. So I asked my father to enroll me in a fencing class”

Kiara couldn’t help but imagine a cute ten-year-old Chris getting into sword fights in one of those little white outfits. She smiled, but Chris didn’t.

“What happened?”

“They said no. But I was a stubborn kid, so I kept bothering them with it and calling schools I found on a catalog”

Apparently, his determination came from an early age. Cute.

“Things took a sour turn then. Edgar said if I wanted to have a place in the family, I should comply with its rules. But I was a smart kid, perhaps smarter than I should. I knew parents couldn’t give up on their children, so I called him out on his bullshit.”

His words gave her the chills, and she knew there was some fucked up shit there. She was already feeling the anger boiling under her skin, but didn’t want to let it out and keep him from opening up.

But instead of talking, Chris stood up and took out the plates, going to the sink to wash them. Kiara wanted to ask him not to, but he seemed lost in thought and perhaps needed something to occupy his hands.

“Are you ok?” She asked, getting up and facing his back.

“Yes, it’s just… It’s been years since I last talked about that”

“You don’t have to.” But she really did want to know. He was hurting, and she didn’t know how to help if he didn’t tell her why. Which made her quite hypocritical, but she wouldn’t think about that now.

“I do. I want to.” He breathed in again, still not looking at her.

She wanted to touch him, but since her hands were not an option, she brought her cheek to his back and rested there. She felt him relax a bit, perhaps enough to go on.

“Edgar drove me to an orphanage and on the way there, he said I was not like other children. He explained that they had adopted me as a baby, and that if I didn’t meet their expectations, they could get another child that would”

“Shit. What the fuck, Chris?” She couldn’t keep her mouth shut, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Yeah, but I didn’t quite believe him. I mean, my mother was strict, but she was also affectionate. And Edgar used to give me presents, which I saw as his form of showing he cared.”

She couldn’t stand not meeting his eyes, so she tugged him to turn around, flinching when her hands touched his arms. He looked at her and she saw how vulnerable he was. How incredibly sad his eyes became.

“What happened?”

“He left me there. Not long, just a couple of days.” Her eyes widened. What kind of fucked up man did that to his child? She was fuming. “When they came to get me, there was not a word about it, but I understood the message”

“Damn, Chris, I don’t know what to say”

“No need, it was a long time ago. I’d say it doesn’t matter anymore, but that’s not true. I don’t think about it as much, at least.”

Kiara felt something wet and warm run down her face and got startled. Her eyes widened and she touched her face with her forearms to make sense of what was happening. Could she really be crying after all those years? She must have looked ridiculous with that confused expression on her face, because he began to cock his head and squint his eyes.

“Sorry. Sorry, go on.” She knew he had more to say, even though it wasn’t needed. She understood now. Why he was so keen on pleasing his parents, why he bent to their wishes time and time again. Childhood scars didn’t fade when you crossed to adult life, she knew that well enough.

“I know that doesn’t justify what I put you through. I just wanted you to understand where it came from”

Not knowing what else to say, Kiara got to the tip of her toes and pecked his lips. It was long and gentle, a grateful kiss for sharing his pain with her. But he didn’t allow her to stand down and embraced her by the waist to pull her closer.

“I meant it, you know,” he murmured against her lips, and she pushed back to look at him. “What I said in the car. I’m in love with you, Kiara.”

# Chapter FOURTY-SIX

He felt her stiffen at his words. Maybe it was too soon. Her arms were still around his neck, and his hands were clamping her waist, afraid to let go. But her stare was wide-eyed, and the tears dried in her face. He didn't regret it, though. Even if she was not ready for it, he was. Wasn't she the one to tell him to do what he wanted?

"Fuck, say something." He might be certain of his feelings, but it didn't mean his heart wasn't pounding against his chest waiting for her reaction.

"Are you sure?" Right, not what he expected. Not at all.

"Yes, I'm sure." His tone was a bit harsher than he intended, but then she smiled. Gone was the time his stern voice annoyed her, it seemed that she'd grown accustomed to it. Maybe even liked it, if he dared to hope.

"Can you help me with the bandages?" She placed her poorly dressed hands in front of him. He smiled, knowing what it meant. Kiara didn't ask for help, she made that clear more than once. But now she did, which meant she trusted him enough to lower her guard.

"Yes"

"I'd invite you to help me shower too, but I don't think that would end well"

"Fucking hell, Kiara!" He was lost in her a second after that, kissing her with more passion than he deemed possible. She was there, holding him as best she could without her hands, pressing her body against him. And she was almost naked, for fucks sake. She didn't change from that barely existing piece of clothing she called a costume, so he was painfully aware of her sinful body.

He wanted nothing more than to lose himself inside her, to cherish that woman that turned his world upside down. She cried for him, and it only made him want to kiss her tears away. The thought made him deepen the kiss, grabbing her ass in his hands. Her moan against his lips sent him into a frenzy, but before he could suspend her and fuck her against the counter, she pushed away.

"Chris," her breathy voice called him.

"What?"

"My hands are killing me"

"Shit, sorry." He let her go, but missed her warmth the second he did. How did he survive a whole week without her?

“It’s ok, I just need a painkiller and we can get back to it.” Her eyes were clouded by lust, and it was the most alluring thing he had ever seen. But then he noticed how tired she seemed. It was past three in the morning, she had sustained a painful injury, and had a straining emotional conversation. They should both get some sleep.

“No, you need to take it easy today. Come, let me help you”

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Chris woke up at the usual hour, but a lot happier than he was used to. By his side, Kiara was spread on the bed like she was alone. It reminded him of another time he saw her like that, how he watched her laying on top of him and caught another glimpse of her tattoo. She was just as sexy now, and he felt like worshiping her body.

Their first time together was phenomenal, but he wanted more now. He wanted all of her. He noticed how her hands were still secured inside the cloth he had tied and remembered how stubborn she had been to try to do it herself. He wanted to care for her too, make her feel loved.

That was new to him. He played with her hair while thinking about what it meant. Surprisingly, he wasn’t as afraid as he thought he’d be, considering his other experiences. It was actually funny to think about them, his other attempts at love. Looking at Kiara’s peaceful face, he couldn’t even understand how he could ever claim to have loved anyone else.

“Did you lose something in my face?” She asked in a mocking tone, awakened by his piercing stare.

“Do you always wake up with a smart mouth?” He cocked a brow

“Yes, get used to it,” she answered, probably failing to realize what it meant. His smile widened.

“I intend to”

“Chris, about yesterday…” Her tone was uncertain, and her eyes showed a concern that didn’t seem related to her previous words.

“What is it?” He took a strand of her jet-black hair and placed it behind her ear.

“I’m sorry about what I said during the holidays. I had no idea.” Oh, that. His smile didn’t falter.

“You have nothing to be sorry about. As I said yesterday, I told you because I wanted you to know. To know what you are responsible for.”

A small frown made its way to her face, and Chris caressed it with his thumb. She was so incredibly beautiful.

“What did I do, besides ruining my image in front of your parents?”

“See, I’d love to tell you the whole story, but I have to take Batman out for a walk. If I knew you’d be waking up in my bed, I’d have hired someone else to do it, but I thought it’d take longer to win you back,” he smirked

“Are you saying I’m easy, Christopher?” She arched a brow. He almost didn’t hate the sound of his full name coming out of her mouth.

“I am,” he laughed, expecting her to punch him or something. But she smiled knowingly and touched her chin as if deep in thought.

“You are right. I am easy. I just needed you to make up your damn mind.”

“This does not seem like a conversation I can win.” He kissed her forehead and smiled. “Do you run?”

Chris didn’t need to go for his morning run with Batman that day, but he wanted to. He wanted to take her with them and see how it felt. If he was being honest, the idea of sharing with her one of the favorite parts of his routine was fascinating. If she fit in there, then maybe… maybe she could fit into his life.

She nodded, and he couldn’t help but smile. Luckily, her wardrobe was mostly comprised of sports clothes and on the bag she brought with them from the show there was enough for a run in the park.

# Chapter FOURTY-SEVEN

The run was a punch to Chris' stomach. How could he have overlooked the fact that Kiara was actually an athlete? To put it in simple terms, he was quashed. He thought his running and gym habits were enough to put him in the apex of physical capacity, but it couldn't be further from the truth.

He had thought about Kiara as an artist most of the time, so it was shocking to see the stamina the girl had. He should have known better, having seen and touched her tight body as he had. He was definitely out of his league.

Batman was able to keep up with most of it, but the bastard had two extra legs to help him out. And he was absolutely certain the dog was putting an effort to impress her.

"I don't have a change of clothes," Kiara mentioned once they got back to his apartment. They were both sweating from the run, and a shower sounded like heaven.

"I can lend you a shirt"

"So I can look like a girl from a sexy perfume commercial?" She asked, purposefully biting her bottom lip, and giving him sexy eyes. She might be joking, but it didn't keep the view from being hot as hell.

"Do you have a better idea?"

She simply shrugged and found her way to the bathroom. Her hands had been taken care of, but the burn was bad to begin with, so there was no way she could stand the direct contact of hot water and soap. Not that Chris was complaining, he could certainly get used to washing her naked body more often.

He had to use all his self-control not to fuck her against the cold tile wall. He had planned on it, and she definitely had the same intention, but he saw how her face contorted in pain when the water hit her hands. Too soon.

