

Sin De Rella

Gia Hunter

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

Contents

Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	14
Chapter 4	19
Chapter 5	24
Chapter 6	30
Chapter 7	35
Chapter 8	40
Chapter 9	45
Chapter 10	51
Chapter 11	57
Chapter 12	63
Chapter 13	68
Chapter 14	72
Chapter 15	77
Chapter 16	83
Chapter 17	88
Chapter 18	93
Chapter 19	98
Chapter 20	104
Chapter 21	110

Chapter 22	116
Chapter 23	121
Chapter 24	126
Chapter 25	132
Chapter 26	137
Chapter 27	143
Chapter 28	148
Chapter 29	153
Chapter 30	158
Chapter 31	163
Chapter 32	168
Chapter 33	173
Chapter 34	178
Chapter 35	182
Chapter 36	187
Chapter 37	192
Chapter 38	197
Chapter 39	203
Chapter 40	209

About this edition

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Chapter 1

Seven Years

Skip

I SCANNED the packed room, hoping to find an old mate as quickly as possible. Coming back to this place again was harder than I thought. My chest tightened when the door shut behind me—it felt like walking down the memory lane. The air was thick with the same smell of alcoholic beverages, cigarette, perfume, chalk, and felt.

A curvy woman passed by me with a tray of cold beers and a large bowl the size of basketball full of crisps, making my stomach to grumble. At the dim-lit corner, a couple started to snog on their table and didn't give a shit on the replayed football match on the flat TV screen bolted on the wall.

What was wrong with you people? That was the real football for bloody sake! Our European football, and not some bunch of bollocks!

The drinkers laughed boisterously beside the pool players who were carefully analyzing the angle of the ball on the fifth table. Across it, the two blokes slapped down their bets confidently as if they already presumed who was going to win.

Then there he was—the familiar figure about my age, same built as I am, and an inch taller than my six feet two inches height. The light hanging above the table made the tattoo of Mjölnir's symbol stood out on his right arm. He twisted his cue to the chalk square expertly.

Bloody Shark. I inwardly smirked.

He leaned on the table, then slid a cue shaft along the crook of his hand and hit the cue ball, knocking the balls into each other. A roar erupted around, causing to gather more audience around him.

His opponent was a skin-head bulky guy, leaning across the table. He intently watched the balls rolling in front of him, waiting patiently for his turn, but I was sure it was never going to happen. I could bet a hundred quid on it that Shark was going to win, effortlessly.

A low chuckle rumbled in my chest as I sat down on the wooden stool. Bottles of different types of alcohol lining behind the bar. A sign prohibiting the minors, a liquor license, and alcohol sponsor signage posted on the right side.

A late fifties old man with an untrimmed graying and thick beard approached with a friendly smile. "What can I get for ya, fella?"

"Just a beer. Thanks, mate." I smiled back, fishing some bills from my jeans.

"It's on the house," he intoned.

To my disbelief, I stared at him like he was tricky jigsaw puzzles. Seconds ticked by, I busted out laughing. "Jett?" *What the!* It was Brett's uncle, who co-owned the Rogue Pool house.

His face split into a grin, showing off his two bottom crooked teeth. "Thought you wouldn't recognize me, Skip."

Still laughing, I extended my hand for a handshake. "I almost did not recognize you, Jett. What's the deal with the beard? How's business, life, and Lorcan?" I met his son with Brett back in London.

"Oh, come on. Let's not talk about my boring life, but Lorcan is in LA. So, you stay here for how long, son?" He grabbed a long glass behind the bar counter and pressed the beer tab. The beer bubbled up, then he placed down in front of me.

"Thanks. Not for good, but I'll stay for a year or so." I sipped the beer. The yeasty and bitter taste slid down, washing out the worry clogging in my throat. My stomach churned as it reminded me of why I was back after seven years.

"Good to know, son. Good to know."

Another cheer erupted and glasses clinked simultaneously from where Brett was playing. A skin-head, bulky man cursed fiercely, face reddened with anger.

"He won," I confirmed.

"Yup, poor man. He doesn't have any idea who Brett is," Jett concurred proudly.

Brett was a pool shark. Sadly, he stopped competing when his grandma died almost four years ago while he was on States tour.

At the corner of my eye, I saw the framed photo of Brett and his team. Other photos were The Minnesota Fats' Rudolf Wanderone and The Filipino's pride The Magician Efren Bata Reyes.

"Thanks, man!" That was Brett. "Nice game, by the way."

I chuckled when I sensed him heading towards us. I turned to face him. "You've got to be kidding me! You tricked him, Sharknado. You're a pool shark and he is barely a rookie. That's literally cheating!"

His big brown eyes widened in surprise, then grinned and spread his arms wide as if to welcome me. "Look who's here, fellas?" He threw his hands in the air in an exaggerated way. "Finally! Finally, he finds his way back to where he truly belongs! The United States of fucking America,

where burgers and fries are our religion, right fellas?" He got everyone's attention, raising their drinks. "Welcome home, Skipper Braddock Linton, my mate!"

I slid from the stool, laughing my arse out. "That's quite British-y, don't you think? We're here in US soil, Brett Rogue." We hugged with a back slap. He was my roommate in college and had been my best friend since then, but I had to go back to England to work with my father after I graduated.

"I thought you were joking when you called last week, mate. Are you in trouble? Are you now in the MI-6 most wanted lists?" Still grinning, we sat on the stools just like old times.

Jett placed down a bottle of beer for him.

"Not in trouble, as far as I know, not in a wanted list either, Jack Reacher." I laughed. When was the last time I laugh like this? We talked over the phone, exchanged emails, but not like this. I missed the old times when we were just screwing around, partying, and not caring about tomorrow.

The last time I met him was three years ago with Lorcan, but we were busy enjoying the London night. Scratched that. I was totally pissed most of the time to even remember.

"Most wanted bachelor then, Mr. Bean?" His brow waggled playfully, smiling with mischief.

I snorted, "I'm engaged, Ethan Hunt." *I wish.*

His eyes bulged. "No fucking way, James Bond!" He slammed his hands on my thighs, making me jerk up and wince in pain.

"What the bloody hell was that?" I grimaced. "Of course, I was lying, Stephen Curry?"

"I thought you're serious, plonker." He sipped his beer, keeping his eyes on me.

"What's wrong if I'm engaged, daft? I could have just fallen in love in a week and planned on getting married."

He snorted, "That's Mission Impossible, E. L. James. The last time you were heartbroken, I and Lorcan flew from LA all the way to London to mend your stupid broken heart. And the last time I talked to you over the phone, which was just last week, by the way, you seemed far from being in love, so, I know you're lying. I might consider if a hot babe will jump into your knickers tonight, then you take her to your flat and shag her brains out."

"Bloody hell. Why her? Why not just Simon Cowell?" We high-fived and laughed—a deep thunderous laugh like we used to do. I hadn't gotten a chance to tell him the reason why I was here, and it made me felt like an arse.

I scratched the back of my head where I tied up my bronze curly hair into a bun. Talking about my ex, just ripped the old wound open. I couldn't blame her for choosing her career over me because that time I was also busy working my arse off to make my own name and prove to Dad that I deserved to be a Linton, and not because I was his son.

"Still hurt, huh?"

"Barely." My accent thickened, especially when I was upset or worried about something. I pushed the empty glass. "Jett, scotch, please."

"You're not gonna piss your arse, Linton. It's your first night in New York after seven bloody years," Brett imitated my thick accent, which he quite fancied at it and lured lots of girls during our college days.

"Nope. I'm gonna beat your sorry skinny-arse over snooker," I challenged him, though I knew who was going to win.

"Fucking Brit!" he spat out, laughing carelessly. "Carry on, Harry Potter. So, what will get if I win?"

"Anything, Kardashian." I shrugged, extending my hand with determination.

"I can't believe you know all these shits."

"Blame it on Clyve. He didn't stop talking about shits since he started producing a morning show."

"Wow! Good for your bro, mate."

"Now, what if I'm going to win?"

"Are you serious?"

"Bloody."

"Okay, anything," he answered, sounding unsure. His brows squished together.

"Are you sure?" With confidence, I arched my brows as I gripped his hand to seal the deal. My heart started to hammer in my chest. What the fuck had gotten into me to play the game that he had been playing all his life?

"Yeah, King Arthur."

"I have unfinished business with someone, but can I have your word that you won't kick my arse—"

"With who?"

Chapter 2

HeartRated

Arella

I COULDN'T help but think of how happy I was when my ex-husband proposed to me three years ago. A month later we get married. Now, I was staring down at the Manila envelope that had been inside my drawer for eight months. My final divorce papers.

Taking a deep breath, I tore open the package. There it was—nothing but black and white. My marriage was over. And I already saw him with a woman in his arms a month after the divorce had been finalized.

That jerk.

And I was so damn upset about that. I loved him. I even forced him into a marriage counseling because failure was difficult for me. And seeing my world turned upside down, it felt like he stabbed me right into my heart. And after all the effort, it still didn't work, in fact, it just had gotten worse. So, I decided to leave our home when our fight had gotten physical.

Somehow, I got something that made him went ballistic. A six-figure settlement. It didn't feel right though, and I haven't touched it since I'd been single. All I wanted I was to get back my life.

I shoved it back to the drawer and pulled out my laptop. My life had been back to normal—not the kind of normal that I used to though, but I had quality weekends with my family, had time to annoy my big brother, got my friends back, and had a new awesome and bubbly roommate.

Windows started. The Wi-Fi instantly connected. I'd been checking out online dating sites and apps recently, but hadn't signed up yet. And if my brother found out about this, he was going to lock me up away from civilization and thought I was insane, but he wasn't going to find out, was he?

HeartRated got my interest. I clicked the register button, filled up some basic info, and uploaded my picture, then my finger froze in the air. Am I really desperate to go out on a date? It was now or never.

I took a deep breath and clicked DONE.

* * *

This is impossible.

Hotsome: The awkward moment when you try to message a girl and all you can think of is hello.

SinDeRella: Hi.

Hotsome: Want to chat sometime?

SinDeRella: Sure, how's your day?

Hotsome: Great. And hope you are as well. So, any plan tonight?

SinDeRella: Actually I have. How about next weekend?

Ten seconds later...

Hotsome: Cool.

Hotsome: I checked your info. I think we have something in common.

So, he checked my profile.

Do these people believe in everything you post?

SinDeRella: What made you think I'm stating the truth?

Oh, crap! It didn't sound friendly. Blamed me for not having a lot of dating experience. My ex was my first and only boyfriend.

Hotsome: We signed up for online dating, love, so we both wanted to go out on a date, right?

God, I was overthinking.

Hotsome: By the way, is that your picture on the DP or you stole it from your twin?

I rolled my eyes. That was so lame. He seemed not used to flirt or a way to impress a girl.

SinDeRella: I might be looking for a date, but what if I don't like you?

Hotsome: Come on, love. We both know we wanna have some fun.

Hotsome: If this is your picture, then you look gorgeous, love.

I cropped the picture during my roommate, Katrya's birthday last month. I was wearing a red mini-dress and showed off some cleavage. And now, I was in trouble.

I clicked Hotsome's profile.

28 years old, 6'2", single. *Of course.*

He loved to adopt a dog.

A foodie and football fan.

His interest: A woman with natural beauty.

My jaw dropped, just staring at his picture because his name suited him well. Hot and handsome. *Damn beautiful!* Indeed, his age was probably just like my brother. Did I forget to mention he has copper brown hair reaching his shoulders? It was unruly and wavy that made him sexier. His face was beautifully crafted. His skin wasn't tanned as I liked in a man, but he had warm honey brown eyes that scorched me. His nose was almost perfect. His strong jawline was covered with a day or more worth of stubble. His lips were full and pink, slightly spread into a smile. And that... corded neck. A few chest hair poking out from his opened button shirt.

I wondered if how did it feel against my fingertips?

Crap, I got it bad.

Did he have six-packs, lean hips, and muscular thighs?

Okay, enough, Are.

Wait, why did he look so familiar? Was this his real picture? He could have just cropped and put someone's picture from Google, Instagram, or other social media apps, right? Because there was no way he looked like this? He could have a lot of ladies filling in line to have him. *He's not real.*

I shook away those thoughts. *I'm in deep trouble.*

It's just a picture. He could've just photoshopped it.

Hotsome: Are you still there, SinDeRella?

What had gotten into me to use this username?

SinDeRella: Something came up. I'll chat with you when I'm free.

Hotsome: How about tonight? I really wanna know more about you.

SinDeRella: How would I know you're not some psychopath?

Hotsome: Then we should probably meet.

SinDeRella: Didn't I just ask why should I trust you? *insert sarcasm.

Hotsome: Lol. Am I too pushy? Let's talk sometimes then?

SinDeRella: Sure.

"Wow! Since when are you interested in online dating?" Katrya's voice from my back startled me.

I turned to face her. “Did I forget to lock the door?” I asked sarcastically. It was not that we should lock each other’s door. We knew our limits, and when I moved into this apartment, her first rule was no bringing of dates home.

“Your door is ajar, my dear. And I called you when I got inside, but you seemed so lost staring at that picture.” She walked inside, locking the door behind her. “So, tell me. Are you going out with that guy?” She pointed out to the laptop that I already shut closed.

“You know I never did this before. I don’t know, maybe or maybe not.”

“I can set you up out on a blind date. I’ll ask our new X-ray technician. He’s single and kinda hot,” she suggested, grinning.

I rolled my eyes. “The last time you set me up on a date, he canceled an hour before the date. So, no thank you.” My self-esteem suddenly dropped freezing cold when it happened, and Kat apologized for like a thousand times even though it was not her fault. Still, she felt being played out. Besides, that guy was the one who asked her that he was looking for a date.

“I’m sorry, Are.”

“I know. Don’t worry, there’s this one guy that I chatted earlier, but how will I know if he is not some jerk?”

“Then go out on a date with him. In a public area, and don’t go to his place.”

“I don’t do that for a first date, Kat.”

She snorted, “Really? The last time I checked your last date was your ex.”

“Fine, but what I mean is, I will not go with him after our date. If he asks me again, then, I’ll see if the first went well.”

“And you know this dating thing, most people are not looking for a serious relationship, right?”

“I know, and I’m not looking for a relationship either.”

“You are a big girl, Are, but make sure if you’ll go out on a date he’s hotter than your jerk ex. So, who is this guy?”

“Um, his username is handsome,” I answered reluctantly, grinning.

Kat stared at me for a moment before she burst into a laugh and threw her head back. Her straight, shiny, and raven black hair swayed gracefully. I was so jealous of her hair and fair freckled-free skin. Her mom was a Filipina and her dad was a Korean, but they were American citizens now. Kat was a nurse in our local hospital for three years.

“So, is he a *hotsome*?” Her dark brow raised, still smiling.

I chuckled and shrugged, then her mouth gaped open and raised her hand to stop me from saying. “I’ve never seen that look before. He’s that hot, huh?”

My brows knitted together. “What look?”

She pointed finger at my face. “That sweet guilty look. Your face is literally blushing right now, Arella. Did you already have wet dreams over this hotsome guy?”

“Oh, shut up, Kat. I’m hungry. What do we have for dinner?” I stood up and ran my hands over my crumpled panda pajamas.

“You are the one who has no duty, Are. I should be the one who’s asking you that.” She rolled her eyes, looking amused. “What a lazy roommate I have.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’ll make up to you, I promise.” I followed her out of my room. I was taller than her in a few inches, but she had a petite figure compared to me who gained some pounds after my divorce.

My ex-husband used to restrict my consumed of calories, and still, he called me fat despite my fifty-five kilos. I could say he was fit and never eat fatty foods. We both went to a gym and watched out our weight together. But, I stopped everything when I moved out of our house.

“You can make it up to me when you have a second date with hotsome.” She winked when we both stopped in our small living room that only consisted of a long brown couch where I usually spent most of my time watching action movies on our flat TV. It had a small glass coffee table and the new dark brown rag we bought from the 50% off last month.

“I’m just glad that you’re trying to give back some colors to your boring life. He moved on, Are. Now, it’s your turn. He’s not the only hot guys in the world. Your ex-husband is an asshole.” She smiled, this time it wasn’t sympathetic like every time she found me crying on this couch. But Kat didn’t know some important details about my ex.

“So, should I consider dating one of those hot guys?” I smiled back.

“If they’re hotter than Ed Skrein, then yes. It’s time to make that drier than oregano vagina wet.”

“Oh, my God! Your mouth, Kittykat. This guy looked familiar to me, but I don’t think it’s him that I used to know though because his eyes have different colors, and I don’t think he’s ever interested in this kind of thing. I mean he doesn’t have to, you know.”

Chapter 3

Dr. Everly Hynson

Skip

THE CREAM stucco house came to view when the iron-wrought gate slid open. This had been my mother's house after her divorce from Dad. Dr. Everly Hynson never remarried and been promoted as the head of the Pediatric department in the local hospital last year. Back in London, Mum's schedule was the cause of most of their fights. She was still a resident back then. Dad was busy running our cosmetics and fragrances business while Mum was on call mostly at night. But her love over her job made her selfish in the eyes of my father.

The door swung open. Mum stood beautifully in front of me with her familiar smile. She was always curvy as far as I could remember. Her straight, blonde shoulder-length hair made her look younger than her late fifties plus she had her makeup on, and always had.

"Hello, mother!" I greeted, spreading a grin on my lips.

"My darling, Skipper. I thought you forgot your way back home."

Stepping forward, I wrapped my arms tightly around her. A feeling of breathlessness overwhelmed my senses. "I missed you so much, Mum."

"I don't feel that way, Skipper," she said with a laugh.

"Come on, Mum. We've been through this." I pulled away, staring at her beautiful hazel eyes. "I just want to prove something to Dad. When the time comes, I can stand on my own."

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I know, baby. And Mum is so proud of you." She kissed my cheek. "Let's get inside, shall we?"

Mum was a neat freak. This house still looked new and smelled clean and citrus. Everything was white from floor to ceiling, to furniture, decors, and even the grand staircases in the middle of the living room. But you couldn't find even a single living plant around. She was an environmentalist to the bone. She had this opinion that if she put plants in the house it was like cutting off their lives.

I followed her to the right corner of the house. One thing caught my attention was the door to my right ajar slightly with a yellow light illuminated the entire room. There were racks made of woods and filled with wine bottles. Dad was right after all.

My chest tightened. I took a deep breath and pressed my lips together to stop overreacting. The family room was welcoming than the living room. My pictures and Clyve hung everywhere. I sat on the custom-made cream couch in front of the huge motion-sensor television I'd ever seen.

"Did you order that?" I asked, pointing to the TV.

"You mean if I till watch Grey's Anatomy?" She smiled warmly.

"I'm not judging you." I shrugged. "I mean how odd to watch medical-related shows when it's far from the reality? You've said that, remember?"

"I know, but Grey's Anatomy is closer to reality."

I looked down at the bear's skin rag under my feet.

"That's fake, honey. I know how much you all love animals." She sat beside me, leaning her head against my shoulder.

"I know why you're here, Skipper," she said softly.

"Of course, I'm here to manage the New York branch. And might stay here for good as well since Clyve loves his job at the CNC."

"I'm your mother, baby. I know Bradd is aware of my drinking problem."

"So, it's true then?" I lifted my head and watched her closely. Dad still cared about Mum, and I thought he still loved her and still talked from time to time.

She nodded slowly. Guilt plastered all over her face. "I'm seeing a therapist and attending some seminars."

"But you still keep alcohols in your house. Is that part of the therapy? How does it help, by the way?" I sighed with frustration.

"Don't judge me now, Skipper. You've never been here for me in the first place."

"So, is it now my fault, huh?" My voice sharpened.

My mother stood up, crossing her arms over her chest. Her feature remained calm, softened even. She was aware of why I had to leave her years ago. Not only because I had to work for my Dad, but she was all-out support of my decisions.

"So, how's your apartment?" That was why I loved her so much—she never pried. And I was not ready to rip the wound open as well.

"Thanks for helping me out, Mum. I like it by the way. The place is not far from the office, so I don't have to wake up early." I smirked.

She rolled her eyes. "You never change, do you? This is New York, Skipper, and I should have chosen an apartment far from for your office so that you have to force yourself to wake up early."

"You're mean, don't you know that? Why would I wake up early if I can manage my time just right?"

"It's not about time management, Skipper. Since you started high school you always skipped breakfast and just ran out of the house with an empty stomach. It is not right to just stop at the greasy food stand and eat from there? How are you even this fit?" She motioned to my body.

"Well, it runs in the blood, I guess. And my name is Skipper, right?" I arched my brow, smirking again. "I work out every day after my job, and it helps me sleep at night. I only eat a greasy breakfast, but I eat healthy at lunch and dinner."

"Why don't you stay with me instead."

A boisterous laugh erupted. I could even hear the echo of my own voice in the entire house, but Mum was not amused at all. "Who the bloody twenty eight years old bloke still stays at his mother's home?"

"I want to take care of you, honey." Her voice remained sweet and motherly.

I abruptly stopped laughing and stood up, pulling her into a hug. "Mum, I love you so much. Let's take care of ourselves together, but I don't have to stay here to do that. You can come and visit me anytime. We can cook a healthy dinner, then have some cuppa whilst watch Grey's Anatomy together every weekend, how does it sound?"

She nodded. "I love you, Skipper."

"I love you too, Mum."

"So, are you dating someone?" Mum noticed how my body went rigid.

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat, unable to find a word to answer her.

"So, you didn't come here for her."

"Mum."

"I know you are still close with Brett, Skip. And you probably heard what happened to her marriage."

My heart ached. Why did it have to feel this way? After all these years, it was just like yesterday. But she lied to me, and I could never forget that. It almost took years of my life away from my family.

I was beyond shocked to see her signing up at the dating site I co-owned. Didn't she know that his brother shared twenty percent of its profit? I knew I was a scumbag back then, and that was one of the reasons why I had to stay away. I was playing with fire—a fire that couldn't be ceased once I stayed around. I regret beyond anything, and worse was, I just stabbed my best friend on both sides.

Stalking Arella was probably the worse idea I came up with, but I couldn't let her go out with another man on a date. I guessed she had never been on a date since her divorce from her slag ex-husband. So, I called my internet engineer to make her profile unseen to everyone but me. We'd been chatting for a while now, and I was glad she didn't agree on meeting me, yet. Meaning, she was cautious and intelligent.

She changed a lot these years. Her slim figure was gone and became more hot and curvy. She changed her hair color as well, but those cherry full lips that I tasted once still looked luscious and sinful.

My face heated with embarrassments of what I did to my best friend's little sister.

"I have to go, Mum."

"I'm trying to let you open up, Skip. You two can still be friends?"

How can I be friends if I still lust her? I thought after all this time, it was going to lessen, but I was completely wrong. At least now, we were both adults and single.

"I don't think it's a good idea, but even so, I'll try to be nice."

"It's been years, Skip."

"I know, Mum, but she still lied to me. I have to go. I'll see you on the weekend?" I sounded like an arse to her, but I couldn't just talk about it right now.

"I'll visit your apartment. And please, no more socks on the floor, Skipper. You're near thirty for God's sake."

A soft laugh rumbled in my chest. "That I changed. I placed a hamper near the door where I could toss my socks."

I took a deep breath to lessen the ache in my chest. Mum walked me out of to my rental car.

"Thanks, Mum."

* * *

I SWIPED the screen to unlock my phone. My pulse raced as I opened the HeartRated app on my phone. It was totally all Brett's idea to create a dating app, forcing me to go out on a date. I'd met

several girls using this app, but nothing serious other than hot sex overnight then bid goodbyes after that.

Hotsome: Hey, love. You up for a drink this weekend?

I'd been asking her for days, but she just gave me reasons. I was wondering if she found someone outside this app or I was completely not her type. Photoshopping my photo and my brother's was not exactly a good idea—it was like lying, but she did lie to me in the first place, so call it quits.

The chatbox bubbled.

SinDeRella: I have a weekend dinner with my family.

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. I wanted to ask her again what was her purpose of signing up on this app.

Hotsome: Can I ask you something?

SinDeRella: Sure. As if I can stop you from sending.

Smartarse!

Hotsome: Did you find a date already?

SinDeRella: What made you say that?

Hotsome: Because you kept on turning me down.

SinDeRella: I'm nervous and I'm not good at it.

Hotsome: Just be you, love.

Seconds later...

A minute passed...

Hotsome: Still thinking twice? Fine, my Sinderella. I won't ask you again. Just send a message when you're ready.

I logged out. Disappointment swept over me. What if she hadn't moved on from her ex?

Chapter 4

Skip Linton

Arella

THE LIVING room already blasted with loud noises from the TV and from Dad and my brother, Brett. They were football fans—the soccer one. Brett was a die-hard fan of Manchester, while Dad was a Real Madrid, and as for me, I was a neutral. Well, if I was being honest, I knew American football, but soccer, on the other hand, was different. Instead of throwing the ball, the players kicked it toward the opposing team’s goalkeeper to score. And they called it a goal. And the NFL and FIFA balls were different in shape. *Why in the hell I am I talking about balls right now?*

Grimacing to their noise, I ambled toward them, sitting on the couches. The entire room was dim, only the light coming from the TV screen that helped me not to bump into something, and I happened to memorize this place since this was my home once.

“Guys, good evening! Can anyone please lower the volume down?” I yelled, waving my hand. To my dismay, nobody heard me, or they were too engrossed with what they were watching. This kind of scene was not new to me—no one could distract them, even a high magnitude level earthquake.

“Yes!” they yelled in unison, fists pumping in the air while I was crossing my arms over my chest in annoyance for ignoring me.

Wait, Lorcan was not the third one. My cousin arrived from LA this afternoon, and Uncle Jett would also be here tonight.

“I told ya, mate!” the man guffawed over my brother. His accent was the first thing that caught my attention. He was tall just like Brett and looked like he took much time in the gym. The sleeve of his dark sweater stretched on his flexed bicep. His long brown hair tied up in a bun. Then the straight nose, the wrinkles at the corner of his eye, down to the dimple on his cheek, and those lips that spread into a full-blown smile.

My breath caught. My hand flew to my chest. My heartbeat galloped. A flush of adrenaline tingled through my body the moment someone finally turned the light on.

The noises suddenly stopped. And I got a chance to see the man beside my brother. *Oh my, God! It’s him.* The guy I once knew was almost unrecognizable. In a good way. He’d grown up into a... gorgeous as hell kind of man.

His different colored-eyes bore into mine, making my breath held, my heart seemed to freeze then pounded harder in my chest. What was he doing here? And the time seemed to stop because what shocked me the most was there was no recognition in his eyes.

“Hey. You must be the baby *sista*.” He walked past Brett and Dad, then stopped in front of me. “Arella, right?” He extended his hand, and I found myself closing my gaping mouth.

Does he happen to have an identical twin or a doppelgänger maybe?

How the hell didn’t he recognize me? *Well, it had been years, Are. You gained some fats while he became gorgeous.*

“Are, don’t be rude. You haven’t got a chance to meet Skip when we came home during college.” Brett pulled me back to reality—a shocking painful reality.

I swallowed uncomfortably and cleared my throat. “Hi, I’m Arella.” My voice was low and shaky. Heat rushed through my cheeks when the picture of what I did back then sprang into my mind.

His grip my hand firmly and short. “Nice to finally meet you, Re— Arella.” His hand was warm and strong, but I was shivering with disappointment to how he didn’t remember me.

“Nice to meet you too, Skip.” I put a little emphasis on his name and broke my gaze. I still remembered how those beautiful eyes looked at me, but there had no emotions and nothing warmth as they stared back at mine.

My belly knotted as I berated myself for my actions. I never regretted it though, because that was one of the best nights of my life.

“Are, you’re here. Come over here, honey, and help me out in the kitchen.” Thankfully, Mom saved me from farther humiliations.

I walked away speechless with knees barely made me reach the kitchen.

“Hey, Mom.” I kissed her blemish-free cheek. Her expensive perfume wafted my nostrils. At fifty-five, she managed to stay beautiful, ate healthy food, and meditated a lot.

“You okay, honey?” Mom’s brows furrowed as she faced me. She stopped whatever she was doing with our helper, Morena.

“I’m fine. Thank you for asking. Let’s finish this and have dinner because I’m starving. And I need to go back to my apartment and watch the movies I rented online.” I quickly picked up the bowl full of pasta. I almost dropped it and too late to realize it was hot.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Are? You seem—”

I hissed and blew the burning sensation on my palms. “I’m good. It’s just that time of the month.”

“So, you finally met Skip Linton,” Mom simply started.

My gaze met hers. “Come again?”

“Skip Linton.”

“Is he related to Axson Linton?” I had to pretend I never met him before.

“Your crush? Member of the Fifth Death, then yes. He’s Axson’s cousin. Remember you went to their concert with Alys? Skip came with them to meet your brother. You didn’t get a chance to meet him because he left in the morning before you came home.”

So, he wasn’t lying when he said he was a Linton. I thought it was his first name though.

Uncle Jett and Lorcan arrived and everyone’s attention solely focused on Skip and my cousin. I barely talked throughout the dinner. I lost my appetite, but I managed to eat a tiny portion of the food I scooped into my plate. I couldn’t help myself to steal glances at Skip. All these years, he worked for his dad’s company in London that was why I never saw him again after that night.

He was more beautiful, especially when he smiled. His well-defined jawline dusted with dark brown stubble. I had every detail committed to my memory of how handsome he was back then, but there was nothing could compare to the way he looked right now in front of me. *He’s perfect.*

My skin pricked with the painful memory of my fingertips touching his skin seven years ago. He was my first, and I could still remember how it felt like when I was pressed against him and how he worshiped my body.

You’re so beautiful, Reigh. So beautiful that it’s hard to let you go after this.

And Jesus, those arresting blue-brown and blue-gray eyes—the first thing I noticed from him. They just amazed me.

I forced myself to tune back to the conversation and just the smile of Skip threatened to totally overwhelm my senses.

“How about tomorrow night, Skip?” Brett suggested. *About?*

Skip shook his head and pressed his lips together, causing his dimples to pop-out. “You won two days ago, Bretton. So this time, I pass. How about you and Lorcan?”

“Nah. Thanks, dude. I pass. How about you and Arella?” Lorcan said.

My eyes widened when my name was mentioned. “A pool? No, thank you. I’d rather sit on my couch and watch Marvel’s.”

“Seriously, sis, stop moping at the tiny space of your apartment. Get a life, and you’re still young to waste your life over your asshole ex.” A sudden pang hit my chest, but Brett was right, that was why I’d been trying hard to get back my life.

Mom gripped his hand while Uncle Jett shrugged as if telling us Brett was right, then continued his dinner.

Lorcan groaned.

“Brett,” Dad warned as if to remind him we had our guest.

“Give her a break, Davin,” Uncle Jett said to Dad.