"I'm starting to think you don't want me at all," she joked when she got out of the shower unfucked. The fact he had a throbbing hard-on was not missed by either of them.

"Don't," he said sternly, getting her wrists in one of his hands to show her his reason. Her dripping body so close to him didn't help his situation.

"There are things I can do without my hands, you know?" She winked and wet her lips. Shit, he wanted her. Hard and fast, against the wall while she screamed his name. He was too close to losing it, all he could do was grab her tight ass and whisper against her ear.

"If you put that smart little mouth of yours around my cock, I won't be a gentleman about your injury"

"Is that a promise?" She said with a glint of lust in her eyes. Next he knew, he was kissing her like a starved man in a feast. He was ready to move their wet make-out session to the bedroom when her cellphone rang.

He almost threw the damn thing out of the window, but she went ahead and checked the caller. Her eyes widened a bit, and she answered the phone on speaker, her hands too hurt to hold it properly.

"Hi, Uncle Harry." Her voice was wary, and she looked at Chris with apologetic eyes. He simply nodded and began to wrap a towel around her body. He didn't feel comfortable listening to her conversation, but she motioned him to stay. Chris smiled at how at ease she was with his presence.

'How are you, troublemaker?' The voice on the other side was warm and hoarse, probably due to many years of smoking.

"All good here! How about you and Carol?"

'We're fine too. Listen, do you have plans for lunch today? We are having shrimp pasta. You used to love it, so I thought maybe you could join us.' The man's voice was almost pleading, and Chris was curious to know more about that relationship. Kiara looked up at him before answering.

"I'm sorry, I have other plans for today"

'Oh, that's a shame. Carol missed you, she was excited to see you'

"I missed her too Harry. Both of you. Maybe we can schedule something next week"

'I just thought you wouldn't want to spend the day alone. I know how hard her accident's date is…'

"Murder." She hissed, and ran to take the phone off of speaker.

He could no longer listen to the voice on the other side, but he saw how her whole body language changed. Was it her mother's death anniversary? It was the only thing that made sense, and Chris felt a chill at the thought. Kiara was barely able to hold the phone properly, but stepped away when he motioned to help.

"Fine. I'll go." Her tone was way too harsh, and suddenly her warm and playful vibe was replaced by distant eyes. She murmured a few words before hanging up, but failed to meet his eyes when she was done.

Chris had gotten her a shirt while she talked, but she ignored it without the sassy remark he came to expect.

"Kiara, what's wrong?"

She paused for a while, and her eyes held a struggle he knew nothing about. When she motioned to talk, he thought she'd open up. She didn't.

"Nothing, I'll have to leave earlier than planned. Sorry." She was aloof, and it wasn't like anything he had seen from her so far. What was going on? Chris couldn't understand the sudden change.

"I've heard it, but that's not what I mean. Are you ok?"

"Yes"

"I can't help you if you won't talk to me. Was that about your mother?" He tried again, knowing he was pushing it but unable to stand down. He needed to help her, to ease her mind. He loved her, for fucks sake.

"Stop prying into my life." She didn't shout it. Even her aggressiveness was lacking emotion. She was pushing him away, but he didn't know why she was doing it. They were just fine a second ago.

"Kiara." He reached out to her, but it felt like she wasn't there anymore.

Her body was doing tasks that she shouldn't do with her hands like that, but somehow it seemed like she didn't feel it anymore. She began to put on her old clothes back. When he tried to help, she turned around in clear refusal.

"Why are you doing this? I can help you, just talk to me."

His plea fell on deaf ears, and he could almost see a wall forming around her. She was calling for a car, and he tried to hold her. She didn't even glare at his hands in the way he thought she would.

"Please, don't leave." But she did.

# Chapter FOURTY-EIGHT

Push through. Those were the only words on Kiara's mind as she felt herself slipping. Her breath was becoming shallow, but she couldn't let it show. If she could just leave, and be alone for a while, she'd be able to get her grip back. Why was she getting like that again? It was not fair.

In the first few minutes after Harry mentioned her mother, she was still there. Fading, but there. But after Chris' words hit her, she felt her grip on reality escaping. There was a distant barking sound somewhere, and a doorknob that caused her pain when she touched it. A car stopped by the sidewalk and she got in. Did she call for it?

Everything around her was a blur, and her hands hurt every time she touched something. Why did they hurt? Someone talked to her, but she couldn't answer. After a while, she wasn't sure they were talking to her at all.

Her keys worked on a door to an apartment she didn't know how she reached. Push through. The furniture looked weird, her clothes against her body felt odd. What was that sound that disappeared every time she tried to focus on it?

Water, she needed water. Her feet led her to the bathroom, but the shower tap was blurred, and sharp, and she didn't know if it was alright to touch it. Open the tap. Just open the tap. Once the cold water ran down her spine, she focused on that feeling.

Little by little, the fog that clouded her eyes dissipated, the bathroom objects went back to their regular sizes and shapes. With a large gasp, her eyes widened, and she fell back into reality. Shit. Fucking hell, not again. Kiara was shaking under the cold shower, so she turned it to hot and took off the clothes that gripped her body in a chilling hug. How long has it been since her last episode? Five years? Not fucking fair.

She carried on with her shower feeling an excruciating pain in her hands. She probably used them a lot in her trip from Chris' place to her own. Fuck. Did he notice? She hoped not.

Kiara tried to think back to her last memory before the derealization. She had agreed to go to Harry's for lunch, and he mentioned her mother's death anniversary. She didn't realize…. She wouldn't have stayed at Chris' if she had remembered.

When the water was no longer soothing the aftermath of her episode, Kiara stepped out and tried to dry out her regret along with the waterdrops. The man opened his heart for her, why couldn't she do the same? But she couldn't. She knew the words wouldn't come out, even if she tried.

Harry shouldn't have mentioned it. Or maybe she shouldn't have reacted the way she did. Not that she had any sort of control over it, but it's been so long… she should at least be able to

handle another person mentioning it. But Harry had referred to it as an accident as if there was no one to blame for her death. She simply didn't have another reaction set inside her.

Maybe he had noticed something. He must have known she was a bit fucked up inside, considering her reaction twice on the island. Both when Patricia asked about spending the holidays without her family and during her fight with Chris, she was able to stick to reality and get into a cold shower before shutting down. The only difference this time was that he pushed her to talk about it, and hell, she almost did.

A chill ran down her spine thinking she almost told him everything. How smitten was she with the man to think it was alright to tell him? No, that couldn't happen.

***

When she reached Harry and Carol's, there was a lingering sadness in her. Chris had come for her, and she pushed him away because of her own troubles this time. It was not fair, she knew. But she just couldn't.

"Welcome, darling! It's so great to see you again!" Carol's voice was motherly, even though she wasn't a mother herself.

"Thanks for having me," Kiara answered, shaking off the bad feelings. That was not a happy occasion, but she wouldn't treat it like a funeral either.

The three of them sat to eat on the five-seat round table, that used to be full during her childhood. Then it began to host only four people, and now the same old wooden table held just the three of them. But the company was good, and the food was nice, so Kiara didn't feel the emptiness she thought she would.

"What happened to your hands, Kia?" Carol asked. She loved it when people called her Kia, though not many did.

"One of my lovers got jealous of the other." She winked, feeling more like herself.

"So… circus?" Harry replied in an amused tone. He was a witness to most of her bruises and burns throughout adolescence, when she decided to truly dedicate herself to the craft.

"You know it." She smiled, struggling to fork another shrimp directly from the tray ahead. Carol would have chastised her in a different situation, but she was just too happy to complain. Seven years apart was definitely enough to miss them.

"But that's probably the worst you ever had!"

"Of course not, the accident in the club was way worse!" Kiara replied, but noticed a bit too late the shocked expressions of her hosts. Shit, of course they didn't know.

"What are you talking about Kiara? What accident?" Well, now the cat was out of the bag. Again. She should really learn how to control her tongue sometimes.

“It was no big deal, Harry. A couple of years ago I fell during a performance. I even got a souvenir out of it!” She turned her sidecut to them to show the little scar that adorned her shaven head. She expected them to lighten up in face of her dark humor, but luck was not in her favor.

“You cut your head?” Carol’s shrieking voice told her that her goal was not achieved at all. She covered the spot to avoid the virtual magnifying glass they were trying to put on it.

“I didn’t even faint.” She did. “And it was not that high.” It actually was.

“Why didn’t you call us?” Harry’s voice was troubled, and she began to feel bad about it.

“Let’s talk about something else, it’s been ages!”

“You need to let us take care of you, Kiara. It’s what your father wanted.”

Go to hell. The words almost spilled out of her mouth, but they didn’t. What came out instead was perhaps worse.

“He can’t want things from a grave, can he?” Shit. Her words were hurtful to all of them and she knew it was not ok to say it. She knew, but she couldn’t take it back.

“Kia…” Carol tried to reach out to her.

“This shrimp is really something else,” she said in a terrible attempt to change the subject. She didn’t fail to notice the uncomfortable stares exchanged between the couple, but luckily they said nothing else. The dinner resumed with a few other words, until she thought it was fine to leave.

She left feeling the weight of her words crushing her once again. That was not her day. Or week, or month. She was not one to dwell on her bad luck, but she was ready for the hidden camera revelation already. There must be someone purposefully fucking her up, destiny couldn’t be so mean.