Suddenly, the dining room turned dead silence and small. Everyone’s eyes pinned on me as I lifted my gaze to survey them. Skip’s hard and painful eyes were also on me. His jaw muscles clenched hard, making his jawline more evident.

I composed myself and cleared my throat. “I’ve been out on a few dates. So chill out, *mates*,” I broke sarcastically.

“Really? Well, that’s good to hear, sis.” Brett was literally grinning. He loved me so much, and what happened to my past affected everyone in my family, especially my brother.

He never liked Dom in the first place, but I was blindly in love and nobody could stop me from marrying him when he proposed. And I thought he was *the one*—it turned out he was a jerk. My life crumbled down like post-apocalyptic earth, barely standing.

We were back in the living room. Mom chose not to join us. I sandwiched between Brett and Uncle Jett. Dad was on the loveseat. Skip and Lorcan chose the two recliners.

“But make sure, he respects you, Are. If he doesn’t want to have broken bones,” Brett whispered. He was on a business trip at that time, and I couldn’t face my parents in my state, so I flew away. Lorcan went ballistic when I escaped to LA with swollen lips and black-eyed.

“Aren’t we done talking about my personal life here? It’s nothing serious, Brett. It’s just a date.”

“I don’t agree with nothing serious, Are. You have a life ahead of you, but at least find a decent guy,” Dad countered.

“Sorry, Dad, but I agree to disagree. Let Are enjoy her life. She’d been in hell, and I’m glad I have my sister back.” He was dead serious, then he faced me. “And she’s going to beat me over a pool,” Brett enthusiastically announced.

“What? Hell, no, Brett!”

“Why not, Arella? I heard you’re good as well,” Skip rejoined, eyebrow half-arched.

“How the hell am I gonna win over a shark when I haven’t played in years?” Brett and I used to play pool back when I was in high school. I stopped when he moved out to college.

“Let me teach you,” Skip suggested.

“No, you’re not, and I don’t play anymore.”

“Okay, this is just a game, Are. You and Skip are partners, then me and Lorcan. How about next week?” Brett’s eyes were warning me.

“Fine, but can we be partners instead?”

“No way. Baby shark and an old shark can’t be together as a team. So, you and Skip have a week to practice.” Lorcan laughed, clearly happy and already expecting to win.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever, Lorc.”

* * *

“SO, WHEN can we gonna start to practice, Arella?”

I stopped walking toward my car when the deep voice spoke at my back. I turned to face him. His unique-colored eyes expressed the same. “We don’t have to. Brett said you almost win.”

“Because he let me and wanted to know why I challenged him,” he simply answered. His hands were on his slim-fit jeans pockets, showing the best of his strong and powerful thighs. His closeness almost ignited me. His spicy, minty, and musky smell refreshing the summer air.

“And what is your reason exactly?”

He chuckled confidently, “You don’t wanna know, love.”

Chapter 5

Arella Rogue

Skip

WHEN I got out of my last relationship, I decided not to ever get serious with a woman again, or she had to come with me where ever I go. Then, her entrance just caught me off guard. Things got offhanded.

Arella Reighan Rogue was nothing like in her picture. When I first saw her, she was already beautiful, but now, she'd grown up into a gorgeous woman, and as sexy as fuck! She was slim back then compared to the femininely curved body she had right now. Her brown caramel hair was longer than before—it couldn't possibly be natural because I still remembered it was the color of Champagne. It cascaded midway down her back in wavy ringlets and shone and glossed in the light from their living room. Her skin looked so soft and smooth, and pale as milk. And those puckered pink painted lips parted when I pretended not to remember her. Her perfect heart shape face paled when she recognized me, then blushed a crimson rose when she paired with me over a pool.

My heart jumped out of my throat the moment our eyes met. Her wide honey-colored eyes adorning with long ebony lashes were alluring, but there was something in those eyes that I couldn't point my finger on— was it sadness? Regrets?

Your eyes look magical. I've never seen like these before.

I thought they scared you away like most girls were.

I had been with my shared of women, but I never imagined any of them naked underneath me, unlike right now. So, what was with Arella? The forbidden fruit that worth a bite— another bite. The jolt of electricity was still there— after all these years. Had she felt it too?

She swayed her wide hips, walking away from us. Her turquoise mini-dress hugged her gorgeous round arse perfectly, revealing her long shaped legs that could run miles. Despite wanting to taste her, I clenched my aching jaw, remembering about her lies just to avoid a hard-on in front of her family.

Damn it! I needed to get laid. I hadn't had longer than a week without a woman since my ex. *Thanks to HeartRated!*

And what the bloody hell happened to her marriage? At the other corner of my brain, I was pretty celebrating. Now I had a chance to pursue my plan.

"You okay? Homesick already?" Lorcan pulled me back to his attention.

The weather was just right, but I found myself sweating to what I thought about her. The fresh air expanded my constricted chest, making me calm.

"I'm too old to feel homesick, Lorcan," I chuckled. Bitterly.

The guilt I'd been carrying for seven years worsened a thousand times. Mum and business were just part of my plans of coming back. I persuaded Dad to transfer me with reasons for taking care of my mother.

I realized I was such a bloody awful son.

Since I found out about Arella's divorce and my constant stalking her online like a creep, I finalised my decisions.

"So, how's your first week?" Brett asked, then sipped his beer.

I leaned my back to the chair, looking up at the clear dark sky. "I have to visit the lab next week. One of our chemists just developed new scents."

Brett chuckled, "Good luck, mate!"

My brows arched with curiosity. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Nothing." When his phone rang, he excused himself.

When his shadow was far enough, I faced Lorcan. "Lorcan, I don't want to be nosy, but what happened to Arella's marriage?" I sounded like a nosy bitch because I was actually snooping. But a few info wouldn't hurt. It didn't feel right to ask Brett about his sister, or I was just guilty as shit to ask him.

"Brett didn't tell you?" He looked at me in disbelief.

"Why would he tell me?" I almost chuckled at my absurdity.

Then why are you even asking him, idiot?

"Then why are asking me now?" See?

"I was wondering, and I couldn't shut my ears off to listen while Davin and Arella were in a serious conversation earlier. So, that bad, huh?"

"Are all British love to snoop like you?" Lorcan laughed, and it made me groan as I was afraid Brett could have heard us. "You better ask Are. I'm not the right person to tell you that, but how do you know about her divorce?"

Fuck! Lorcan fucking Rogue!

“Have you forgotten that you all just talked about it earlier?” I breathed inwardly.

He pursed his lips, but his blue eyes remained pin at me. “Yep, pretty bad, but Are got a good settlement. That asshole deserved it.” The clenching of his jaw was hard enough that he breathed through his nose.

I nodded in understanding and didn’t pry anymore. I looked away, feeling the unknown emotions flooding my senses. My hands fell down to the armrest. When I looked back Lorcan, his scrutinising eyes still pinned at me. I was afraid he just saw something.

“What? Do you develop a crush on a Brit already?” I joked, trying to lessen the tension that suddenly thickened around us.

“If I haven’t known you never met Arella before, I might think you two have something.” He didn’t blink, and I swore I could feel my face burned with guilt.

The adrenaline quickly rushed through my system, making my senses heightened. My mouth fell open as I stared at him in disbelief.

I swallowed hard, licking my dry lips. “Where did that bloody idea come from?” My accent thickened. I spoke in an American way since I was here. Mum never adopted Dad’s accent, so I was used to be talking like her.

“And why the hell are you so defensive?”

“I’m not, but *you*, saying something that is completely ridiculous. Arella is my best friend’s little sister, and think about our age difference, mate.”

“That’s what I’m saying. Your defensiveness is questionable. What is four years age difference? Her dad is six years older than her mom,” he said calmly while my sense was raging in alarm.

I stood up, breathing deeply. “I better go and talk to Brett. It’s late, and I should go home.”

“Just be careful, man. I’m a psychologist for a reason. I notice things that you don’t. And I saw how you looked at her.” Lorcan rubbed his chin, then shrugged.

Yeah, I fucking forgot there was a shrink around. How wonderful? I ignored him, walked away, and entered the house. Brett was done talking when I bid goodbye to his parents.

“Skip, call me if you need anything.” Brett walked me to my car. I could sense the call was not good news.

“I’m good and settled, mate. Thanks though.” I stopped beside my car and faced him. “Is everything okay?”

"It's Are."

"Is she okay?" The words slipped my mouth before I even realized.

Shit!

There was a brief of hesitation traced on his face, then he said, "She signed up in your dating app."

I could feel my face lit up. Not bad at all. Thank fuck! "You mean our dating app. Doesn't she know that's ours?"

"Fuck no. She'll laugh her ass out on me."

"Then what's wrong if she signed up?" How did I end up being so shameless to find something about her?

Brett hadn't mentioned anything about his sister's personal life even once, so I respected and never asked. Unlike my life, it had never been a secret between us. Well, aside from *that part*.

"I don't want her to use that app to go out on a date."

"I thought you want her to go out on a date and have her life back," I quoted his words.

"Yeah, but I doubt if there was any guy who's serious to have a relationship using that app. Mostly they just want to get laid."

"Mate, you're too overprotective over her. Did you forget she's old enough to take care of herself? Let her loosen up a bit, she needs it. She should date someone and forget that asshole who broke her heart."

I could see the pain in Brett's face. It made me wonder what she'd been through in the hands of her asshole ex-husband.

"She asked for my permission, Skip. Since the first time she went out on a date with that dickhead, I had this feeling that I couldn't trust him with my sister, but Are was kind of lost. There was something missing in her eyes. The sparks, I didn't know, but I just wanted to see her happy again. So I allowed her since she was so adamant to date that guy. If I only knew he was." He paused and rubbed his hands over his face, then blew an exasperating sigh.

"Over these years all he did was hurt my sister in every possible way, and I never thought Are could hide it from me. It almost killed me when I found out, Skip. It was all my fault." The pain in his eyes when he looked at me just justified that Arella had been through hell. And Brett was blaming himself.

My knuckles cracked as I fisted my hands behind my back.

That bastard!

“Can I help?” I asked without hesitation.

“Will you?”

I let out a small laugh. “Brett, you’re my best friend, and if it concerns you and your family, I’m willing to do anything.” *And if it concerns Arella, with all my heart, I’m in.*

“Thank you!”

* * *

BRETT’S WORDS echoed repeatedly in my mind while I ran three miles on the treadmill and until I finished the hot water in the shower. I questioned myself for his sincerity and trust. Am I this trustworthy for him to trust his sister with me?

I lied on my bed, staring at the blank chatbox. I scratched my growing stubble annoyingly. All my plans had been thrown into the dustbin.

Hotsome: Hey, you up?

The chatbox instantly bubbled. My lips curved into a smile.

Sinderella: Thought you won’t talk to me until I have my decision.

Hotsome: That was the plan.

Sinderella: What changed then?

Hotsome: You’re not interested, so I thought I could find someone interested in meeting up. This is the purpose of this app, right?

I waited. She didn’t reply, but her profile status showed she was still online.

Hotsome: Can I ask you one thing?

She replied immediately.

Sinderella: OK

HoTSoMe: Are you dating anybody? I mean, do you like someone else?

Sinderella: That’s two things, hottie.

Hottie? I chuckled.

Hotsome: Choose one then.

Sinderella: Yes, I like someone.

Fuck!

Chapter 6

His Scents

Arella

MY HEART lurched thinking of Skip Linton. When I was still with my ex, I thought of Linton and never figured out that he was actually a *Linton*. If my heart lurched for him, it also ached that he didn't recognize me. Was it because I gained some weight? Was it my hair? It frustrated me because I knew he was that guy.

The connection was still there—those eyes, the feelings when our eyes met—I could still feel it, and I knew he felt it too.

Hotsome: So, should we stop this?

I stared longer at my laptop screen, berating at my possible answers. Linton didn't want me anymore. This man showed interested for almost two weeks now, so what was stopping me?

Sinderella: But he doesn't like me.

Hotsome: What made you say that, love?

Love? I shook my head, pushing the thought of Linton away.

Sinderella: Well, for a starter, he didn't show his intention. It's maybe because I'm fat. Secondly, he didn't ask me out, and lastly, I don't think he would ever like me more than a friend. If he even considers me as a friend.

Hotsome: So, this guy is a friend, huh?

Sinderella: Well, he's a

I hesitated. Why? It wasn't like he knew me, right? I continued typing.

Sinderella: Well, he's a friend of my brother. So you probably know about the Bro code. I'm literally an off-limits.

Hotsome: That makes sense.

Sinderella: So, if you were that guy, what would you do? I mean if you like me.

Hotsome: If I like her that much, and if we're on the same page, I'll risk my relationship with my friend and she should think of the possibilities and consequences when things went south before she enters into that relationship. But my relationship with her brother won't be the same again.

Sinderella: He doesn't like me anyway. It answered my doubt. Thanks so much.

Hotsome: I'm glad I can help.

Sinderella: Are you still interested?

Hotsome: Interested?

Sinderella: Yes, in meeting me?

I crossed my fingers.

Hotsome: Of course, but let me be the one to ask you. Would you like to grab a cup of coffee, or grab a drink with me?

There was something in me lightened up upon reading his reply.

Sinderella: I'd love too, when?

HoTSoMe: How about Saturday?

Oh, hell. I had a game with the guys.

Sinderella: Um, I promised my brother and his friend for a pool game.

He replied immediately.

Hotsome: The same guy?

I grimaced. My hands were sweating as I typed my reply. I had to be honest with him as much as possible.

Sinderella: Why won't you join us instead?

I clicked send.

Seconds later, still no reply. Was he hesitating?

Hotsome: I might be out of place with your brother and his friend around. Don't you think it's a little bit awkward to meet your brother on our first date?

Sinderella: You're right, I'm sorry. I told you I'm not good at this. How about Sunday? I know a good coffee shop downtown.

Hotsome: Sounds like a plan.

Oh, my God! I was really going out on a date with hotsome, and I didn't even ask his name. *How stupid of me!*

* * *

AFTER I got my BS in Chemistry, I'd been a trainee for two years at the Scentsory Laboratory for Perfumes. A sub-branch from France. We concocted remarkable fragrances those now sold by the huge brands in perfume industries.

I always loved natural scents, especially from flowers and fruits. My family was not impressed with my choice of major. Brett once told me it would be difficult for me to find a job, but it didn't stop me from pursuing what I loved, and I wanted them to be proud of me.

Now, we had a seven-figure deal with the famous international brand— Everly Cosmetics and Fragrances. And I just found out from Brett that Skip's family owned that company.

I stared at the lines of vials on the racks in front of me. My mind went back to Skip Linton. If he was going to choose a scent, what would that be?

We'd tried many formulations for months. Some were strong, others were mild, and nothing met our expectations. It exhausted us. We needed to impress our client and until now we were not near closer to making an extraordinaire scent. We had to come up with two scents this week—one for men and another for women.

Jasmine and honey? How about orange blossom, rosewood, and pine? Lime for headnote, rosewood, then vanilla for ground? I was also thinking of cherry, apple, lavender, hyacinth, citrus, and raspberry. Musk, mint, cedar, and sandalwood were usually for men. I groaned in frustration.

The alarm on my phone startled me, indicating my work was done for today, and I had not come up with a better formula.

I sent a text to Kat if she wanted to have a late-night dinner tonight after her duty. I drove to the supermarket near our apartment when I received her reply. I parked my car, blocking a black rental car since I was not going to stay long.

Hurriedly, I pushed the cart to the veggies section and picked some baby carrots, cherry tomatoes, lettuce, zucchini, lemon, cucumber, and some fresh herbs. Then I moved to the dry section to grab some organic pasta, quinoa, and semolina. I started to watch what food I shoved into my mouth before I turned into a freaking hyena. Nobody wanted to date a fat woman, right? After grabbing some fresh milk and tetra packs of orange juice, I paid to the register.

A tall familiar figure leaning on my car made me stop pushing my cart. Before I could avert my gaze, he saw me coming. His simple blue sweater stretched on his perfect body and his firm and huge biceps flexed as he crossed his arms over his chest, attentively watching me as I approached in wobbled knees. His hair was still on the same man bun as the last time I saw him. The aviator

glasses he wore looked too good on him. He reminded me of the young Tom Cruise in the movie Top Gun.

“Arella,” he greeted. Just my name on his tongue was like warm honey on my skin.

“What are you doing in my car?” Thankfully, my voice didn’t crack or stutter.

“You blocked my way,” he simply said with the same tone—cold as the Arctic.

“I’m sorry, I was in a hurry. I didn’t mean to block your way.” I quickly unlocked my car and opened the trunk.

“Of course, you didn’t,” he mumbled and stood straight.

I paused. “Excuse me?” My voice raised a little bit. Before I could start loading my groceries, he already took two plastic bags at a time.

“You don’t have to. I can carry them myself.”

“I know, love, but I’ve been waiting here for a couple of minutes, and I’m in a hurry,” he talked without bothering to look at me, then grabbed another bags.

“I’m so sorry—”

“You’ve already said that, Arella.”

My blood suddenly rushed through my brain with a strong force. “Wait, Linton. Do we have a problem here?” My hands already propped on my hips, glaring at him. And he sensed my anger.

He turned to face me, lifted his sunglasses, and propped on top of his head. And I almost stumbled back when I saw those eyes that drove me insane years ago. Now, they squinted back at me with intensity.

“Problem? Are you seriously asking me right now? No, I don’t have a bloody idea why—” He suddenly stopped, strolling his gaze on my body. I wore four inches high heels, but he was still way taller than me. “Never mind!” He slammed my trunk a little bit stronger, making me startled.

“Drive. I’m late for my appointment.”

“Where is your appointment?” My question made me freeze.

He snorted, and that irritated me. “Why would you like to know?” He walked past by me. His perfume reached my nostrils—it was a mix of mint and cedar.

“Care to tell on why are you so mad at me? What have I done wrong? If it’s because of the stupid game. Forget about it because I’m not coming. I already informed Brett that I can’t join you guys. I have a date.”

His hand froze before it touched the door handle of his car. He then turned to face me and shook his head with a mock plastered on his face. "You're a terrible liar, Arella."

"I lied sometimes, yeah, but why would I lie to you if I don't want to play that stupid game with you?" I raised one brow. "And why do you care if I choose to go on a date than to be your partner?"

"Fine, call that guy who you want to go out on a date with." His face reddened. His gorgeous eyes could light me into a torch.

"I will. When I get home."

"Don't you dare lie to me this time, Arella. And you won't go anywhere on a date during our game."

"Look, Skipper, you may be my brother's best friend, but I don't know you, and I can't recall giving you the right to control my life. Do you think I can't find a date because I'm fat? You guys are all same. You want a supermodel in your arms. You're so full of shit and ashamed to date someone has a body like me!"

His mouth fell open, eyes widened with shock. His face paled as if he'd seen a ghost.

I got in my car and revved away without looking back at him. My ex-husband used to tell me at least two months ahead if we had a party to attend, so I could go on a strict diet and spent at least two hours in the gym every day because he wanted me to look like those people around him when he introduced me as his wife. But I wasn't lucky to have a fast metabolism like some women, so I almost starved to death during our entire marriage.

I fished out my phone from my bag when it vibrated. This must be Brett. I pressed to my ear and sniffed as I answered. "Brett."

"Arella?"

Chapter 7

Kat

Skip

MY GUT clenched. That son of a bitch hurt Arella and messed up her head. Now she left angry and possibly wouldn't talk to me again. What the fuck was I thinking? I dialed Brett immediately. Gladly, he picked up like he was expecting my call. "Yep?"

"I want Arella's number," I quickly said what I wanted.

"Why?"

I groaned, "I thought you need my help. I need it now, Rogue."

I ended the call after he agreed. I waited for him to send his sister's number. After a few minutes of agony, I took a deep breath, trying to come up with a better idea of how to apologize before I made the call.

I dialed.

My heart leaped when she answered quickly. But there was something off in her voice and thought the call was from her brother.

"Arella?"

"Who's this?"

"You should've checked first before you answered, lo—" The line went off.

Fuck! She hung up on me. Great! Just great.

I parked the rental at the corner of her apartment building. Brett gave me her address as well, and it was just a few blocks away from the supermarket. I closed my eyes and redialed.

"What do you want, Skipper?"

My name made my lips curve. "Can I come up, please?"

"Wait a sec. Did you follow me here?" The shock in her voice made me guiltier.

"I asked your number from your brother, and he was quite generous to give me your address as well."

"Well, how nice of him. Why did you ask for my number?"

I ignored her sarcasm. I deserved it anyway. I climbed out of my car and looked up at the old brick building in front of me— not old enough to be destroyed by a low magnitude earthquake, but old for someone who could afford a decent apartment. “I was an arse earlier, and I want to apologize in person.”

“Apology accepted. And here I thought you’re late for your appointment.”

“I said in person, Arella. And you can’t avoid me all the time. Your lab and your future job lie in your hands, and we have a seven-figure deal together, *remember?* So whether you like it or not, we still see each other at work and on weekends, love.” *Yeah, idiot, way to completely scare her away.*

“Don’t threaten my job, Skipper. And I’m not working alone on that project, remember? And you missed a few details, blokey because I’m only a trainee, so I don’t give a damn about the deal.”

I grinned., “I know, love. So why don’t you invite me up so we can have dinner?”

“Oh, my God! You’re unbelievable!” She was clearly unamused. “You just hurt my feelings and accused me of lying earlier, Skipper. I’m alone, and I don’t trust you. You’re literally a stranger to me.” *Smartarse!* You trusted me back there, so what changed now when we both knew we were free to do whatever we wanted?

“Fine, I’ll go. We still have a game to play on Saturday, right?” I got back in my car, squeezing my eyes shut, unable to fathom her rejection.

There was a moment of silence. My phone was still pressed against my ear and I could hear her sigh.

“Fine. Come up. It’s apartment 03B. I am doing this for the sake of Brett, and nothing more.”

My heart raced of the possible scenario I could think, but I wouldn’t dare make any stupid things. We both paid the consequences back then, and I was not planning to let that happen again. She may have lied to me, but nothing was going to change the fact that her ex-husband had hurt her, and she had enough pain he had inflicted.

I knocked and stepped back, shoving my hands in my pockets. The door ajar, and gorgeous Arella looked adorably homey on her white bunny shirt and apple green pajama bottom. She tied her hair into a messy bun. And I fucking loved how she didn’t try to conceal her freckles on her makeup-free face. Her eyes and nose were still red. She was crying, wasn’t she? and it was all because of me.

My chest tightened. “Hi.” I smiled, washing out my guilt out of my face.

She just made my day when she genuinely smiled back. “Come in.” Her voice was soft and a little bit unsteady.

“Thanks.”

“There’s nothing much to see inside. It’s the opposite of Brett’s apartment, but I love this place to even plan on moving out,” she explained, and I followed inside, locking the door behind me.

“I’m not here to judge your apartment, Arella. I just want to apologize for what I did earlier.” I sat on her couch with some colorful throw pillows placed on.

She picked one and sat on the sofa to my left.

“I already told you, apology accepted.” She shied, not meeting my gaze.

“About what you said earlier—”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” she cut me off.

“No, Arella. I need to say this.” I stared at her closely, and she looked surprised. “I don’t date a woman by her size or her pretty face. I go out on a date with her because she’s funny and accepts her flaws. My ex-girlfriend was a model, but still, our relationship ended because something didn’t work out between us. I want you to know that size and looks don’t matter to me as long as she’s true to herself.”

She looked down, but I knew she was listening, so I continued, “You are far from being fat, and so what if you are? Don’t let your ex’s words mess up your pretty brain because you’re an intelligent woman more than you give yourself credit for. You should remember that he’s a loser, and not you, Arella Rogue. He doesn’t know what he let go. Trust me, love, he’ll regret it. He’ll come back groveling to take you back. If not now, sooner. If it’s his loss, it’s another man’s gain. Trust me, and I will only say this once. You are beautiful inside and out.”

“I like the way you are right now. You don’t have to change a thing about yourself for the sake of how men will gonna judge you. Don’t give a damn if they can’t accept who you are. There are plenty more fish in the sea.” I stood up. “Thanks for giving me a chance to say things.” It felt that I’d just lost tons weighing on my shoulders. “I should go.” I walked to the door when she didn’t say a thing.

“Don’t you want to stay for dinner?” she asked.

I turned to face her. “Thank you, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” I wanted to spend time with her and that was the problem. Her wound was still raw, and I didn’t want to be the reason to rip it open again.

“Why is that?” The way she looked at me, those innocent eyes made me wanted to be a sinner than I already was. *She’s just... Because I don’t want just to eat dinner with you. I want more, and it involves a lot of eating— my kind of eating, and a lot of shagging in every corner of this tiny apartment.*

"You should stick to your no stranger allowed in your apartment. I'll see you on Wednesday?"

Her brows furrowed. "Wednesday?"

"Yeah. At the lab."

"Oh, yeah." She rubbed the back of her neck, and it was wrong to stare, but it made me want to bite and taste it.

"Bye, love." Before I could open the door, it swung open. A petite Asian lass appeared, wearing a green scrub suit with a red sweater.

Her face lit up like she'd seen the Man of Steel in person. "Oh, my god! You're handsome!" Her squinty eyes bulged. Her mouth formed an O-shaped as she poked my arm playfully.

"Who's handsome?" I raised my brows innocently.

"Kat!" Arella called from my back.

"Wait. Who is handsome?" I asked again.

The woman named Kat checked me out whilst kneading my arms. "You're a catch, handsome."

"Kat, he's not handsome!" Arella grabbed and released her friend's hands on me.

I nodded slowly. "Uh-huh, the date?" I glanced at Arella. So, she talked about the guy on the app to her friend. I wondered what else she mentioned to Kat.

"Then who is this guy? Another date?" Kat asked. Arella remained tongue-tied. Her face was already creamy red.

"Wow! Are, I can't believe you take him home. Well, if I were you, I would definitely bring him home with me and cuff him on my bedpost and the rest is just the two of us," Kat whispered that I could still hear, then side-glanced at me with a smirk. "Right, handsome?"

Arella glared at her with a look telling her to shut up, but Kat seemed a type of person who never listened.

"Unfortunately, I'm not her date nor whoever this handsome guy is." I shrugged. "But what I can assure you of is, I'm way hotter than this guy you're talking about, right, love?" I raised my brow to Arella, but she still had an incredulous look on her face. "Please to meet you, pet, I'm Skip."

Her mouth gaped open. Her eyes unbelievably widened. "Oh, my God! You are Skip Linton?"

"That's me. Mind telling me how did you know my name? Did she talk a lot about me?" I smirked, pointing my thumb to Arella.

"Kat, get inside, and Skipper is leaving." Arella grabbed my hand and dragged me away from her roommate. Her warm and soft hand made me grasp back.

"Nice to finally meet you, Skip Hotbrit Linton!" she yelled from inside whilst Arella was still dragging towards the lift.

"Arella, how does she know me?" I stared at her, looking for any signs of lies.

"She knows Brett, and I mentioned that I met you during a family dinner." She rolled her expressive eyes.

"That's it?"

"Yeah, that's it. What else would it be?" She sounded annoyed and defensive.

"How about that hot arse some guy?"

"I don't think it's any of your business, Skipper. You don't want to stay for dinner, so go home."

"Are you sure you don't have anything else to tell me, Arella?"

Her body went rigid, eyes quickly meeting mine when my voice suddenly turned firm. "I-I don't think I get what you mean."

"Of course, you don't. Keep it that way. You can be dumb, but—"

She raised her hand. "Look, Skip. I don't know what you're talking, and I think you might have mistaken me with someone else because I don't know you and I've never seen you in my entire life, so you better stop telling me I'm—"

"Are you sure about that? Because I haven't mentioned to you anything else, yet—" My heartbeat pounded, and before I could tell her what tied us for years, she cut me off.

"Of course, I am sure." She looked away.

"And you've never seen me before?" I stared at her intently and hissed with anger as to why she had to lie to me again.

"Y-yes."

I scoffed, "Such a terrible liar."

Chapter 8

Ms. James

Arella

IGNORING MY hammering heart was hard enough, but what was harder was facing the man who never left my mind these past days. He left me standing outside my apartment two days ago with a billion-dollar question that might remain unanswered.

Right now, I was facing a *deja vu* as my body hummed to his closeness while he was talking to our head chemist, Dr. Duke Mackenzie. The disappointment plastered on our faces when Skip didn't like any of our samples. He said it was too sweet for women and too strong for men.

But instead of taking it as an insult, it encouraged and drove me to work harder for this project. I wanted to prove to him that we could compete with the top leading fragrance laboratories all over the world. I able to come up with some ideas now I knew what he liked.

He faced me. "Ms. Rogue—"

"It's James," I corrected him, smiling sweetly. I was still Arella James in our lab—my ex-husband surname. Though legally, I already changed it after our divorce.

His jaw instantly clenched, shoving his hands on his dark grey tailored-suit pants. If his eyes were warmed when he arrived earlier with his assistant, Eli, now they shot me with cold and flinty stares.

"Okay, Ms. James. I want the scent is simple, sweet, yet seductive, and that lasts longer. I think you should conduct a survey on what men want in women, and so as for women—"

"I don't think we have much time to conduct a survey, Mr. Linton. We already wasted eight months—"

"Make time, Ms. James," he cut me off. "We made a deal, and I will ask all over again for as long as I'm not satisfied with the samples your team had come up with. You and your time have until six weeks to come up with new samples, otherwise, I will cut the deal myself."

Dr. Mackenzie looked alarmed, then cleared his throat. "We will make sure the samples are ready by the end of next month. We always ended up satisfying our partners, Mr. Linton. I can guarantee you that. We have the best team, and our products had been tested with our previous clients."

"Good. See you after three weeks then, Dr. Mackenzie." Skip shook his hand, then turned to me. "With the survey." He then walked away, leaving us all stunned.

Dr. Mac followed him after throwing me a glare.

"Are, what was that all about? You are rude to hot British owner of the Everly brand." Maj, my co-chemist nudged me.

"I wasn't rude, Maj. You knew we worked hard for those samples. My olfactory nerves were literally damaged, but he didn't like every single one of them. Then he wanted a survey? We don't have time for his bull!"

"Hush. Lower your voice down. We'll be in deep trouble if Mac hears you say that. What's got your knickers in a twist anyway?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired, and the pressure was all on me. Why did Mac have to tell him that I lead this project were in fact, it's him, Maj?" I stomped out of the testing room, still annoyed.

It all started when I succeeded in creating a signature fragrance for a famous baseball player. Now, it was stuck to Mac's head that I could possibly do other scents for this project. Besides, I would do anything he asked for because I was just a trainee.

Maj's high heels echoed in the entire hallway as she followed me. "Are, wait!"