She went to jail, was led into forced cohabitation with the most opulent people in the world, got interested in a guy that didn’t have his shit together in the family department, and got a derealization episode after who knows how many years. Now she couldn’t even get through a Sunday lunch without some sort of drama going on.

Her trip back home was drowned in self-pity, and Kiara hated it. So she decided to count her blessings as her mother taught her to. The woman might have been dead for eleven years, but her advice was timeless. Jail was just for a day. The island was beautiful, and she met amazing people there. Chris was… there.

What? Chris was literally there in front of her building sitting on the sidewalk like a lost puppy.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

# Chapter FOURTY-NINE

Chris looked up to see Kiara shouting at him from the inside of a car. He must have looked like trash, but didn't really care at that point.

"I was waiting for you."

"Why?" She didn't seem annoyed, but her guard was definitely up.

"Because our deal isn't over"

"Fucking hell, what is it with you and deals?"

"What is it with you and breaking them?" He criticized, but regretted right away. There was something about her that made him say what he wanted with no filter, but he knew it only served to lift her guard even higher.

"I didn't break it, you said you wanted to talk to me, and you did." She crossed her arms, but he saw a glint of defiance in her eyes. The same that bent him out of shape a while back, but now was just evidence of how passionately wild she was.

"Yes, but the offer said I'd also take care of your hands." He raised a brow, indicating her bandages with his head.

"As you can see, I took perfectly good care of them on my own," she retorted, bringing her hands up for inspection. It was actually impressive; the bandages were tightly wrapped and clean.

"Fine. I'm here because I want you. I don't know what happened back there, but you can't just walk away from us."

"Watch me," she replied, turning to the entrance of her building and heading inside.

"Kiara, can you fucking wait?" He closed the distance between them and held her arm, trying to keep her from running away again.

He couldn't stand how she left his apartment in the morning, and he didn't want to go through it again. Her expression darkened when she turned around, and a menacing look took place on her face, looking at his fingers wrapped around her arm. He held in the smile. She was back. He didn't know what had happened back at his place, but she was not herself. He would choose fire-spitting Kiara over distant one anytime.

"Sorry. I just want to talk to you."

"Chris, stop. We are not a thing. We won't be. The holiday was nice, yesterday was fine. Now get over it."

“You are not making any sense. I love you, and I know you feel something too.” He got closer to her and for the first time noticed the slight shiver in her body. Like she was a string of a guitar that’s been strummed and left to resonate on her own. “You are denying both of us a chance to be happy.”

“Not everyone that loves, stays.”

***

Chris got home with the nagging feeling of having misinterpreted a situation. He was trying to understand Kiara’s behavior, but everything seemed so contradictory, he was sure he missed the point. When his mind was almost combusting from the lack of a breakthrough, he called the person who could help him sort it out.

“Luke, I’m losing my mind here. What are you doing?”

“It’s Sunday evening Chris, what do you think I’m doing?”

“Studying?” Chris teased. He never did.

“Just tell me what you want already, or Amanda will make me hang up on your face.”

“Right. Can we meet? I need your help”

“Did you go after Kiara?” Shit, that man had a pact with the devil. Reading people like that shouldn’t be allowed. But then again, that was the point of his call.

“Can we meet?” He asked again. There was no point boosting his ego even further, he was already enough of an arrogant bastard.

“I’ll call Marcus”

The trio met at their usual bar, and Chris was already two beers down when he began to talk.

“I went after Kiara,” he said after the last gulp of his bottle.

“Finally!” Marcus cheered.

“Did you tell her?” Luke asked. He didn’t need to explain, nor did Chris. He simply nodded, and began to peel the label of his bottle.

“How did she take it?” Marcus dropped the fun attitude, knowing how tough the subject was for his friend.

“She was amazing.” She really was.

“So why are we here? Edgar and Patricia had something to say?” Marcus asked.

“No, I sort of dealt with them.”

Luke raised a brow. Marcus was about to ask for more, but Luke raised his hand in a subtle gesture and shook his head. Even after all these years, Chris was still impressed by his blond friend. He had no idea how he knew Chris didn't want to talk about his parents, but he knew.

"How did you find her?" Luke asked.

"I helped!" Marcus said, feeling proud of himself for lending his stalker abilities to find her. Chris proceeded to explain the whole story. The club, the burned hands, the kiss. Then the run, the phone call, and her reaction.

"She just left?" Marcus demanded, already too tipsy to notice how troubled Chris was about it.

"Yes, man, that's what I just told you. Anyway…" Chris was about to continue, but then he noticed Luke's expression. He knew the man long enough to know he was struggling with something he knew, but didn't know if he should share. Chris had seen it multiple times. "Just fucking say it already"

"It's not my life to tell," he blurted.

"Luke, she's not your patient, for fucks sake!" He always did that. He knew something about someone that could help all of them out. But then he decided to keep it to himself because he couldn't control the information once it was out.

After a few seconds of silent ponderation, Luke finally blurted out.

"She might have a dissociative disorder"

"What?" Marcus questioned.

"When you guys fought at the island, I thought I saw a few signs. It seemed like a derealization of sorts, she didn't know what was happening and went straight to the shower. It's a common strategy, allows the person to focus on the water and get her grip back. I think it happened again."

"Shit." Chris was a bit stunned.

"Maybe it's triggered by stress"

"I think it's about her parents," Chris mumbled, thinking out loud. His friends turned inquiring eyes to him. "They died, but I don't know how. And I mentioned them that day we argued, so if you think she had it today again, it might have been it. Shit."

He felt like the ultimate jackass. Of course he knew losing her parents must have been hell, but considering his own family issues he thought she might be better off this way. It was a shitty thought, he now realized.

"Well, that sucks. What are you going to do about it?" Marcus asked.

"I already did." Chris proceeded to tell them about the second half of the day, and how he showed up at her house and she sent him home without looking back.

"The girl walked out on you three times? Damn, my heart can't take a triple blow. Even from cute blue eyes. I'd call it quits." Marcus threw his hands up in the air. Chris turned to Luke, trying to get a little more sympathy from the smart one.

"I'm with Marcus here, Chris. She clearly asked you to stay away. It's hard to deal with the kind of problems she has, and we all know you don't have your own shit figured out."

Chris kept peeling the already trashed label off of his third beer, silent for a whole minute.

"Well, I'm not quitting." Both men looked at him, surprised. "She said something before she walked away. Not everyone that loves, stays. I'll prove her wrong." He didn't know if he was making any sense, but the decision was made. She wanted him gone? Too bad he liked to annoy the shit out of her.

# Chapter FIFTY

Kiara woke up Monday morning with the emotional hangover of the century. She was tired of not being able to do anything, so she decided to go to practice anyway, even with her hands out of commission. If she couldn't do what she wanted in Chris' department, she'd at least work her frustration out with a sick series of abs and legs.

When she got to the studio, she ran into Michael's glowing figure. Literally. The man was covered in glitter from head to toe, and it was fucking Monday.

"What the hell did you do last night?" She asked in disbelief.

"I'm coming from Heaven, baby girl." He paused for dramatic purposes. "You know, that new club downtown"

"I don't know, and probably don't want to." She rolled her eyes, knowing that if she gave the slightest opening, he'd tell her all the places she'd find glitter if she searched. "What are you doing here?" It was unusual for him to visit the studio, especially on a hungover Monday morning.

"Chris needed me here"

"What?" She shrieked with her heart on her throat.

"Jeez, chill out. Christine. Short, brunette, sickening neck tattoo… rings a bell?" Right, Christine. Kiara really needed to get her shit together. "Now, on to more pressing matters… what are you doing here instead of sitting on the face of your beloved?"

"Not my beloved," she retorted.

"Not my point, Kia. Why do you look like you lost your golden ticket when not two days ago I saw you licking the incarnation of the chocolate factory itself?"

"It didn't work out"

"What did you do?"

"Why does it have to be me? Maybe he fucked up."

"Baby girl, I watched you sabotage your last three prospect relationships before they even started," he said in a caring tone, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. "Now spill it".

"There's not much to say. We're too different."

"I'm not gonna sit here and watch you lie to me, bitch," he complained, crossing his arms.

"You're not sitting," she mumbled under her breath.

"Your sarcastic ass won't keep me from asking questions. Why are you pushing him away?"

"Stop making a drama out of it. I had fun, but it wouldn't work out anyway. I told you already, he's a loaded prick"

"For cock's sake Kiara, will you drop the rich-is-garbage act?" Michael threw his hands in the air and raised his voice, obviously to annoy her further because of her drama complaint.

"It's not an act, it's the truth," she whispered, looking around to see if anyone was staring.

"You didn't seem to have a problem with it when you were eating lobster and lamb on his island"

"I never had a problem with luxury, just the people behind it."

"And yet, you never told me why"

Kiara fidgeted with the bandages on her hands, suddenly uncomfortable with the topic. She should have told Michael. She had no reason not to, it's not as if he'd… leave. She swallowed hard, hating that train of thought. Instead, she decided to give Michael something else to appease his curiosity.

"He said he loved me."

"Holy shit! And you didn't thank him with your sword swallowing abilities?"

Kiara punched his arm, but laughed. She quite vividly remembered when both of them took a summer course on the practice, and Michael kept suggesting the side benefits of it.

"Alright, I've had enough 'Michael' for today. I came here to practice, and you are keeping me from it." She began to walk away, but a couple of steps into her grand exit, she heard his voice again.

"Stop pushing people away because you think they'll leave you first, Kiara. He might not, you know."

She didn't stop walking, but her chest tightened at his words. Why did she keep doing it? In a moment of self-reflection, Kiara thought back to all her years in therapy where she thoroughly unfolded the reasons for her derealization episodes.

She knew what she was doing, but it didn't mean she could fight it. What if he, too, left? The thought kept popping up even though she knew it wasn't the same. Her parents didn't leave her. They fucking died. But even during therapy, she couldn't quite separate the two.

The crunches and squats were doing little to ease her mind, but she knew better than to try the aerials with her burned hands. So she kept going, trying to run away from the sadness that lingered in the back of her mind.

All the excuses she could think of to push him away were so thin, she could break them with less effort than it took for her to climb the silks. Michael was right, she should really drop her years-old habit of loathing the rich. They were not all the same. He was not like the scumbag murderer…

“Hey Kiara, want to grab some lunch with us?” Someone asked from across the room, luckily interrupting her troubling thoughts.

***

The week went by in a blur, and Kiara’s only way of knowing the time was passing was the improvement of her hand. Since she couldn’t perform, all days seemed to merge like a big mess of bad eating and irregular sleeping. When Saturday came along, she was seriously considering creating a routine that didn’t require her palms. Not having at least a minor show to perform was killing her.

She was halfway through a chocolate-chip pint when the buzzer rang. Did she order takeout? Or was that the day before?

“Hello?”

“Kiara, it’s me.” Chris?

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Batman was missing you. Can you come down?” As if on cue, she heard a muffled bark coming from the faulty buzzer.

“Shit,” she cursed, and thought about it for a while. Batman was there, how could she say no? “Fine, I’ll be down in five”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. While Kiara was changing into decent clothes and a pair of sneakers, she thought about what the hell he could possibly want from her. Ok, maybe she knew what he wanted. But why did he keep pushing it when she refused so many times? Maybe he liked the chase.

By the time she got downstairs, most of the random thoughts were replaced by the enthusiastic meeting of soulmates. Batman and her, obviously. The dog was on a leash, but it didn’t stop him from pulling forward and meeting her halfway for a session of weird hugs and licks.

“Kiara?” Chris’ voice was amused, as it always was when she and Batman were involved. She came to expect how he’d playfully interrupt their PDA before she found herself rolling on the sidewalk with the giant dog.

“Hi,” she stated firmly, standing up and deciding in a split second that she wouldn’t shy away from the conflict. She might be confused, but that didn’t mean she’d play the clueless girl in front of him.

“How’s your hand?”

“Much better.” She had discarded the bandages already to allow the area to breathe now that the risk of complications had passed.

“I’m glad”

“How’s your family?” she asked, suddenly aware of how incredibly selfish she had been to run away from him after he opened his heart to her.

“They’ll live. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“What do you want?” She asked honestly. Standing in front of him under those piercing brown eyes was messing with her resolve not to lick his face. Shit, get a grip, Kiara.

“I told you, Batman was missing you,” he smirked, and she rolled her eyes. “I’m serious, he’s been howling non-stop this week. I was wondering if I could bring him here on Saturdays so he could see you.”

She was taken aback by his question. She was absolutely sure he’d try to sweet talk his way into a date or something. Well, he was. But not in the way she thought he would.

“What is your goal, business boy? I know there’s a deal behind that suggestion.” She wouldn’t be accepting anything if he didn’t tell her exactly what his long-term game was.

“I want Batman to be happy.” Judging by what she’d seen of the two of them so far, it was actually plausible. The man would do anything for his dog. “But I also plan on making you mine on the way.”

# Chapter FIFTY-ONE

Two months had come and gone, and Chris knew he was on the right track. He didn't fail his promise to see her every Saturday, no matter how poorly it fit the rest of his commitments. The weekend after Christmas was particularly hard because he had to leave in the middle of the company's Christmas party. It was worth it; he earned an eye-roll coated with an adorable attempt not to smile when he explained his delay.

Every Saturday was the same, he'd get to her building, buzz her down, and they'd walk around the block talking and pampering Batman. He'd talk about work, and the restructuring of the company. She'd shoot sarcastic remarks about the impending downfall of construction oligarchies. And every single time he wanted to kiss her smug tight-lipped smile away.

On one particularly rainy Friday in the middle of February, Chris got a message from Kiara saying she had an all-day event that Saturday, so they couldn't meet. The way his humor plummeted at the thought made him realize just how much he needed this to work out.

His week had been exceptionally rewarding in the business instance, but that text left a sour taste in his mouth that made him want to leave the office. He was pondering over an early leave when his secretary told him his father was there to see him.

"Send him in," he said, schooling his expression to avoid wearing his bitter humor on his face.

Edgar was having a hard time getting used to no longer being in charge, but Chris knew better than to force him to stay away for good. He was trying to save the company, not drive his father into crippling depression. The business was visibly the old man's most prized possession, which made him a terrible father and a dick of a husband. But still, ripping it away from the man was not the human thing to do.

"Christopher," he greeted from the doorstep.

"Edgar. Come in."

The other man sat on the chair across the table and gave him a piercing stare before breaking the silence.

"You need me back here." Never one for preamble.

"No, I don't." His voice was stern, as it had been during the past couple of months after his Kiara-induced change of heart.

"You will ruin this company!" Edgar's voice rose, showing his absolute lack of control over the topic. One more reason to leave him as an outside consultant instead of a member of the board, as he requested.

"I will not. Is there something else you need?"

"You can't do this. I won't allow it."

Chris pinched the bridge of his nose. He was not in the mood for that discussion, especially after he found out Kiara would be busy the next day.

"Edgar, we've been over this. You sunk the company in debt, and you kept it from your board. It was their decision to remove you from the post and I only agreed to these meetings because I value your expertise and I respect you. Now, is there something you want to share about the progress we made this past week?"

The man was fuming, just like he had been for the past couple of months. But surprisingly, it didn't spark anything but a mild sadness in Chris. Sadness for seeing such an industry titan crumble to the weight of modern business models.

"You should marry Felicia!" The sadness went out the window with that sentence, but instead of going berserk on the man for such absurdity, he kept staring at him with impassive eyes.

"Why is that?"

"We can merge, and they'd pay off the debt. I arranged everything with her mother!"

"Jesus Christ, no wonder we sunk into debt. We were negotiating like it's the eighteenth century. Tell me more about her dowry, Edgar. Does it come with a few good horses?" Chris laughed at his own joke, thinking about how Kiara's ways were rubbing off on him.

"So you'll pass on a good woman to be with a promiscuous dancer?"

Chris didn't know if he should laugh or punch the man in the face. It was so utterly pathetic to think he was only now showing his hatred towards Kiara. And it was even more ridiculous because the man didn't really care what his woman – or any other - did for a living. He was only bitter about it because it got in the way of his plans.

"I'll ignore that absurd remark on Kiara's profession because you are mourning the loss of your position. I won't do it a second time, Edgar."

"She changed you!" He barked as if it was an insult.

"Yes, she did."

***

"Michael, I need to know where she'll perform tomorrow"

"Hello to you too, Mr. Sinful Voice! What a pleasure to talk to you again"

"Can you help me?"

"No."

“Oh, for fucks sake.” Chris pushed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes and sat back on his kitchen chair. It took him over an hour to get hold of the man on that faithful Friday night, and now he was refusing to help.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I need to see her.” Desperately.

“Why don’t you ask her instead?”

“Because it’s Kiara. She won’t tell me.” He heard an amused laugh on the other side.

“You know her so well already, it’s adorable. Tell me, what are your intentions with my baby girl?”

“What are you, her father?” Chris joked, but the silence on the other side reminded him that was not something to be said when Kiara was concerned. “Sorry, that was a shitty thing to say.”

“It was, but it’s alright. As long as you don’t do it to her and make her go cuckoo again.” Michael was laughing, but his joke had a warning. Chris debated whether he should ask about it or not.

“Does it happen a lot?” He tried. It was better than asking the story behind her episodes.

“It’s been a long while, so I was surprised she had another one. I’ll be honest with you; I think it was important she did. She was under the impression there were no more issues because she could keep her head on her shoulders,” he scoffed. “I think it’s about time she opens up to someone other than a therapist.”

Chris thought about it for a while. He understood Michael’s reasoning, even though he approached the subject too lightheartedly. But he could still see her body shaking and distant eyes when he thought back to it.

“I don’t want her to go through that again,” he stated firmly.

“Ooh la la, there is that voice again. That’s one of the reasons I am playing matchmaker for you two.”

“You are what?”

“Matchmaker. Or pimp, since she’s a hoe. Now, do you have a pen?”

Chris wanted to laugh at how fast Michael could change the tone of the conversation. It was probably one of the reasons Kiara was so fond of him, no sad topic could linger on that man’s tongue. He dismissed those thoughts and grabbed the pen and paper by his side. This is what he came for.

“Tell me where to find her”

# Chapter FIFTY-TWO

Sales conventions were one of Kiara's favorite kind of events. The organizers always had some sort of crazy briefing for her, that matched the company's goal for the year. She often found herself having to portrait 'double-digit growth' or 'increase market share' in a three-minute silks routine. In sum, she was paid exorbitant amounts of money to perform whatever the hell she liked.