I stopped to a halt and turned. I was so annoyed for some unknown reason. Or I was annoyed at Skip for bailing out on me two days ago. He had the right, I knew, but did he have to be cold then warm, then cold again? Couldn't he just tell me what was wrong? Because I was not a freaking fortune teller to guess his twisted game. Didn't he really remember me? Or it wasn't worth remembering at all?

"Are you listening, Are? Quit frowning!" She pressed her forefinger between my eyebrows. "I'm asking you. How did he know you're a Rogue? Did you two happened to have a wild night together?" Her caramel face lit up in a mischievous way.

A long wild night, yeah.

"Hell no!" I pointed to my ID, and she looked down.

"Thank, God! You got new! Good for you, Rogue. Let's go out tonight, then and have a few drinks? Stop overthinking everything, Are. We are a team, remember? We can do it. We always did!" She kissed my cheek and left.

How did I become such a liar after that night? Not a big big lie, but it was still a lie.

"Are!"

Holy crap!

"Mac, if you're going to fire me, just do it! I don't want another pep talk," I started before he could.

He was a good boss, nosy, but tolerable. He propped his hands on his hips, then blew an exasperating breath. He pressed his lips into a thin line as he continued looking at me with brows drew together as if deciding to fire me or I still had used to him. "I don't wanna lost my best shot, but if you're gonna be rude again, I'll spank your ass, woman."

I huffed. "You don't like my ass, I know, but Linton was also an ass. Did you see his reaction every time he smelled our best works? Does he even know perfumery? I bet his daddy dear only promoted him because he's an heir to the throne of the Everly Cosmetics and Fragrances, and he knows nothing!"

"Quite a judgmental of you, Arella James." The voice at my back made me freeze. A coldness wrapped around my body like a plague that seeped through my bone—it almost made my blood stop with shame.

Crap!

Mac's eyes were wide as saucers. Colors drained from his already pale face.

I closed my eyes as my heart sped up upon hearing his footsteps getting closer. I took a deep breath and turned around when I was definite that his body standing close behind me. "Shouldn't you be back to your castle, Mr. Linton?"

Mac gasped at my back.

Instead of getting insulted by my sarcasm, he smiled—a smile that made my heart thunder, a fluttery feeling spread on my belly—a smile that made me feel imprisoned and a smile that popped out hearts from my eyes.

"Sassy, aren't we? I come here to talk to you before I leave." For the second time, he shoved his hands on his pockets like a mighty god he was.

"What do you wanna talk about?" My curiosity struck.

"Your work, of course."

I was so lost in thought that I forgot Mac until he cleared his throat. "I was about to tell her before you came, Mr. Linton. I'll give you two time to talk then. Have a good day ahead. Are, I'll see you later."

I smiled and nodded.

"Talk," I started when Mac was finally gone.

"I might not be an expert about perfumery like you, but I study business management with your brother. I'm exposed to my dad's business which is perfumes and cosmetics all my life. I agree, I'm

not as good as you, but I know if the scent will fascinate the consumers or not. I must say, you're good at it. I'm actually impressed, but I'm not going to boost your ego. Clients have different tastes, that's why I want to conduct surveys. It's not a part of the deal, but I want to team up with you."

"There is something missing. A tiny one, but could be essential to your concoction. Try to figure it out," he added.

"I did already my best. I think I'm not the right person you wanna team up with. I'm just a trainee. Let me suggest Maj—she's one of the best."

"No. I chose you myself, Arella. Don't worry, I'll double your salary, and you don't have to work during your shift. I already talked to my assistant to arrange my schedule, and you can't say no to me because your boss already agreed."

"Without consulting me first? How dare he?" I shot him a glare. "Well, then I don't have a say, do I, boss?" My breathing went heavy, but Skip remained magnificent as he was.

His gorgeous eyes surveyed my face, making a little self-conscious, then he smirked. "Do you have a problem working with me, Ms. James?"

You have no idea, do you? I internally rolled my eyes. You're a complete distraction!

I didn't think I could focus on my work when I had him in my lab, or he could be my inspiration for a man's perfume, right?

"I don't have for as long as we stay professional all the time."

"Of course, that's why I chose you because you were damn good pretending we didn't know each other at the testing area and nobody suspected you knew me, right?"

"Then why do I feel it's an insult, Skipper?"

He chuckled, "It's a compliment. Don't you receive a lot? They must've been so bloody dumb to not notice you."

I rolled my eyes. "What's up on your sleeves?"

"Nothing really, love."

"Well then. Since I don't much have a choice, fine by me. But whatever happened before we should set it aside and not mention it at all. I love what I am doing, and I still have eight months to get a good recommendation from my boss. I don't want to taint it with whatever mess we had from the past."

"What past?" His cold stare seeped through my soul, making me shiver.

I broke the contact and looked away. “Don’t pretend you don’t remember me, Skipper Braddock Linton.” My heart thundered, and I could even hear the loud pounding that grew in my ears. My skin tingled, but I couldn’t take it anymore. And I needed an answer from him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said defensively.

“Really?” My brow arched. “Well then, I must be fucking the wrong guy back then. Or he could probably your twin.”

Chapter 9

The Reigh

Skip

“IS EVERYTHING alright?” The blonde frowned beneath me.

I was inside her, yet it didn’t feel right. She was hot and definitely made me hard, but it felt like something was forcing me to do this just to get a release.

I wrapped my arms around her soft and feminine body and rolled over. “Ride me, babe.”

She pulled out, and my sheathed cock sprang free. “Take me from behind.”

“On four. Now.” I quickly positioned myself when she moved to follow my order. I pushed her head down. “Ass up, and tilt your pussy.” I closed my eyes and thought of the innocent honey-colored eyes staring up at me, then plunged my cock into her from behind.

My cock instantly jerked inside. “Fuck!” I grunted, and she moaned.

“Faster, Skip.” Her voice came out a pant.

I quickened my thrust, pushing her head down, then grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head to me. She moaned—she liked it.

“Like it rough, babe?” My muscles started to clench. My breathing came out heavy. Sweat made our body slick despite the cold temperature of the room.

Leaning down, I pressed my body against hers, then I bit her shoulder and growled at her, “Answer me.”

She nodded and whined with pleasure.

“No. I need a word,” I said firmly.

I always prefer to be a boss when it came to bonking even if it was just a one-night stand, but I always guaranteed the woman I slept with to have the best night of her life. I liked it rough, soft, wild, and love. I loved sex. I tried and experimented in many ways, and it always fascinated me how it could blow any human away.

I pushed her head down roughly till it pressed against the mattress. “You don’t order me when my cock is buried deep inside you, understood?”

She granted me a nod.

“Say it!”

“Y-yes!”

I thrust until I was buried deep, my balls slapping against her slits.

“Yes! Oh God, yes!”

“Good.” Then I pounded into her faster and rougher the way she liked it. This was what she wanted, then she was going to have it. Her pussy clamped my cock—she was about to come. I flipped her onto her back.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” I commanded, and she quickly complied. “Now touch your little nub, and don’t come until I told you so.”

She gave me disapproval looked.

“Do you have a problem?”

She pressed her middle finger into her clit and moved it in a circular motion. I slowed my rhythm, feeling my cock dragging into her pussy. I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw. Electricity surged through my spine as my balls felt heavy.

Her honey-colored eyes. Her puckered lips. The visual of her writhing, moaning, and screaming my name almost brought me to the edge.

“Fuck!”

“I’m coming!” she screamed, and it took me back to the woman with me. Her name was Denys. She convulsed, rolling her eyes back.

“Come.”

She shuddered, and I came so hard, spurting my seed and filling the condom inside her pussy.

I dragged myself into her bathroom and pulled out the condom. I tied it, tossing into the bin. My emotions swirled around me. I felt guilty for Denys. I just used her.

“R-reighan.” My voice came out raspy as emotions grew inside me.

“Oh, now you remember me?” Her words wrapped with sadness and disappointment. Tears started to well her eyes.

“Then why did you lie to me? You said your name was Reighan.”

“My name is Arella Rieghan. My mom got the Reighan from my grandma, and you said your name was Linton.”

"Yes, I'm a Linton."

"But why didn't you just say your name was Skipper?" she asked in a shaky tone. The tears finally fell down her face.

"Back in college, nobody called me Skip, Arella. I didn't lie to you, I swear. What happened..." My ribcage squeezed my heart with excruciating pain. I balled my hands to stop myself from pulling her into my arms and hug her till my heartbeat calmed down. "T-that, that was the best night of my life," I told her truthfully.

"Then why did you just run away?" Her eyes filled with shocking emotions.

"Haven't you figured out yet, Arella?" I cursed silently, rubbing my face in frustration.

"You didn't tell me you're under eighteen. And I never asked your age."

"How did—"

"And fuck! I took your virginity, slept with my best friend's little sister, and you know what's worse? I just committed statutory rape that bloody night!"

Her hands flew to her gaping mouth, trying to hold her sob. But it was too late, and I just watched her like fucking duff while she was shaking to cry. I wanted her to hit me, punch me, and kick me if it could ease the pain of leaving her that night.

"I-I'm so sorry," she apologized, taking a step closer.

I held my hand up to stop her. "Please, don't." I pulled out my wallet and took a card. "This belongs to you."

** * **

I PULLED the door open, leading Denys inside the Rogue Pool House. The same energy, noises, and smell filled the room. This time I had company. After talking to Arella that day, I didn't contact her, but we still chatted on HeartRated, in fact, we still had a plan to meet tomorrow as handsome and SindeRella.

It was odd to read her messages opening up her likeness on me, but it warmed my heart because I felt the same towards her.

"I don't know how to play pool, but I can be your cheerer." Denys batted her lashes on me.

"We won't stay long. I'm just going to meet my friends and play straight, then we're good to go." I was glad she agreed to come with me. I needed someone to distract me in front of Arella.

I thought it helped once we both cleared out what happened years ago and started out a clean slate, but it was quite the opposite. I thought of her a lot more lately than necessary. It gutted me to stay away from her, but I had a promise to keep with Brett.

“Cool then,” Denys agreed, hooking her hand around my arm.

“Linton, over here!” Brett waved.

We strolled towards him, and I almost stumbled back when my eyes landed to Arella’s back. My heart instantly recognized her presence, racing its beat unsteadily.

She was only wearing a red shirt and jeans that hugged perfectly her round bum. *She’s just so damn sexy!* Her curves were all in the right places, unlike Denys had a runway type of body and taller than Arella in a few inches.

“Wow! Didn’t expect you to bring someone, hotbrit.” Kat reacted, showing her disapproval shamelessly.

“Well, I wasn’t aware you’d be here, Kat.” I smiled. “Guys, meet my date, Denys. Denys, this is Kat, Brett, and Lorcan.” Lorcan just stood up from his stool and gave a salute. Despite Kat’s remark, they welcomed Denys warmly.

Arella stayed on her seat and didn’t even turn around to greet us. Just bloody great!

“Let’s go to the table, shall we?” Lorcan announced.

“Excited, eh?” I smirked, then I shifted my gaze to Arella. “Is she okay?” Concerned laced on my voice, but I didn’t give a damn.

“Yeah, she’s grumpy these days, but she’ll live,” Lorcan replied.

Brett gripped Arella’s shoulder, and she shifted to face him, taking off the AirPods from her ears. Then our gaze met—there was a glint of happiness in those eyes, then her face fell when she noticed I didn’t show up alone.

I swallowed the thickness clogging my throat. I didn’t regret taking Denys with me. She knew we were just having a great time, and nothing serious. We both enjoyed sex, and it was not like I and Arella were in a relationship. I couldn’t let the guilt suck me whole this time.

“Hi, I’m Denys.” She smiled.

Arella stood and offered an awkward handshake. “Arella. Please to meet you.” Then she looked at me for a few seconds before a half-smile spread across her plump bright red painted lips. “Hiya, Skip! Are you ready to kick their arses?”

My brow arched, humor filling my senses as she took everything lightly. “Hiya? Arses?”

“Aye, rear, butt, bum, ass—”

“Aye? That’s definitely not British, and I know what arse means, Arella. And since when did you learn slang?”

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s just go and win this game, eh.” She faced Denys. “Do you play snooka?”

“Snooka?” Denys furrowed her brows.

“Pool, billiard, snooker. I can show you some tricks. Skipper loves to play pool.” She swayed her arse away, ignoring me.

“Oh,” Denys chuckled. Finally loosened her hand on me, moving closer to Arella. “You don’t have to. He likes to play something else.” Fuck!

“Oh?” Her lips parted. A flush blossomed on her cheeks.

“Come on, Linton!” Lorcan called out.

“Yeah! Come over here, Skipper Linton! Let me kick your arse!” Kat seconded.

“Crikey Moses!”

Kat just burst out laughing. The knocking of balls excited me. I was not good like Brett, but I and Arella had a chance of winning.

Brett agreed that I and my partner should start since he was a pool shark.

I took two cues—one for me and one for her. She took it from me and muttered thank you, not meeting my gaze anymore. Everyone gathered around the table including Brett whose standing across us with Lorcan and Kat. Our drinks arrived, and I gave Denys a beer.

I took a step closer to Arella on my right when she seemed to be quiet. “Reigh, all right?”

“H-huh?” She blinked twice.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” She bent over the table and positioned herself after scraping the chalk to her cue’s tip.

My brain flooded dirty thoughts. My cock went stiffy as I imagined her lying on this table while eating the jewel between her thighs, then bent her over and tilted her ass up while I took her from behind. I looked away, groaning inwardly. My hand around the cue tightened.

How the fuck can I concentrate like this?

Bloody perfect! My cock just jerked.

“Good luck, Are,” Kat said.

She slid the cue along the crook of her hand, targeting the cue ball. The satisfying loud smack made us cheer.

“Great shot, girl!” Denys clapped her hands, clearly no idea how this game worked.

“Not my best,” she simply replied. She was right—she was a little bit shaky.

“Just relax, Reigh. We’ll win this.”

“Reigh?”

Chapter 10

The Dream

Skip

“REIGH?” Denys asked with absolute surprised that caught everyone’s attention. With an unamused look, she snorted, “She’s *the Reigh*, right? How did I not get the clue immediately?”

My stomach knotted sickly. I had to grit my teeth from throwing curses.

“Wait a minute, Skip.” Brett raised his hand to get my attention. His brows raised, tilting his head to the side.

With Brett’s curiosity, I knew I signed my death wish living in hell. I never lied to him. And I didn’t have much of a choice not to answer him if he was going to pry right in front of everyone.

Bloody great!

“How did you know Reigh?” With a reddened face, he pinned me with a hard stare for what seemed like forever. He was losing his patience. His arms already crossed over his chest, and I couldn’t even open my mouth to answer him. “Nobody called her Reigh since grandma died.”

“We, I, uh,” I stupefied, lowering my gaze. Then I blinked, releasing a deep and painful breath.

Shit! This was going to be my end.

“What’s going on, Linton?” he chastised.

Suddenly, the silence laid heavy between us, and I felt suffocated. The room seemed turned into a box, and everyone in this room disappeared, leaving just me and Brett on this table. Sweat formed everywhere in my body as I pondered what I would say or where to start, but it seemed my brain was freezing as well.

My thought was interrupted when Denys said, “I should go, guys. Thanks for having me!” Then she just walked away, and I didn’t even have a gut to stop her.

Brett turned to his sister when he didn’t get an answer he expected from me. “Are, is he—”

“Brett, man, stop asking questions, and let’s play this effing game,” Lorcan broke the tension. But Brett didn’t budge and continued staring at me then back to Arella.

Arella threw the cue on the table, causing to make a loud noise. “I don’t want to play anymore. I’m outta here!” She turned and walked away.

I shot him a penetrating gaze and threw my cue just like Arella did. “Since my partner left already, I’m out as well!” With a quick-paced, I followed Arella outside the bar. I wasn’t expecting this to happen, and now I regretted bringing Denys to the game.

I apologized when I happened to blurt out Arella’s name whilst I slept in Denys’ bed. I was dreaming of following Arella until she was just gone into the thick fog. I woke up Denys nudging me, saying I was yelling a named Reigh.

Arella strode through the alley, maybe searching for her car.

“Arella!”

“Leave me alone, Skipper! You should have been following Denys and not me.” She was not searching for her car—she was hailing a cab.

“Arella, can you at least stop and talk to me.” Finally, I able to reach her arm.

She jerked away. “Don’t touch me, Skip! And I have nothing to say to you anymore. We said what we left unsaid. I don’t want another suspicion coming from Brett.”

“Why would he have suspicions? I don’t know Reigh is a big deal to your family. I’m sorry.”

She finally faced me. My heart stuttered when I saw her eyes wet, and it broke me not to comfort her. Since I came back, all I did was to make her sad.

“How did Denys know about Reigh, Skipper? How long have you known her?” She looked at me sharply.

I let a brief silence stretched on. There was no reason for me to lie. “Let’s go somewhere, and I’ll tell you everything.”

She quickly asked, “What everything?”

“We tell everything that we should know.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, and I have nothing left to say.”

I stared at her intently. “I know you don’t trust me, but you happened to have a lot of things you’ve been hiding from me that I deserved to know.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t know what are you talking about.”

I grabbed her hand and dragged her with me. She refused at first, but I didn’t let go of her hand until we reached my car.

Her phone buzzed. “This is probably Kat.”

"You'll call her when you're inside my car." I opened the door for her, and thankfully, she willingly got inside.

After I buckled up, I revved the engine and drove away.

She was already checking her phone. "Brett."

"Put it on speaker," I said to her, keeping my eyes focused on the road.

She covered the phone with her hand. "What's the deal with your bossiness?" Her voice was sharp as a razor.

Glancing at her, I ordered, "Just do it."

"No!"

"Fine, but you'll tell me whatever he's going to say to you, Arella."

"Brett, sorry about—" she groaned.

"Will you please calm down. I'm with Skipper. I'm okay. I just need to cool off." She listened to the other line, and I knew she was brassed off. "Jesus, Brett! I'm twenty-four!" Her breathing grew heavy as she continued listening and staring out the passenger window.

"Give me the phone, and let me talk to him." I offered my hand, and she just glared at me.

"Now, Arella!"

She startled in her seat, then handed me her phone. I regretted raising my voice at her. These things were not supposed to happen if it was not because of my stupidity in the first place.

"Brett, man, your sister is safe with me. What's wrong with you?" My chest heaved. My muscles tensed. I didn't like him controlling Arella's life. It was not her fault if her marriage failed. It was her asshole ex-husband who wanted controlling her life. Even the colour of her dress to the water she drunk. Jesus Christ!

"You don't know what she'd been through, Linton. I don't want her getting hurt again." I could tell by the tone of his voice he was enraged.

"What made you think I'm going to hurt her?"

"Didn't you? Haven't you? Do you think I was so dense not to notice how you were eye-fucking her? And the way she looked at you? Reigh, huh? I knew you have something up on your sleeves when you asked to play pool with me. During that dinner, that wasn't your first time meeting my sister, was it, Linton?" His yell made me angrier.

"I don't owe you any explanation, mate. You're maybe my best friend, but I'm not telling a shit! The way you asked me back there, it showed that you didn't trust me. And one more thing, you're not going to control Arella, and I'm not doing your shit anymore. If you want to stop your sister from getting hurt, stop controlling her. Her piece of bollocks of an ex-husband had been controlling her life, and she doesn't need another one doing that to her!"

"How did you know?"

My head jerked to Arella with her eyes widened in shock.

"How did you fucking know?" Brett yelled in my ear as well.

I was torn between who should I answer first.

"People talk, haven't yet come to your senses, Rogue?"

"I want an answer, Linton!"

"I don't tell you shit. Why don't you try going to the library and gen up or just google it to find your answer?" I heard Arella chuckled with my sarcasm. "Arella is with me and don't call her every second and ask her to stay the fuck away from me. She's an adult for bleeding hell sake!" I hung up and gave the phone back to Arella.

"What do you know about my ex, Skipper?" she asked in a shaky low tone.

"Arella, we'll talk when we get out of my car. I feel suffocated right now." I stole a glance at her.

She didn't pry anymore. A few minutes passed, the silence was making me uneasy.

"I'm sorry for bringing Denys tonight. I shouldn't have done that."

"I don't care who you date, Skipper."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yeah."

"Liar."

"Tell me why would I care?"

"Don't lie, Arella. I hate liars. And for God's sake, can we at least be honest with each other for just one night?" I parked my car in front of my apartment building.

"Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"My apartment is on the tenth floor."

She paused. Hesitation flashed on her face.

"We're just gonna talk, Arella. I'll keep my hands to myself, I promise. I'm not gonna touch you even if it kills me," I hastily assured her.

She regarded me for a moment, then finally gave me an answer. "Okay."

We reached my apartment silently. While I was fumbling for my keys, she asked, "What Denys knows about me?"

"I happened to dream of you while I was in her bed, happy?" I watched her reaction closely.

Instead of getting angry, she blushed and there was a minuscule amount of humor in her eyes. A smile finally slipped from my lips then turned into a full-blown grin. "I might happen to yell your name. It was embarrassing calling other's name in someone's bed. I think I also imagined you while we—you know?" I shrugged, feeling my face heated.

"Having sex," she mumbled, "Oh, my God, you're insane."

"I'm sorry if I'll be brutally honest with you tonight. I don't want to hide anything from you anymore. Have a seat and feel at home." I threw the keys to the couch."

"Wow! I never thought your apartment is... looked like this." She looked around and saw nothing but a grey colored-wall and couch, white curtain, and charcoal-colored floor and half of this flat remained untouched.

Mum informed the interior designer what would complement my personality. The colour and the furniture were plain. She aforementioned *you worked so hard to even forget to appreciate the beauty surrounds you anymore, Skipper*. But this time, I thought my mother was wrong because I appreciated and fancied how beautiful Arella was, and I wanted to change this flat to homier if she wanted to visit me sometimes.

"I know. Mum said the same thing." I broke out into a soft laugh. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Do you have wine?" She smiled at me, though it didn't reach her eyes, I was glad she did.

"Mum has a wine cellar in her home, so I definitely have."

"Thanks. I see you're always prepared."

I knew exactly what she meant. "I haven't brought anyone here yet, Arella. If that's what you're implying. And not planning on bringing anyone soon."

“Then, what am I doing here, Skipper?”

I took a step closer, meeting her gaze. “If it’s you, I don’t care about the bloody world.”

Chapter 11

The Sparks

Arella

MY HEART started a mad thumping in my chest. My knees wobbled when he looked down at me with blazing dark eyes. He wanted to see my reaction or he might believe the eyes were the gateway to the soul or something. Then he walked away.

A moment later, he was back with two glasses of red wine.

After he offered mine, he raised his glass for a toss. "To us."

I let the sweetness and the acidity of the wine to run down my throat. I needed to numb myself if I had to be honest tonight, which it had been hard for me lately. I had been keeping a huge secret to my family. My grandma just died not knowing what I had been keeping from her. I thought I could keep till the day I die, but Skip being back, I didn't think I could hold on to it anymore.

Silently, I sat back to his comfy couch and heaved a sigh.

"It was just sex," he started. I could literally feel the nervousness in his voice.

Skip is nervous? Huh! I remembered when he first kissed me.

"You're eyes are magical. I've seen like these before." My voice almost whispered as my throat suddenly thickened of the way he looked at me with flecks of hope and hesitation.

"I-I want to kiss you."

My mouth fell open, but something down in my stomach fluttered. The butterflies formed a kaleidoscope of excitement all over.

My brain fuzzed. My skin tingled. My body hummed. This was not my first kiss, but I was excited to be kissed by a stranger.

He leaned closer, his long paintbrush lashes fluttered close, touching his high cheekbones. His cinnamon-beer mixed breathing caressed my face, and my eyes willingly closed as he started brushing his lips tentatively as if testing the water. Then finally, he pressed them against mine, making me sigh in relief. My hands raked through his soft hair as he deepened the kiss, making our lips moved in harmony.

"I said I don't care," I answered after gulping the wine. I lied again.

"Want more?"

“Not now.” I stared at the black TV screen.

“You should.” The couch whooshed as he leaned his body on.

“Should I?” I turned my body to face him completely.

His head shifted. “You are the reason why I slept with her. I met her from the dating app I founded.”

My eyes grew big. “What app?” For a split second, I felt like I was caught in the glare of the spotlight.

“The app where you signed up to.”

My hands flew to my mouth, utterly shocked. His words slammed at me like a snowball as I continued staring at him.

“I’m glad you’ve been honest to someone you’ve never met in person, Reigh.” He gripped my knee, and it made me tense in a good way.

“W-what are you talking about?” I barely heard my words as my voice quavered.

“We owned the dating app. It was your brother’s idea actually. He wanted me to create an app for my dating purposes since I didn’t have time to have a serious relationship. Surprisingly, it grew faster than we anticipated. Your brother is the co-owner.”

“Oh, my God!”

“Reigh, please believe every word I am going to say. I’ll be completely honest—”

I jerked to stand, feeling humiliated that he knew how I felt towards him. “Don’t tell me my brother asked you to chat with me on that app?” Was that how he knew me?

He emptied his wine in a gulp, then took a deep breath. He looked up at me. The look in his eyes made my anger strike.

“Answer me, Skipper!” I yelled, which wasn’t me at all. I used to get ordered, and not the other way around.

“Reigh, of course not. I mean, I was stalking you online while I was still in London.”

“What do you mean? Oh, God!” I took a step back, unable to take any more humiliation than I already had.

I stepped back when he reached out for me.

"No, Skip. Please, no. You knew my secret. You knew everything about me, then you told me not to lie to you when you are the one who's lying to me!"

"Arella, do you think I don't feel bloody overwhelmed that somehow you remembered me, and us? That you told me you like me? It was hard enough to not tell you back how I felt. I was barely holding every time I saw you." He stood up, raking his fingers through his long hair in frustration.

I was utterly stunned for a while because his words touched me. By the looked on his face, I was sure he was telling the truth. And I knew the feeling of not being able to open up to anyone.

"How many times I want to kiss you, taste you, feel you again inside me? You have no idea how hard it is to hide my erection when my bloody dick wants you?"

I blinked back the tears, but it was too late. "You just want to fu— sleep with me?"

"God, no. But I unintentionally broke our code. I couldn't fall for you back then. Your brother trusted me with his life, his family, and everything. I agreed to watch over you on the app. Your profile can only be seen by me, but it was because that's what I want. You are the reason why I am here. Not just because of my family business and my mum. I chose to be here because of you when I found out you finally got divorced. It's not that I want to destroy your marriage, but I was glad when I heard you were finally free from that asshole."

"How do you know my ex-husband?"

"It doesn't matter anymore, Reigh."

"It matters because you lied to me! Why didn't you tell me you are handsome? The picture doesn't look like you."

"I wore contacts, and it was photoshopped. When I saw your picture, I edited my profile right away."

"Do you know who I was talking about then?" My face heated.

"Yeah. Unless you were talking about someone else." He shrugged and smiled to confirm.

I blinked, trying to comprehend what he just said.

"We can't do this, Skip. And I'm going home." I shook my head and marched right to the door.

"Arella, I'm sorry! We both lied. That's why I want us to be honest with each other this time."

"There is no us, Skipper. We both lied. That's the whole point. What else can we do besides lying? And this isn't right. You are my brother's best friend. And I almost jeopardized your life once, and I'm not gonna do it again."

“The fuck you can’t! It’s time for you to take a leap and decide what’s best for you. Don’t allow anyone to control your life anymore, Arella.”

My heart panged when I saw the tenderness in his eyes.

“I wanted you since then, and I never stop. I just didn’t want to spend my years in prison that’s why I ran away. But I’m not running away anymore, Arella. I wanted us before, and it didn’t change a thing until now, I still want you. Fuck! I don’t think I can stay away from you. I’ve tried, but I still failed.”

He huffed. “Fuck best friends! I’d been holding my feelings for you for years for the sake of your brother. I should think about my wants, my needs, my heart, and my life this time.”

I was amazed at how frustrated he was about his feelings—spilling his guts to me.

“Hey. a fan, huh?” A deep male voice whispering in my ear made me shiver.

I turned around. The first thing I noticed was his eyes—they were different colors, but that was impossible. It could be from the light of the Arena. He had a handsome face that could only be seen on TV.

“Aren’t we all are!” I yelled at his ear.

He smelled cinnamon spice and musk. Hmm, interesting scent.

“I’m Linton,” he smirked. His hand held out for a handshake.

“Linton?” I barked into laughter. He could’ve fooled me because he was handsome, but I knew he was lying because there was no way he was related to Axson Linton. Axson was a British, and this Linton was an American. Fine, lie to me, and I’ll do the same. Call it quits.

“And shouldn’t you be telling me yours?”

“It’s Reighan. Just call me Reigh.” I shook his large hand, and it surprised me when he didn’t let my hand go.

The sparks.

My world skidded to a halt, mesmerized by how fate played us well. I stunned stupid just for a moment, then ran back toward him. I grabbed the back of his head and crushed my mouth over his. I took his gasp of surprise into mine. Then the electricity exploded.

My heart thumped wildly when he instantly responded, snaked his powerful arms around me, and pulled me tightly into him.

Why am I holding back when we both know what we want and we are attracted to each other? He was right. Fuck my brother! I was crazy over those gorgeous eyes back then, and now I was insane.

He groaned when I bit his lip and tugged it. Then he got his chance, thrusting his tongue into the well of my mouth.

I moaned to his taste—it seemed familiar, yet still full of surprises. The sweet taste of the wine flooded in our mouths. And if heaven was real, then this was it.

Our tongues tangled together. My fingers grasped his long silky hair as I pulled him closer, pressing my body into his hard one. His bulge was sweet torture. I was completely overwhelmed by the intimacy swirled around us—it was almost unreal.

We were both panting when we broke apart. Skip continued planting kisses on my face, my eyes, my cheeks, my jaw, and down my neck.

“W-we should stop.”

“Make me,” he mumbled in a raspy voice. “Feel that?” he asked shamelessly as he pressed his huge bulge on my lower abdomen, then nibbled my earlobe. The heat on my body reached the boiling point.

I’m royally turned on.

“I can make you stop but not tonight.” My voice was a breathless rasp. I attacked his mouth again, then stopped to pull his shirt off his head.

“Sure about this?” His bun loosened down.

I couldn’t help but appreciate the perfect body he had. “Really? Now you’re asking me, huh? Is this some kind of a British joke?”

He chuckled softly.

“God, Skip. You’re a beautiful creature.” His was drool-worthy.

“And you are gorgeous.” His face smirked cockily.

Then I strolled my gaze down to his hard and fine chest, tracing the tiny golden hair sprinkled across it. I traced my thumbs to his little nipples, making him hummed with pleasure.

“My turn, love.” He lifted off my shirt in a blink. “Hmm, let me see what’s behind this black lacy bra. They’re already worth a hard-on, but I’m a bloody greedy. I want more. I want to taste them again. I’m actually dying here, so wanna change your mind, Reigh? Do it now.” His lazy and sensual gaze made my heart freeze.