It's not as if the people who hired her would be able to tell if she explored the theme they gave her anyway. Even so, she liked to try to pass on the message. It was an artistic challenge, and more often than not, she ended up with a fast as hell routine and a smile plastered on her face.

She particularly enjoyed performing to the half-drunk workforce. They cheered like few other crowds, mostly because they were celebrating making shitloads of money. It was like performing at a kids' party; not strong in the artistic department but it boosted her confidence.

That particular Saturday, they invited her to an all-day event in a hotel, where she would perform to three different groups. They were pretty adamant she prepared different performances for each of them because they had unique goals to achieve. She laughed so hard when Michael told her about it, that her agent hung up on her face to make her stop.

The only downside was that she had to cancel her weekly meeting with Chris… Batman. Weekly meeting with Batman. Oh hell, who was she kidding, she was way past the point of faking it was for Batman's sake. She began to look forward to Saturday mornings in ways she didn't expect to.

Sure, they were attracted to each other since the very first day, but now it was… different. She knew him now. The sound of his real laughter, the way his brows furrowed when she defied him, his annoying habit of walking faster than her – and then giving her an apologetic smile when he noticed.

As she got ready for her first performance of the day in that fancy hotel room, she wondered if he'd miss her. She tried to gauge his reaction by reading his text messages over and over, to no luck. When she read his same reply for the third time, she shook her head in annoyance and threw the phone on the bed.

She refused to keep acting like a clueless teenage girl, especially since she already knew the answer to her own question. Of course he'd miss her. He was more than clear during their many encounters that he was working towards a goal there. And he was pretty close to getting it, if she were being honest with herself. She was almost out of excuses to keep the walls up. Now she just needed to find the guts to open up.

When she was done getting ready and warming up, the staff led her to the conference room where she'd perform. An approachable woman was finishing a presentation on how to stay focused throughout the workday. Kiara stood in the back of the room, waiting for the short break that would precede her performance.

She took a moment to assess her audience. Almost a hundred people sat on big round tables spread across the room. Most of them could really learn a thing or two from the lecture. Not that they weren't focused, it just wasn't on the woman ahead. All eyes were undoubtedly fixated on the staff catering the snacks they'd eat in a couple of minutes.

She also spotted the big boss from a distance. A bit older than the rest of the workforce, million-dollar suit, tight-lipped expression that made her wonder if he was constantly annoyed or just really had to sneeze. The poor girl furiously taking notes by his side was probably his secretary who, despite the large paycheck, was not paid nearly enough to endure that insufferable man.

Alright, maybe she shouldn't be so fast to judge. Perhaps he was a decent boss, who just happened to have the expression of a military totalitarian. Maybe he was even… There it was. The pig motioned something with his head, and the poor girl immediately got his fancy-ass stainless steel thermal and began to refill it with the water bottles on the table.

Kiara felt like opening one of them and pouring it into his suit. 'Oh, sorry sir, I thought that's what you wanted since you can't use fucking words to ask for things'.

She rolled her eyes and thought about Chris. He'd laugh his ass off if she did that impersonation for him, and maybe share one of his own office stories. Now that he took over the business his whole attitude towards it was way more relaxed, and she even began to admire how he chose to manage everything.

When the lecturer stopped talking, the crowd politely clapped. She laughed at the way they all took a minute to assess if it was ok to jump on the food already. Soon enough, the employees gathered around the small sandwiches and cupcakes with no concern for company hierarchy or corporative manners. She would love to keep watching from afar, but duty called, and she had to make sure her lyra was ready for her.

Moving past the tables and trying to stay out of the commotion, she found herself a stone's throw away from the faithful thermal bottle. She almost scoffed, noticing the leather details and the fucking digital display that probably showed the time, temperature, and number of people the owner had yelled at.

There was little to no thought involved in her next move. In a sleight of hand, craftily developed through years of shoplifting, the thermal was in her bag. She wasn't planning on taking a prize for herself today, but this precious little thing deserved to be hers.

While she was helping the technical crew attach the lyra to the ceiling, she made sure to keep an eye on the big boss' table. She didn't want to get someone else in trouble for her little theft, which shouldn't even be considered a theft. It was more of a… karmic retribution.

When everyone got back to their sits, she noticed the man inattentively grabbed a generic water bottle from the table and drank it. Just as she expected, he forgot about the thermal as soon as it was out of sight, and wouldn't remember it until much later. When it happened, he'd not be able to trace where he lost the damn thing. Worked every time.

With that out of the way, Kiara breathed in to concentrate on her performance. 'Finding and engaging early-adopters'. That was by far her favorite of the day. Or was it 'Sticking to our core competencies', that she'd perform in the afternoon? She was not sure which one was a worse theme for a circus performance, but she was loving it.

Of course, she had to make it theatrical and obvious. It was not as if a fierce expression would be enough for them to grasp the concept. So she went full power with that one, as straight forward as a lyra performance could be. She obviously chose Conquest of Paradise as her song, and went for a marine customized outfit. She was truly feeling this naval explorer vibe after she researched whatever the hell 'early-adopters' meant.

As soon as the song began, the crowd cheered in recognition. She was already trying to hold herself from laughing at their reactions, and she knew for sure she'd have a few eager spectators humming along. She flourished the moves and falls as best she could, and made sure to end with multiple spins and an exit worthy of the Olympics.

They cheered and applauded for a full minute, until a perfectly dressed woman hopped on the stage and tuned down the crowd with a smile. Taking it as her cue, she got her bag and crossed the room to leave. She was barely out the door when she felt a presence behind her.

"Here I was, thinking I was special because you stole something from me."

# Chapter FIFTY-THREE

Kiara turned around to see her favorite face holding a smirk.

“What are you doing here?” She asked in a mix of surprise and embarrassment. Nobody was supposed to have seen her little theft.

“It’s Saturday,” he stated, as if it was obvious he’d track her down after she said she’d be unavailable.

“It is, but I don’t see Batman.” She arched a brow. His smirk turned into a full-blown laugh, and Kiara looked around to check if he was not drawing too much attention.

“He was not the one missing you this week.”

She noticed how he was struggling to stay away from her. During their weekly encounters, she realized he always kept his distance, and didn’t touch her beyond necessity. She knew it was a way to give her some space, since she turned him down three times before, but she could really use his body just a bit closer to her today.

“Michael told you where to find me?” She asked, and he nodded. “Sly bitch.”

“Are you giving the thermal back?” He asked, and she couldn’t read his expression.

“I don’t plan on it, but if he threatens to send me to jail, I might.” She shot back. He only smiled, and thankfully didn’t give her hell for taking a prize.

“When is your next performance?”

“At three, then the last one at five.”

“Perfect. Come with me.” He began to walk, and she had no choice but to follow him.

“Where are we going? I need to change!” He stopped walking and looked at her blue and white striped bodysuit

“No, you don’t. Now can you stop trying to ruin my surprise?” He said with a smile. She could live in that smile.

After a couple of minutes of walking around the hotel’s corridors, they arrived at a small room that led to a beautiful garden. In the middle of the room, a green pair of silks hung from the ceiling. She noticed the place was prepared for a yoga class, and soon understood that the hotel must offer some sort of organized activity to the guests.

“What are we doing here?” She asked, afraid he’d surprise her with a master class of geriatric yoga.

“I booked the room so you could teach me… this,” he proudly stated, pointing to the fabric.

"You want to learn aerials?" Her expression must have been of utter disbelief, because his confident façade faltered for an instant when she asked.

"You don't think I can do it?" In face of that, she broke out of her daze and laughed.

"I am going to have so much fun now."

She began to take off her sneakers and assess his outfit. She should have noticed how informal he was, with grey sweatpants and a dry-fit shirt. He must have thought he was rocking the sportswear, but he'd never be able to climb the silks with those loose hems.

"You seem to be judging my choice of clothing."

"Did you bring anything else?"

"Shorts, but I thought I needed extra protection. I do like my legs unburnt."

"Put them on, you won't get hurt if I'm teaching you." Probably.

While he went into the small bathroom to change, she thought about what was happening. There was a silly smile on her face, and for once she didn't really care to show it. He was… there. And maybe, just maybe, he'd stay.

"My mother died in a car crash"

Chris was barely out of the bathroom when she blurted it out. He stood still for a second, and then closed the distance between them with few large strides. He stopped an inch away from her, and she looked up to meet his eyes. They were warm and open, and she knew he wanted to touch her.

"Do you ever drink and drive?" She asked.

"No," he replied, and Kiara sighed.

"You are nothing like him, I should never have made that comparison." She didn't know if he remembered the time she said it, but if he did, she owed him the apology.

Then, before she could carry on, she began to feel her body shake. She hated how little control she had over it. So many years avoiding the topic, but now that she wanted to talk, her body refused to let her.

But then Chris' hands darted up and he held her still, embracing her without moving for a while. Unable to stay away, she leaned into his chest and rested her cheek on his shirt. The way his hands drew small soothing circles on her back kept her there, hooked to the moment.

When she felt like she could breathe again, she began to speak.

"Even today, they keep referring to it as an accident. But he was drunk and chose to drive anyway."

She felt him stiffen against her, and she knew he was mad by the way the soothing movement on her back became harsher. It made her strangely calm, to think he was angry on her behalf. God knew how furious she had been about it all those years, and she wasn't even at the worst part.

"It would have been a hit and run if his car wasn't so fucked up after the crash. Those fancy sports cars are not known for their safety."

She didn't feel like carrying on for a while, and Chris didn't say anything. But eventually, he led her outside to the beautiful garden she hadn't truly paid attention to before. There was a small wooden bench, and a creek that flowed a bit further from where they were. The hotel was relatively far from the city, but still, she didn't expect to find that small natural work of art there.

They sat listening to the water for a while, and she didn't fail to notice how he positioned himself to keep her laying on his chest.

"He wasn't punished, was he?" He asked at last.

"No, he wasn't." She knew he understood. He was rich too, so he knew how these things went. If he ever got involved in something similar, it was obvious there would be no consequence harsher than a fine.

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen," she mumbled with a crooked voice, and only then realized a few teardrops were raining down her face. She frowned and touched them to be sure they were there.

"You are not used to crying." He gave her a sad smile and kept quiet for a while. She wasn't. But now, in the brief time they were together, it seemed as if she had relearned the long-lost ability. Crying was incredibly cathartic, and she kept doing it until it didn't hurt as much anymore.

# Chapter FIFTY-FOUR

She was so incredibly precious. Chris couldn't quite understand how a person could go through that and come out so beautiful on the other side. He didn't expect her to tell him about it, not like that. But he understood her better now. If hating rich people was the only outcome of that disturbing past, he'd more than welcome it. Damn, he'd get rid of his own money if that's what it took.

But he knew it wasn't. She was scarred, more so than he could ever have been, even with his few shitty events in the past. And still, she was the most amazing person he had ever met.

"My father did arrest the fucker, you know?" She said after a while. "Well, he couldn't do it himself because they kept him away from the case. But he knew enough people on the force to get it done"

"He was a cop?"

She nodded. Chris couldn't begin to imagine how hard it must have been on him. A police officer that had his wife murdered by a drunk driver, and couldn't even keep him in jail because of the crooked money-controlled system.

"He didn't recover," she mumbled under her breath. "I don't know how he lasted that long, to be honest"

"I don't understand." He didn't want to interrupt her, but she didn't seem to mind. It was as if only then she realized he needed more information to understand her meaning.

"He died when I was eighteen. They say it was a work accident, could have happened to any cop. It was, but he was dead long before that."

Chris stayed quiet for a while, trying to think of anything he could say that would soothe her. When he couldn't, he took her hands and kissed her palms, then her wrists. She caressed his cheek and he looked up to study her face.

She was unbelievably strong, and so utterly beautiful. And he loved her more than he could ever deem possible. There was not a thing he could say to comfort her, but he desperately wanted to. He wanted to have been there for her, to have met her sooner and kept all the sadness out of her life. But since he couldn't, he just stayed there and held her close for a long, long time.

"I'm hungry"

"What?" He frowned and pushed her away for a second to look into her eyes.

"I need food."

“I know what hungry means Kiara, I just… Are you ok?” He was having a hard time adjusting to her change. Wasn’t she sad?

“Good, so feed me. I have a performance in three hours.”

If she wasn’t going to linger on the tragedy, he wouldn’t either. But he couldn’t help but feel the shift in their relationship. She held his hand to help him out of the bench, and didn’t let go when they walked away from the garden. He looked at the silks he didn’t climb and was almost glad he dodged that, even if it was his own idea.

He was still thinking if there was anything else he should say or do. If it was ok to move on as she had just done. But then again, she wasn’t moving on now. She had done it long ago, when she was a fucking child. He could feel the anger rise again, thinking about a small version of his Kiara going through that.

Then, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking, she stopped walking and hugged him.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for staying”

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Chris stayed in the hotel all day to watch Kiara’s performances. All he needed to crash into the meetings were semi-formal clothes and a confident business smile. Even if her routines weren’t as touching as the first ones he watched, he was still impressed by her ability to match whatever style was requested of her.

And every time she looked his way and smiled from up there, he would welcome the warmth she brought and feel his pocket for the small box he was keeping there. Ever since she agreed to meet him every Saturday he was carrying the damn thing, waiting for the right opportunity to give it back to her. Patience was hard on him, but he could wait a bit longer.

As she finished the last piece, she came to him with a different kind of smile. She seemed especially cheerful as she grabbed his hand and power-walked outside, where the empty corridors provided them a little privacy.

“What is…”

She pushed him against a wall and glued her lips to his. He didn’t fail to respond, pulling her closer and entangling his hands in her hair.

“I missed you,” she whispered against his lips.

“We were talking half an hour ago.” He smirked, but he understood. He missed her like hell.

“Not like that, idiot!”

She kissed him again, and he wanted to stay forever with her in his arms. But soon they heard the people getting out of the conference room and Kiara detached from him at lightning speed.

He couldn't help but love this little trait of hers, how she shied away from public attention whenever she wasn't on the stage.

"I did book a room, you know?" He whispered and loved the way she shivered in his arms.

"They wouldn't let you in by virtue of your dashing smile?" She asked with a sarcastic smile, and he really felt like fucking her against the wall right there because of it. And she was right, the hotel did require a reservation before he could get inside. He didn't think he'd be lucky enough to use it.

He led her to the master suite he had booked, and she shot him a questioning smile, certainly doubting he booked such a nice room with no hidden intentions.

"All standard rooms were booked already. There is a sales convention going on, you know?" He smirked, and enjoyed the view of her exploring the room.

"I need a shower, I had three performances today!" She went straight into the bathroom, and from the room, he heard her cheering. "Fucking perfect!"

"What is it?" He asked, curious as to what could be perfect in a hotel bathroom.

"I hate tub and shower combos"

"What?" He finally got to the bathroom and noticed the tub was separated from the shower. "Oh, that. Does it matter?" He was never one for baths anyway, so he never thought about it.

"Yes, Christopher, it does."

"Why do you keep calling me Christopher?" He rolled his eyes. He actually got used to it on her voice, and was beginning to like his full name in a way he didn't before, but he had to ask.

"Because it annoys you." She shrugged. "Now, can you please fuck me in the shower already?"

# Chapter FIFTY-FIVE

Kiara was still feeling the thrill of a responsive crowd when she kissed him, but she did not regret it one bit. It was past time she gave into him – again. She didn't have it in herself to fight it any longer, and as soon as she made up her mind, it was as if a switch had flipped. Now she fucking needed him.

Chris was not one to lose time, so as soon as she asked for it, his lips were already pressed on hers and her body was crashing against the bathroom wall.

Her hands explored his perfectly cut hair, and she hoped she'd mess it beyond return. He deserved a little chaos, and she'd give it to him. She began to reach for her bodysuit's zipper, but he was faster at finding the opening on her back. A few seconds later, a loud tearing sound made its way to her ear.

"Did you rip my costume?" She broke the kiss to ask.

"I'll buy you another one," he replied, kissing her now bare shoulder.

"Asshole!"

"Already?" He teased, and she pulled his hair harder. With a mischievous smile, she playfully grabbed his right ass cheek.

"Two can play this game, love."

Much to her surprise, he didn't go for the straight refusal she was used to hearing. He just raised a brow and got back to kissing her neck. Interesting. She stored the information for later, but couldn't help getting even more turned on by him.

She failed to realize he had opened the shower tap, but next she knew he was carrying her inside the large box with no concern for his own clothes. She laughed against his lips, and wiggled in his arms so he'd let her down. The bastard, however, held on tighter.

"Stop moving, I won't let you go." Oh fuck, the sound of his rasped voice demanding her to do what he wanted, added to his strong grip on her tights, caused her pussy to clench in response. But still, the only thing better than listening to his commanding tone was to tear it down.

She was not stronger than him, but she did know her body and her balance. She held on to his shoulders for support and unhooked her legs from behind his back. He was still carrying her weight with his arms, and despite thinking it was sexy as hell, she was set on her goal to go down and undress him.

Kiara broke the kiss to bite his earlobe, and when she heard his sharp breath intake, she forced her legs apart and down. Bingo! The unexpected move made him lose the grip, and she found herself standing with her arms around his shoulders.

"Crafty vixen," he cursed, but she could almost hear the repressed laughter in his voice. He couldn't hide how much he loved her disobedience. His shorts had to go, and while she worked on that, he took off his soaked shirt. His boxers were struggling to keep his hard cock contained.

"That seems uncomfortable." She smirked, and slid one hand inside the black fabric to feel him against her hands. His eyes rolled back when she began to stroke him, but he seemed to have other plans. He took her hands out of his boxers and turned her around, pressing her against the wet tiles.

By the feeling of his hard cock against her butt, she knew he had taken off that last piece of clothing. But the jerk was in the mood to torture her a little further, and decided to run his hands across her body at an agonizingly slow pace.

It took him forever to reach where she wanted, but by the time he did, she was dripping. He circled her clit with his thumb while reaching inside her with his middle finger, and she couldn't help the moans that fled her lips. She fucking needed him, and he knew it.

"Chris," she begged, and he chuckled against the soft skin of her neck.

"Yes, my goddess?"

Instead of talking, Kiara pushed her ass towards him and moved against his hard cock. With a low grunt, he gave up on teasing her and took her hips on his hands to steady her. Then, answering her desperate pleas, he entered her from behind with a slow thrust.