“No.”

“Good.” He lowered his head down and bit my nipple through the material of my bra, making me jerked backward in pleasure.

“Did I hurt you?” His ablaze eyes bore mine.

“No. It feels good, and I haven’t felt this in a while,” I told him honestly. No sense of lying anymore. I wanted this more than the air I breath. For now.

Without looking away, he unclasped my bra, lowering the strap slowly. My C cup size breasts fell down.

“Look at what I missed?” His voice was raspy and sexy. He licked his lips and lowered his head down again, kissing the plump of my breasts alternately. “Dark pink.” He looked up with eyes heavy with lust. He took my nipple into his mouth. The scorching hot of his mouth sent a blazing fire all over my skin. Then he sucked hard, sending heat right through my wet core.

My head fell back. “God!”

“Skipper.”

“Stop being cocky, Linton. I want us in your bedroom now, please?” I begged and surrendered. “Or just on the couch.”

When he didn’t respond, I opened my eyes. He was staring at me with his desire-flooded eyes.

Chapter 12

A Real Man

Skip

Arella is a fucking wet dream!

HER EAGERNESS made me harder, that I never imagined it was possible. Her smell, the scorching effect of her touch, and the softness of her curves were such a powerful aphrodisiac.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, and her legs snaked around my waist as I carried her blindly towards my bedroom. I was still busy worshipping her sweet, plump, and swollen lips. The hardness of my cock pressed against my jeans was torture. The blood rushing to my head dizzied me, but more blood rushing to my other head was beyond my control, and there was absolutely nothing could cool down the lust raging inside me.

“Skip, put me down,” she murmured against our mouths as soon as the door shut behind us.

I stiffened as she loosened and helped herself on her feet. With my brows furrowing together, I stared at her. *Did she just change her mind?*

Her honey-colored eyes were still dancing with desires. “Why are we still fully dress?” Her sexy voice rasped as she teased to unbutton my jeans.

Oh, thank bloody heaven!

“I thought you changed your mind,” I said, sighing in relief.

“No way. Are you single?” Her gaze met mine. Her hands cupped my face, leisurely running her thumb on my swollen bottom lip.

“Just now you’re asking me that?” I grinned. “Well, not anymore, love.” I pushed her jeans down. Kneeling in front of her, I planted soft kisses on her tummy. She had a few stretch marks just below her belly button, and it turned me on more that she didn’t try to hide them from me.

“You’re sexier than I ever imagined you every bloody night, Arella.”

Her fingers ran through my hair. And I finally able to get rid of her jeans, then I stood up to remove mine, keeping just my boxers on. Her eyes found my covered fully-erect cock.

“You’re magnificent.” Her hand was still too eager to touch after all these years. It made my heart to skip a beat with excitement and gratitude.

After cupping the back of her head, I kissed her again. This time, it was slow. I was taking my time since we were both on the same page. If I'd waited seven years, I could surely wait for another seven minutes or so.

I'm a damn patient man.

My hands explored the soft skin of her back, down to her round arse. Gripping them, she moaned against my mouth. Unable to control myself, I thrust my hips forward, then cupping her perfect breast.

"Oh, God!"

"Skip."

"Stop it, and I want you inside me now, Skipper!"

"Yes, ma'am." I lied her down on my unmade bed, still couldn't take my eyes off her. "Remove your knickers now, love. If you don't wanna go home without undies."

"Why not help yourself, Skip?" she teased, though she did it anyway.

I shoved down my boxers. My aching cock sprang free.

"Wow! Is there anything not so gorgeous about you, Linton?" She licked her lips in anticipation.

"Figure that out, Arella Reighan. Now, spread your legs for me." I crawled up my bed until I was on top of her. "I've been dreaming this to happen again, Reigh. I wanna worship every inch of you." I kissed her again, down to the soft skin of her neck, to her collarbone.

Her hands grabbed handfuls of my hair, moaning, grinding her hips on me as I drove her crazy with my hands kneading her gorgeous breast, pinching her taut peak whilst my mouth sucking the other, then my teeth tugged her pink nipple, tongue teasing, and licking the tip.

"So beautiful. So perfect, Reigh," I said as my hands, mouth, and my tongue worshiped her body.

"Do tell me how can I get enough of you. I can smell you now, but I still want to taste every inch of you."

I paved a trail down her belly, kissing, biting, licking her navel, and tracing down the mound of her pussy, then she wiggled. "Tickle?"

"Yeah."

I buried my nose on her trimmed blonde curls, inhaling them. "I thought so. You're a natural blonde, and you smell good."

"And how do I exactly smell?" she asked with curiosity lacing her voice.

“Sweet like honey with a little spice in it. Like cinnamon, and it smells you. And it’s driving me insane if I can’t taste you know.” I spread her legs apart, deftly pulling them over my shoulders.

“No, no, Skip. You don’t have to do this?” Her body went rigid. Her voice laced with wariness.

I looked up at her. “What? Eat your pussy? A real man eats pussy, Arella. And this pussy is mine now—mine to eat, mine to lick, mine to care, my mine to suck, mine to love, and mine to fuck. Please don’t stop me. I’d been dreaming to be in this position for a long time. I regretted not doing this when the first time I had you because you stopped me.”

I lowered my head and inhaled her moist sex. “You really have to make a scent like this. How about you made one for me?” I could just come in her smell alone.

She laughed—a belly laugh. “Are you insane?”

“Hmm. You’ve no idea.” My voice turned a husky growl. If I didn’t promise to make it slow, I already fucked her senseless.

And this is my Arella I’m talking about.

She shuddered as soon as my tongue lapped across her wet and heated flesh. Her taste flooded my tongue. “So sweet.” It made me hungrier.

“God, Skip.” Her satisfied noises made my heart war with pride.

She panted, wiggled, and cried with pleasure as I pushed my tongue inside her. She grew wetter as I thrust in and out. I pulled out, and let my tongue danced and nibbled her swollen clit, making her almost jumped from the bed.

“Too much?”

“Please, oh, God. So good.”

“I tend to make you feel good, love.” I did no mercy. I kissed, sucked, bit, licked, and plunged with my lips and tongue. She clamped around me, thrust her hips forward, pushed my head down her wet pussy, and ground violently as she flew higher and higher. I nearly came when she convulsed, shaking like an earthquake, screaming for my name as her orgasm ripped through like a strike of lightning.

After licking her dry, I wiped my mouth and jaw with the back of my hand. “Are you okay?”

“I-I, yeah. I-I guess.” Her stutter made me chuckle. “Lose control with me, Reigh. Just with me.” I moved closer to her, and she eagerly opened the drawer.

“Lie down, handsome,” she ordered when she found the condom.

"You know I used to be a boss, in the bed or not, but your bossiness turns me on," I said as watched her tearing the foil pack with her teeth. I remembered how she looked at me that night. She was curious about how I sheathed my cock.

"I love the softness, velvety, yet so hard on my hand, hotsome." She wrapped her hand around and caressed the crown of cock, spreading the pre-cum that glistened for her. Then she finally sheathed easily. "I'll make it up to you later, hottie," she promised and patted my cock.

"Hottie?" I grinned.

She positioned myself and lowered her slicked fold slowly with her sweet cry, and my vein bulged on my forehead. Yeah, without warning.

"Fuck!" I growled and nearly passed out as I felt her taking me all in so tight and hot. "Jesus Christ!"

She mewled, "It's Arella Reighan Rogue, Skipper."

I laughed, grabbed her head, and kissed her ferociously. "Taste yourself, Arella." I dove my tongue inside her mouth whilst I rocked my hips into her. She sucked her tanginess and sweetness on my tongue, tasting herself.

She rocked me, talking more of me. And I met her thrust, plunging deeper as deep as I could reach. I closed my eyes, taking everything in—I was not dreaming anymore. *This is real.*

"God, Arella. All even better." I cupped her breasts, massaging them, then I wrapped my arms around her and turned her over.

"Open your eyes for me, love. Look at me, watch how good we are together, watch how our souls merge, watch how you make me feel, and watch me making love to you." I grabbed her hands and clasped with mine.

I moved slowly as she pinned her gaze into my eyes. "We made for each other, Sinderella."

"We're perfect together, hotsome." She planted a soft and sweet kiss on my lips, and it melted my heart. I liked rough, and I couldn't remember I'd been this soft to any women I had a one-night stand with, and Arella was definitely not a one-time thing.

"Fucking perfect. Come around me, Reigh. You feel so fucking good. I'll follow you." Groaning, I thrust deeper into her sensitive walls, and she met me, tightening her walls around me, clenching even harder.

"I'm coming, Skip!"

"Damn right, you are. Say my name again."

“Skip!” She quivered, shuddered, but never broke her gaze. I watched her eyes sparkle as she reached the edge—propelling her euphoria.

Jesus! My name sounds like a prayer.

One last thrust. My cock pulsated.

“Reigh,” I groaned and went blind with ecstasy as I claimed the carnal bliss she generously gave.

* * *

“Love, what are you doing?” My voice was groggy and raspy. I was hard as a rock, and I thought I was dreaming of her giving me an awesome blow job. But this was way better than a dream.

I tilted my head, Arella’s mouth was taking all of me, bobbing her head up and down. She looked marvelous.

My heart galloped in my chest as I gritted my teeth. “Bloody hell, Reigh.” My head bucked against the pillow. My brain went foggy. My breathing caught as I watched her hot mouth taking me in and out. My fingers found her hair, grabbing it as she sucked, nibbled my tip, and grazed it with her teeth.

“Fuck, you’re good at that.” My hip thrust, following her suck. Once she massaged my balls, I was done.

“Fuck! Stop! I don’t wanna come in your mouth, Reigh.”

But she was a stubborn woman—she sucked me harder and moaned on my cock, and my muscles contracted in response. I growled as she sucked me hard again, and it sent me right off of fucking space.

“Arella!”

Chapter 13

Pool Table

Arella

“Let me make us breakfast.” Skip kissed my forehead after offering me his sweater for me to wear.

“Do you cook?” I was a little surprised. I was expecting an awkward moment after what we did last night, but the moment I’d been waiting for didn’t happen, instead, he cocooned me throughout the night. I even felt him kissing my shoulder in the middle of my slumber while our limbs tangled together.

“Reigh.” His brows furrowed, but his lips curved up into a cocky smile.

I rolled my eyes. “What?”

“You’re stalling. I hope you’re reminiscing our sexploration last night.” His cocky smile grew into a grin.

My face hated, not of embarrassment, but with satisfaction. It had been a while since I had sex, but one thing I was sure of, was that I never regretted my decision of sleeping with him. Skip worshiped my body that even my ex-husband could never do that to me. I was insecure for many years, but last night he boosted my confidence and made me feel sexy.

“You’re back to being cocky, aren’t you? And is that how you call it now? A *sexploration*.”

“Yeah. Too many hot shagging?” He closed the gap between us and cupped my face. “We’ll explore a lot together and things we are good at.” Then, he smashed his mouth into mine. The kiss was short, wet, hungry, and ended with a loud pop.

“Point taken.”

We shared breakfast together with a little chat regarding my work.

“Don’t interfere with my training using your connection, Skip. I was just alright before you showed up. I want a good recommendation without your influence.”

“You’ll be working with me anyway. So why can’t I help my girlfriend now?” He emptied his coffee cup.

My brow arched. “Girlfriend?” My heart skipped a bit, then thundered in my chest with that word.

Confusion plastered on his face. The hand with an empty cup dropped down slowly to his charcoal gray kitchen counter. "Aren't you...my girlfriend?"

I held my smile, but my stupid heart was beyond overwhelmed that I almost lost control not to jump into him. "Oh, are we now?" My sarcasm made him swallow hard uncomfortably.

He looked down, disappointed.

"What else you want me to do, Arella?" His jaw clenched, then breathed noisily in frustration.

"You'd proven your point yesterday and last night, Mr. Linton." I stood up and circled to his side.

"You're hot when you're annoyed and frustrated, don't you know that?" I cupped his face and pressed my lips to his. I closed my eyes, sensing the softness and firmness of his talented lips.

When I pulled back, his eyes still closed. "I like your tattoo, boyfriend."

He cracked his eyes open and looked away. "Not funny."

"The tattoo? It was actually hot, and you have the same tattoo as my brother on your arm, but the one on your arse is way sexier." I smiled genuinely.

"That's not what I mean."

"Oh?"

"Reigh, can you be serious for a while? Do you like me or not?" His eyes were as serious as hell.

"I more than like you, Skipper. I knew what you said last night were so real. And this is not just about sex. Your gorgeous eyes don't lie, handsome. So, yeah, I was just kidding with you earlier." I kissed him one more time, and he relaxed on my lips.

"I don't care if your brother hates me, Arella. I want us more than anything."

"I know, but promise me that you won't interfere with my training. I want what I deserve."

"Deal."

"Good. Now, send me to my apartment."

"Not until I eat you on this counter."

I laughed. "You're not satisfied with your first breakfast, Mr. Linton?"

"You sucked me, and I didn't get a chance to eat you." His eyes were already blazing with lust. His words were sinfully erotic.

"I just did what I promised to you last night," I grinned mischievously.

Skip scooped me up, placed me on the counter, and swiped off the plates aside, causing to clutter on the floor, then he lifted his sweater off my head. I was completely naked. The coldness of the room didn't cause me to shiver, it was his intense stare as it raked through my naked body with adoration, making my nipples to harden painfully under his scrutiny. He grazed his thumb on my nipple, then captured it with his hot mouth.

And I was instantly wet and squirming.

"Skip, take me back to your room."

"I'm taking you somewhere else," he quickly answered.

As if on cue, I instantly snaked my arms around his neck and wrapped my legs around his waist. Skip pushed the hair from the back of my neck and placed kisses that made me shiver while he carried me to what he called somewhere else. I heard the door unlocked, and the smell of wood and citrus-y air freshener permeating the room reached my nostrils.

"Where are we?" I looked around, and I didn't see anything other than the light he switched on and the gray-colored wall. Before he could answer, he placed me down, feeling the felt and the wood under my skin.

"Now, lie down, and be a good girl. A good girl always gets a reward."

"I want that reward, Sir Skipper. But are we really doing this on the pool table?"

"You will have it. And yeah because I was losing my mind when you bent on that table at the pool house, and what was embarrassing was how I imagined wild things in front of your brother."

"Oh?"

"I want to make it slow, but you're driving me crazy, Reigh. Every time I kissed you, every time I thrust inside you always felt like the first time. It's how fucking amazing you are, and we are." His words were blowing my mind, and the most erotic thing I'd ever heard.

In an instant, my legs were on his shoulders as he downed his head and nibbled my inner thigh, and my inner flirt celebrated. The warm of his breath and the stings he caused was scorching.

He then licked my slick folds, making my head to fall back. He then lightly licked my clit, then sucked it, pulled between his lips, and I screamed, gripping his hair as I couldn't help but move my hips against him— luxuriating the feeling he did to me.

He then stopped. "Do you trust me?"

Still panting, I propped on my elbows to look at him. "Y-yes."

Without warning, he plunged his fingers inside me, making me arch my back and caught my breath, and he continued sucking me as he thrust them in and out, curled it, and hit the spot that I'd never known it existed.

It made me insane, made my eyes roll back, and cry me out with pleasure. "Oh god!"

Then instantly, his fingers and his mouth were gone.

"Skip?" My voice came out in a rasp.