She was relishing the amazing feeling of his thick cock filling her up, when she felt him sliding his arms around her in a delicious embrace. One of his hands traveled up to her breasts, and the other down to her clit. She took one of her hands off the wall to pull him closer by the back of his neck, and he wasted no time to kiss her anywhere he could.

"I love you," he whispered, and she felt her knees faltering. Luckily, he was right there to hold her up and kiss her neck. Fuck, she was doomed. He loved her, and he wasn't leaving. And hell, she loved him too.

Before she could answer, he pulled out and turned her to kiss her fervently. She missed him inside her already, but loved the way he pressed her against the cold tile as if his body belonged even closer to hers.

Almost without noticing, she ran her nails deeply across his back, and heard him hiss in return. The hot water on his new scratch probably didn't help. With a smirk, he pulled her hands up by the wrists and trapped her. He began to tease her with his other hand, leveraging the fact she was dying to touch him but couldn't.

"Behave," he grunted.

"What if I don't?" She challenged him, and in return got exactly what she wanted.

“I’ll have to tie you up.”

He went back to kissing her, but his spare hand found its way to her ass and pinched it hard. Fuck, she lived for it. That bite of pain turned into waves of heat across her already flaming body, and no amount of water would cool her down now. He smirked, loving her unearthly reaction to him.

So he thought he was the only one allowed to play? Maybe her hands were trapped, but she could tease him regardless. She shot him a playful smile and began to raise her left knee on her side. He seemed confused for a brief moment, but then she straightened her leg until she was on a standing side split.

“Fuck, Kiara,” he said in a rough voice.

Yes, she was showing off. But it certainly did the trick, and Chris brought her leg to rest on his left shoulder. Her wet pussy was on full display for him, and she knew he’d reach deep inside her like that. He finally let go of her wrists to align himself to her, and he wasn’t gentle this time. He pushed his cock into her, and she felt herself clenching around him. So fucking delicious.

He was pounding hard and deep, and when he picked up the speed, she felt her feet lifting from the ground at each thrust. She held on to one of the shower grab-bars for a little extra support, thanking the stars for putting in there. Chris was in a frenzy, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull whenever he pushed deeper, and her split opened a little more.

It wasn’t long before she felt that amazing sensation building in her core, and he must have noticed the change, for his pace picked up and his grip on her hips got tighter.

“You feel like a fucking dream,” he whispered. "I won’t ever let you go, do you understand?"

Kiara felt her control slip and gave in to the orgasm that hit her. She couldn’t hold her leg up, so she let it slide to his side and was surprised when he picked her up, still inside her. Her head was as foggy as the bathroom, and she gladly accepted being lifted so she could enjoy the aftershock of her pleasure.

He carried her out of the box, and she only came back to her senses once he dropped her on the bed, still dripping wet.

“What the fuck Chris, we are soaking the bed!”

“I don’t care, I need you.”

“You were having me already,” she said between dazed laughs, but she wasn’t complaining. If he wanted to have her on every surface of every room, she’d gladly take it.

# Chapter FIFTY-SIX

Chris unwillingly left her in bed to get the condom from his bag. He was not thinking about it earlier, but after almost shooting deep inside her in the shower, his memory was jogged up. He reached for the package, but his hand found the small box he had placed back there earlier, and he smiled. Maybe… later.

He watched her laying in bed, wet and open for him. She was a fucking goddess, and he couldn't understand how he could be so lucky.

"I'll have to finish without you if you just stand there. I don't mind the audience." She motioned to touch herself, and he immediately crawled over the bed to tower her.

"Don't you dare," he threatened, and pinned her hands above her head. With his spare hand, he rolled the condom down, and slid into her. Fuck, she was so impeccably tight around him.

He knew she would find a way out of his grip again, but if it was anything like that fucking split she did in the shower, he would more than welcome it. She always found a way to elude his plans, but now he couldn't comprehend how he could ever find it annoying. It was perfect.

"Aren't you tired of pinning me down? I think your hands would be just as comfortable choking me instead." Holy shit, he was ruined.

Chris let go of her wrists to place his grip on her throat, and the sight of her eyes rolling back made him lose it. He began to pound inside her relentlessly, and her soft moans, muffled by the light choking, were fueling his desire like wind on a wildfire.

Not long after, he began to feel the preface of her orgasm. She closed her eyes, like he noticed she always did when she came, and began to trash against the mattress to find her release.

"Look at me, Kiara," he demanded, and she immediately did. Her spellbinding blue eyes were almost fully taken by her black pupils, clouded by pleasure. Her pussy clenching around him was everything he could ever ask for, and he almost allowed himself to let go with her. Not yet, though.

When she came back from her high, she glared at him with a look he'd photograph and frame if he could. Her eyes were clouded by the pleasure bliss, but were also absolutely livid that he didn't cum with her. Then, she assumed a new expression that was the blunt definition of determination. He was fucked.

As if to prove her fierce resolve to kill his attempt on holding back, she skillfully clenched around him. Shit, it felt good. He was holding still inside her, and she was just embracing him on the outside. But on the inside, she was working his dick in a sensual dance that had him seeing black spots in minutes.

"Are you tired already?" She sarcastically asked, knowing damn well he was almost paralyzed by pleasure. But he wanted another orgasm from her, then he'd accept to dive into pleasure himself.

Her words were playful, but he had just the thing to handle her mischief. He relished the fact he knew what she liked already, and that she responded to his every move so perfectly. He turned them around, so she'd straddle him from the top. Then, he brought his hand down to her ass cheek in a slap that sounded so obscenely enticing, he had to do it again.

She began to ride him as if her life depended on it, and Chris didn't want her to ever stop. But then she did, and in a move he didn't see coming, turned around and sat on his dick again. He was left facing her round ass, and she began to move on top of him to the rhythm of their bodies' music.

The woman was a fucking artist, and it showed even in bed with the way her hips moved, and her ass bounced in his own private show. Then, she bent forward a little and began to touch a spot right behind his balls.

At that moment, Chris lost all hope to remain in control. He felt a wave of pleasure consume him in a way he hadn't felt before, and as she kept pressing that spot, he was taken even closer to the edge. He couldn't hold back now, and with a few more ups and downs of her ass, he allowed himself to let go with thick spurts of cum. After a couple of perfect minutes inside her, he finally detached from her sinful body.

"Fuck, that felt good," he uttered.

"That dick of yours works wonders as well."

They both laughed, and he began to place a trail of kisses on her body. They made a mess on the bed, and the sheets were soaking wet, but he couldn't care less. When he reached her tattoo, he stopped kissing her and began to trail the intricate design with his fingers.

"What does it mean?" He asked.

"I did promise to tell you didn't I? The chrysanthemum is the flower of death," she began, pointing to the largest flower, and Chris held his breath. Maybe he shouldn't have asked, but she was actually smiling. "But I found out in Australia, they call it 'mum' and give it as a Mother's Day gift."

"Really?"

"Yeah. When I heard about it, the flower became pretty special to me."

"And the other one?" He asked, tracing the smaller flower that composed her black and grey tattoo.

"The peony? I find it cute," she shrugged.

“Cute?” He was lost. She had a flower that had a double meaning that eternalized her mother on her skin and another she found… cute?

“What, you thought it would have another deep and symbolic meaning?” She pushed her body up to lay against the headboard, and Chris laid on her lap still looking at the ink. She carelessly played with his hair, and it felt like home. He thought it would be a sensitive matter, but she was laughing.

“I don’t know, maybe your father?”

“Oh, hell no. The man had a terrible pollen allergy. He would hate it if I had a flower to honor his memory”

He climbed to her side and kissed her, letting her rest on his chest. He wished he could find out every little thing about her just like that, with her in his arms.

“I thought it would be harder to talk about this,” she said, more to herself than to him. And he looked at her with a raised eyebrow, waiting for an explanation. “I didn’t turn into an empty shaking mess, for once.”

He knew she was referring to her derealization episodes, but she had a sort of dark sense of humor to talk about it. He recalled it was not the first time she used it to address troubling subjects. But in the end, he was just glad she was sharing her story. He knew it was not always going to be that easy, but at least she was opening up a bit.

They laid together for a while, enjoying both the silence and the few words that broke it every now and then. When they got cold, they got rid of the wet sheets and asked for a new set. When they – or yet, Kiara - got hungry, they ordered room service and ate in bed. He thought she was already asleep when she moved a bit in his arms.

“I love you too, Chris. I’m sorry it took me a while to realize it.”

# Chapter FIFTY-SEVEN

Kiara opened her eyes and tried to remember where she was. The heavy blanket and soft pillow didn't match the ones she had at home, and the big man holding her close was definitely not something she woke up to often.

"Morning," Chris said in a voice too awaken to match her lazy mood.

"Morning. Have you been up long?" She turned to face him, stifling a yawn.

"Not too long." Definitely a while, then. Had he been staring at her the whole time? She began to move away from his embrace to get up, but his arms just brought her closer. "Stay," he almost begged. Kiara smiled, and nested in his arms for a while longer.

"What now?" She asked. They both knew her question was not just about their plans for the day.

"Will you stop running away from me?" Chris asked with his face buried in the crook of her neck. He was leaving a trail of soft kisses on her bare shoulder, and it felt nice.

"I will if you keep doing this."

But then he stopped and looked into her eyes with a dead-serious expression.

"Is this how you feel about us?"

"I'm not here just because of your mouthwatering dick, if that's what you are thinking."

"Good, because I'm all in, Kiara. I mean it." He paused for a moment, assessing her reaction. "Now, mouthwatering, you said?" He playfully arched a brow.

Kiara clicked her tongue and pushed away from him for a bit.

"You don't deserve a blowjob after making me work so hard last night."

The sound of his laughter filled the room and Kiara didn't fail to notice how her heart reacted to it. She felt like holding him close, happy to have him by her side. Realizing she had no reason not to, she put her hands around his neck to hug him, and it took him less than a second to respond. After a long while, he pulled away to talk.

"I have something for you." He began to rummage through his bag while fighting to stay in bed. She laughed at his effort and propped up to sit on the bed with crossed legs. He got back to her side, leaning against the headboard, and showed what he got from his bag.

"What the fuck is that, Chris?" She was looking at a very self-explanatory black velvet ring box. Instead of understanding her shock, he chuckled.

"I'm not asking you to marry me," he stated. "Yet."

"Then why do you have a ring box?"

Kiara was in a weird place between scared and confused, until he opened the damn thing and she saw the beautiful diamond ring that she once wore. Even though she recognized it, she still couldn't understand what the hell he could possibly want with that, if not to propose.

"I think this belongs to you. It fit you perfectly once before," he stated, as if that explained everything.

"You mean when I stole it?" She reminded him, attempting to bring the man back to reality so he'd start making sense.

"You did," he smiled, and Kiara began to think the man was absolutely crazy and she should run for the hills. But his smile was just the cutest thing and almost made her forget he had a fucking ring in front of her.

"Chris, can you please form complete sentences that actually explain something?"

"I'd like you to have it back. It's not a proposal, but it does have a meaning if you accept it. For once, I'm sure of what I want, Kiara. I need you in my life, and I know I can make you happy too."

"I want that too, Chris. But that still doesn't explain the ring. Don't get me wrong, I love it and I'd take it as a prize all over again if I knew you wouldn't put me in jail for it. But why are you giving it to me now?"

"It was my mother's." The bastard had this uncanny ability to never answer her straight.

"It is Patricia's?" Somehow, she doubted the woman would own such a delicate piece of jewelry.

"No… my biological mother"

Shit, ok. They talked about his adoption a few times on their weekly walks, but he never mentioned his birth parents.

"I thought you didn't know anything about them."

"I just know they died. The ring was the only thing they left behind, and Patricia gave it to me when I was fifteen. It was missing a few stones, but I had it restored and… that's not the point. What I mean is, I used to see it as a token of the life I could have had. I know I was luckier than most, but there were times I'd trade all the wealth and comfort for a little bit of freedom."

"Chris…" Kiara moved in bed so she could sit on his lap, with her back to his chest, and he pulled her closer as soon as she did. He placed his chin on her shoulder and put the box in her hands before carrying on.

"This was never an engagement ring for me, it was a symbol of what I wanted the most in life. Things are different now. I don't need to cling to that imaginary life I created. I like reality just

fine, and you were the one who helped me get here. Do you understand what I'm saying? You are everything, Kiara. I don't care if we get married or not, you are what I want the most in life."

"Fucking hell, this is the sweetest thing I've ever heard!" She turned around to kiss him as best she could in that position, but she didn't care if she had to bend over and contort to push her face against his.

After a long kiss and a careful work of repositioning, Kiara found herself straddling Chris while he leaned on the headboard. Her hands were on his face and she kept kissing him multiple times, enjoying how he smiled just for her. She was never one to express feelings with words, but she felt it all. How he loved her and how she loved him just as much.

"Will you wear it?" Chris asked between kisses.

"Yes, I will wear it."

# Chapter FIFTY-EIGHT

*2 years later*

"Can you fucking hurry? We'll be late!"

"We will not be late, Kiara," Chris tried to appease her.

She came closer to look at the computer screen from above his shoulder, and knew he was getting a pretty accurate demonstration of having someone breathing down your neck. But she was too psyched about the show, she just wanted to leave already.

"This is Michael's wedding all over again! You keep working until the last minute and then we arrive late."

"Kia, we got there two hours before the ceremony!"

"Yes, but only because Nicholas was two hours late!"

Chris turned around on his chair and brought her to sit on his lap. Damn it, he knew how she liked to watch him work like that.

"I'm almost done, I promise." He got back to typing, even if his line of sight was compromised by her body on his lap.

"Why are you working on our vacation?" She tried to fake being annoyed, but couldn't. He just smiled and pecked her lips while typing the last sentences of the email.

"Ok, done! We are officially in business with our third client!"

"The mining company?" She asked, reading the content of the screen for the first time. He nodded and closed the laptop to hug her.

"We won't starve, babe!" He cheered. Kiara rolled her eyes and grabbed her purse to leave the suite of the five-star hotel they were staying in Milan. Sure, starve.

But Kiara couldn't be prouder. To open the environmental consulting company was a risk she encouraged him to take, even if it meant juggling that and the construction business while he couldn't become a silent partner. She felt partially responsible for his nights away from home and emails during the holidays, but it was all worth it if the end result was that gorgeous smile on her man's face.

They got into the cab to head to the show, and Kiara was almost bouncing on her seat. If there was one thing she had quickly adapted to, now that she lived among the one percent, was the opportunity to see every single performance she wanted.

"Tell me again about the show," Chris required.

“Right! It’s called Goccia di Vita, which apparently means ‘Drop of Life’ or something. It’s a representation of this small family, and all their problems.”

“Don’t we have enough of those already?”

“Shut up Christopher, your mother has been a sweetheart since you talked to her last.”

“And saved you from endless performances to all her social groups,” he reminded her once again.

“If I remember correctly you were largely compensated for that already,” Kiara teased, thinking back to their most recent deal. Whenever Chris could free her from performing to Patricia’s friends, he’d get… well, rewarded.

“That reminds me, this week there was a book club meeting. You were supposed to do an interpretation of Jane Eyre, if I didn’t heroically intervene”

“I will not suck your dick in the cab,” Kiara replied. Oh, fuck, the cab driver. Kiara felt her cheeks catching fire, and Chris laughed by her side. The bastard loved to see her drawing unwanted attention.

“Tell me more about the show. You said Kate was part of it?” He always provided her a way out too, or at least something else to think about. Still a dickhead, but a sweet one.

“Yes! She’ll do a lyra routine.”

“Wait, but you said it was a dance show.”

“The pamphlet said it was. Isn’t that exciting? I have no idea what will happen!”

Chris kissed her once again before they finally arrived, and she pulled him inside the theater in a rush. Two large popcorns and a soda cup later, they were heading to their seats.

Kiara was more than halfway through her bucket when the third bell rang, and she looked to the side to see Chris’ was still full. She rolled her eyes and grabbed his bucket to fill up her own.

“You are not supposed to ration the popcorn,” she stated.

“I want to have it till the end of the show!”

“Life is unpredictable, sometimes a pretty girl steals your popcorn. That’s why you never save things for later.”

“Genius. Why didn’t they teach me that in business school?” Chris replied sarcastically, but she knew he loved her brilliant remarks on how to face life. Probably.

The show began, and they soon understood it was a rather unconventional piece. She couldn’t decide if it was a play, a dance, or a circus performance, but she loved it either way.

“I like your shows better,” Chris whispered in her ear after one of the more circusy acts.

“Shut up,” Kiara replied, but couldn’t help the little smile that formed on her face. In the two years they were together, he didn’t miss a single one of her big performances, and never failed to remind her how much he loved her art. She melted a little every time he did it.

Kiara allowed herself to get lost in the play, and was particularly moved by the distant relationship of a father and his daughter. It got her thinking about her own family, but in a way that she didn’t think was possible a couple of years ago. It didn’t hurt as much, and now she could enjoy her memories of them with a lighter heart.

“Chris, when are you putting a baby in my belly?” She whispered.

The poor man choked on his popcorn, and Kiara almost regretted blurting it out like that. She tapped his back a couple of times while he coughed the corn out of his lungs, and looked around to see if he was drawing too much attention.

“What?” He asked after a few gulps of soda.

“Baby. Inside me.”

“Do you want one now?” He whisper-yelled, and she didn’t know if his face was contorted because of the idea or the aftershock of his choking. She began to tuck the shorter strands of her hair – results of her now ex-sidecut - behind her ear and nodded. She really did.

In a quick move she did not see coming, Chris grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the seat, apologizing to the angry spectators for the disturbance. Kiara kicked a few knees on her way out and wanted to hide inside her empty popcorn bucket from the glares they were getting.

“Chris, what the fuck?” She demanded as soon as they were out the door.

Instead of replying, he kissed her feverishly in the deserted outside of the auditorium. She tried to escape his grip to breathe, but he only allowed her a brief moment to do so while he called the cab.

“Let’s make a baby,” he said once they were inside their ride.

Kiara couldn’t believe he took her out of the show for that, but she would never stop him from acting on a whim. It was a rare sight, and she loved it every single time. He kissed her all the way to the hotel, and she laughed when he pushed her on the bed as soon as the door was closed behind him.

“We don’t have to do one right now!”

“Yes, we do.” He stopped kissing her for a while and took her hand in his, twirling her ring on her finger. “Then we’ll get married properly and get a dog.”

“We already have a dog”

“We’ll get another one.”

Kiara rolled her eyes and nestled into his embrace. For a long while now, those arms around her felt like home, and she had no plans on letting him go.