"Hush." His finger rubbed against the orifice that nobody touched me there, even my ex, and that was the reason our sex life went cold. I was uncomfortable with him, but why now with Skip that I didn't know much about him, yet I felt that he could do anything for, and I wouldn't have the courage to stop him?

My muscle tensed though, but I managed to whisper, "It's okay."

"Are you sure it's okay?" His voice was laced with concern.

"I'd love to try it with you."

He licked me there, and it made me wild. He pushed his finger inside.

"Relax, Reigh. Breathe." Then I felt it stretched me. The pain was just a bearable sting, but it grew me wetter and ignited the fire within me.

"More," I begged, and he pushed it all in then out. "Oh god! I-it it feels a-amazing."

Then his mouth was back, and my scream echoed in the entire room or could be in the whole apartment. And I didn't care. It was hard to take all in how amazing it felt was. His plunging continued, and the pleasure was rising higher and higher. His tongue thrust inside me, tandem with his finger in and out. The burn lessened, and it turned to a sweet sting that sent ripples through me.

"You're killing me!" I screamed. My hoarse voice bubbled. And that all I could take. I forgot my own name as I flew high and fell to the ecstasy I never knew it existed.

Chapter 14

Dominic

Arella

I ROLLED my eyes, ignoring the knowing grin on his face as I walked toward his car. I knew that smug look when he saw the post-orgasmic bliss all over my face from the climax he gave me not so long ago.

His approaching footsteps and then a hand on my waist made me suck in a breath as his warm grip coursed through me. He kissed the top of my head, then finally opened the passenger door. “Why are you so in a hurry?” There was a tiny bit of sadness in his voice.

“I told you that I have a video call with my friend in Seattle once a month. She was the one who came to the concert of Fifth Death with me.” I climbed inside, and Skip closed the door after me.

He immediately started the engine, then turned to my side and smiled genuinely. “That was the best night of my life.” He stroked my cheek affectionately.

“I thought the first one...back seven years ago.” I arched a brow.

A silly grin spread across his face. “Okay, but last night was beyond amazing, Reigh.”

“Good to know.” I leaned and cupped his face. “It was indeed amazing.” I pressed my lips to his. Skip instantly welcomed me, slightly moaning the moment our tongues touched. I had to press my thighs together as the sensation blanketed my skin in an instant.

Skip raised his hands and slowly stroked my shoulders down to my arms. He nibbled my bottom lip, then ran his tongue to where he made it swollen. He gently kissed my lips, then pulled away, causing me to sigh in dismay, and that surprised me because I’d never been greedy like this.

I opened my eyes to the most breathtaking smile I’d ever seen. “It’s not over, and I can’t make my girlfriend come and scream here while those bastards are watching us.” He looked outside the window.

My eyes widened when the realization hit me. “Huh! How can I quickly forget everything when I’m with you? What did you do to me, Skipper?”

“Well, I’m glad I have that effect on you.” He pulled out of the parking lot.

The moment the elevator door closed in front of us, my heart started hammering again.

Skip pushed the door open to my apartment while our mouths still locked together, then he said, "Reigh, you really have to answer your phone. It starts to annoy me."

I'd been ignoring my phone that kept on ringing since I woke up in the morning. And I knew exactly who that was. My hands fumbled his belt as he was undoing the button of my jeans.

"That's probably Brett. I promise I'll call him later, and you're hot when you're annoyed anyway." I winked at him.

"If you say so, love," he chuckled, then deepened the kiss.

"Well, well, well if it's not the two long lost lovers finally got back together." A yelp slipped my mouth the moment I heard that voice—the familiar voice that had been the cause of my nightmares.

Instantly, Skip wrapped his arms around me protectively and possessively. "Who the fuck are you? And how the hell did you get inside this apartment?"

"Oh, she didn't tell you, did she?" His mockery made Skip's body shake with anger.

"Dominic, p-please stop." My entire body shivered. My chin started to tremble.

My apartment was still dark—the light was still off, only the sun streaming through the opened window that allowed me to find him leaning against the window. If I hadn't known him for a long time, I would not be able to recognize him.

"Oh, you're still scared at me, aren't you? After all, you locked me up for months, and yet, you never changed. Can't your asshole manwhore protect you from me?" Dominic jeered. His black hair was longer than the last time I saw him. He hated a beard, but right now, he looked like he had not been shaved a month or so. He might have lost some weight as well based on the shirt he was wearing—it was too baggy on him.

"Get the fuck out of this apartment, dickhead! Before I will call the police and let them arrest you for trespassing!" Skip's voice thundered, body quivering with rage. His hands were unknowingly squeezing my arms to the point they may leave bruises.

"And I'm so scared," Dominic derided.

"You just violated the restraining order, Dominic," I pointed.

"I don't care. Not until I get my money back, bitch," he sneered.

"Call her again, and I swear—"

"Skip." I hugged Skip tightly before he could launch to Dominic, wishing I could make him calm.

"Please, don't, Skip. He doesn't worth your strength." I lifted my gaze to him.

His eyes were furious. "How did you marry this piece of shit, Arella? Let me break his face for treating you—"

"I marry her because she forced me to. Didn't she tell you? I can't believe you're so fucking clueless? Do you think I ever loved her? This lousy lay of a bitch!"

Before I could blink, I stumbled back, and Skip was already punching him. My world spun around. Thuds and screams made me fell on my knees and sunk into the floor. I hugged myself as the sound of my heartbeat thrashing in my ears.

My fingers tremored.

My breathing rasped as I tried blocking his fists on my face.

"Bitch, I know you still talk to him! You worthless whore! I will kill you and her in front of him!"

"Enough! Please, stop!" I screamed with terror as I hid my head on my knees.

"Arella!" I barely heard Skip yelling and shaking my rigid body. "Reigh! Reigh, please, baby. I'm here. Look at me, please?" His warm breath, his touch on my face, his familiar smell, his voice pulled me back to him.

"S-skip." The black spot took me in completely.

* * *

THE WARM caress on my hand felt so good and made want to sleep even more. With heavy lids, I opened my eyes to the familiar surrounding of my room. My gaze landed on my furious brother, leaning against the doorjamb whose staring down with an intensity that could turn someone into coal. Then I looked at Skip whose sitting on a chair beside my bed. His brow knitted together as he continued circling caresses on my hand. And I wanted to place my finger to ease the crease on his forehead.

"Hey."

They looked at me with surprise, but no one had said a word.

I looked at Skip with bruises on his face. "You okay?"

He nodded and smiled sadly, then leaned down to kiss my lips, causing Brett to growl in his place.

"My brother, Skip," I whispered nervously.

"The fuck I care. How are you feeling? You scared the bloody shit out of me, Reigh."

"Wait a minute. What did I..." My brows furrowed as I stared at him for a moment. Then what happened earlier sprang into my mind. I sat, leaning my back on the headboard, bouncing my eyes between them. "Where is Dominic? How did he enter my apartment?"

"You should be checking your messages and returning calls, Arella." The tone of Brett's voice made Skip clench his jaw.

"He went to the hospital and threatened Kat. She gave him the key. That's how he got in. Don't worry about Dominic. He can't come near you anymore. He's back to prison," Brett added but remained stoic.

"Oh, my God! Where is Kat? Is she okay?" My eyes widened. I couldn't take it if Kat was hurt because of me because he wasn't aware that Dominic was actually in prison.

"She's fine. She made a statement to support Linton's while you passed out," Brett said.

I looked at Skip when he squeezed my hand.

"How do you feel? Really." His strong eye contact warmed my heart and made me feel safe.

"I'm better now." The fluttering on my stomach and the palpitation of my heart worsened my guilt and the possibility that my brother was already aware of my relationship with Skip.

"Now, it's time to explain what he said back in the station." Brett's strong and cold voice made me shiver.

"W-who?" The tone of my voice suddenly changed, making me look guiltier.

"Stop playing dumb, Arella."

Skip turned to Brett. "Can you give her a little time to rest? She just collapsed hours ago if you might forget."

"Don't talk to me like that about my sister, Linton. I don't fucking care about you. Our friendship is over the moment you touched her! You broke my trust, you fucking slept with my sister, and you disrespected me, you, fucking son of a bitch!"

"Brett!"

"What? Did you even care about our friendship over your itch, Arella?" His eyes were wide as he moved slowly and deliberately towards my bed.

Skip jerked to stand. The chair stumbled and created a loud noise in my room. "Don't you ever talk to her like that again!" He jabbed a finger on my brother's face. "I left her because I chose our friendship over her, but that was seven years ago. And this time, it's my call, and I don't fucking care about how long our friendship was if I had to stay away from the woman I've loved. You hate

me or not, you accept what I and Arella have, I don't give a bloody shit. I choose her over you this time, Rogue. And I don't need to ask permission from you because she's a bloody adult. And may I remind you, I didn't make a blood pact with you, so, you either accept it or just leave us alone."

Skip's confession made me gasp. I just witnessed something beautiful... something that I might never see it again, and so as Brett who stared at him incredulously. But it was gone in a heartbeat.

"I can't believe you fucked my sister behind me!" Brett's words were like a punch to my gut.

"I didn't know she was your sister back then!"

Brett was about to punch Skip when I yelled at them to stop, but they seemed not to hear me.

"I won't allow you to punch me again, Bretton Rogue!"

"Just stop, please!" When I got their attention. "I forced myself to go out on a date with Dominic, because..." I breathed deeply and closed my eyes when they stung. My chin trembled. "Because..."

Chapter 15

Pent-up Emotions

Skip

HER TEARS fell like a stream. “Because I was so sad, and I wanted to forget him and move on.”

“And of all the people you chose to date was that dickhead?” Brett roared with anger.

I knew him well if he was pissed off, and right now he was on the razor-thin edge towards losing his control.

“...and...”

“Oh, and there is more, huh?” And Brett’s sarcasm was also pissing me off, but there was something in Arella’s voice that made me want to shut the bloody off out of Brett.

“...and I-I w-was pregnant.”

Pregnant?

The word pregnant clawed into my skin, finding a way right deep into my soul, taunting me. And there was a strange feeling awakened inside me that I hadn’t felt before.

I blinked rapidly as if I misheard her.

Pregnant. The word kept on repeating in my head to the point it made my world spinning.

“Reigh, I’m out of...rub— condom,” I told her shyly. I was already hard when I remembered I already used the two foils I had on my wallet.

“Is that why you stop?” She bit her lip. A rosy pink blossomed on her cheeks. “How about you let me do something for you instead.”

“No, Reigh. I’ll be fine.”

I scratched my head and looked down to my unsheathed cock. “I think I just have to make you feel good.”

“I’m on a pill, Linton.”

I was beyond terrified. We had a kid, yet she never mentioned it to me last night.

“You’re lying, right?” Brett asked in a disbelieving voice.

Fuck!

“Where is our baby, Arella?”

She suddenly burst out crying, covering her face with her trembling hands. She shook her head repeatedly without looking at me. “I’m sorry, Skip. I’m so sorry.”

My skin flushed and tingled as to why she was apologizing. I was barely breathing, and I could pass out in a moment to this unexpected revelation I never imagined. “Where the fuck is our child, Arella?”

My sudden explosion startled her on her bed. My fist struck the wall as I knew exactly the answer to my own question. It bloody hurt, but it was merely a sting compared to the pain I had in my chest, knowing that my child was gone.

I unyieldingly denied the fact though. “Just fucking answer me for God’s sake!”

Her pain, her cries, and her tears were a soul-searing crept in my veins.

She just cried out loud.

Just fucking great!

And that made me more an impatience dimwit. God knew how much I wanted to scurry towards her, to hug, and comfort her, and tell her everything would be all right, but that was complete bullshit. Right now, all I wanted was to know the truth.

“Arella, would you mind answering him?” Brett cut in, and surprisingly he was calmer than I was.

My gaze never left her. “I think I get it, Bretton.” I huffed. “I can’t believe you have that in you, Arella. You broke my heart that I doubted there was anything in this fucking world could fix it. You ruined me! Un-fucking-believable! The woman I was madly in love for seven years is fucking filicide. Screw you!”

I stalked away before I could do something to her that I might regret. I wanted to squeeze her to talk, but damn it, I still loved her. No matter how cruel she was, I couldn’t just undo my feelings for her. I was only sure of one thing, I couldn’t be with her anymore.

“Skip!” Brett was calling me as I hurriedly stalked away out of Arella’s apartment. “Can you just stop for a second!”

His quick footsteps got closer.

“Damn it, Linton!” He was also furious as I was.

I stopped and turned. “What the fuck do you want now you know our deep darkest secrets? Wanna punch me again? Go ahead, just fucking do it!” I looked up at the sky, and it seemed the world was mocking me.

I ground my teeth, squinting my eyes at him. “I wanna be bloody numb. Hell, I don’t care about life anymore. I just lost my best friend, I lost my child, and now, I fucking lost the woman I ever loved. What reason do I have to live, huh, Bretton? Do fucking tell me!” I threw my hands up, frustrated, lost, and hurt. All at once.

“I’m sorry, mate.” He shook his head. His eyes filled with shame, sadness, and anger. “I have no idea Arella was keeping something like this to our family. I bet grandma just died and didn’t get a chance to know about this.”

I blinked twice and breathed deeply to repress my pent-up emotions, but there was no much help. “I guess I just don’t know anything about her after all. You should go up and take care of your sister because I just broke my promise. I’m so sorry, Brett. I have to go.” I walked away, and I could sense he didn’t follow me anymore.

Fuck this life!

* * *

THE TIRES screeched at Mum’s driveway as I pulled over. I was glad I didn’t get into a car accident. I rushed to the foyer and banged my fist on the door. “Mum!”

My body threatened to shatter with emotions— emotions that I never thought could crumble down a man. Before I could knock again, the door swung open—it was her caretaker, telling me Mum was in her office.

I sprinted to where I expected Mum would be. Her face fell the moment she saw me. Without a word, she stood up from the chair and walked in my direction that it felt like a century. She wrapped her arms around me and rubbed my back for comfort whilst I shook to cry for my losses.

“Oh, honey. What happened?”

“How could she, Mum? How could she? S-she’s not the woman that I thought I knew. I guess I know nothing about her. Those eyes never lied to me, but why did she do that?”

“Hush, honey. Come here, and let’s talk about it.” Mum pulled away, held my hand to the couch.

I sat down, feeling the numbness in my body. I glanced at Mum closely. “It was my fault because I left her that night. I didn’t look for her even though I knew where to find her. I hated myself for not thinking twice. Now, I lost them.” I looked down, feeling guilty when I realized I shouldn’t be blaming Arella. She was still young. She was barely eighteen when she’d gotten pregnant by a stranger. She had a life ahead of her, and pregnancy was the last thing for a teenager to wish for.

I was the one who was selfish. I could have been spending in jail, but I chose to run away.

Mum pulled me into a hug again, then she let my head lie down on her lap. I closed my eyes, taking all the comfort from her hand as she ran her fingers through my hair.

"We're supposed to have a baby, Mum," I mumbled when my senses came back. My tears were just falling. The fuck I care!

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." The concern in her voice wrapped around my skin like a soft blanket.

"I know, and I said terrible things to her without thinking I had my own mistakes. I think I lost her for good. I don't think she can ever forgive me, can she?"

"You just have to do the right thing, Skipper. Follow your heart if she means a lot to you," Mum said, pointing her finger to my chest.

"Her ex-husband hurt her and broke her physically and emotionally. I thought I'm not capable of hurting her, but I did the worse. It's just, I got carried away and accused her of a killer."

"It's not too late, Skipper. You still have time to make it right."

"I hope so, Mum. I hope you're right." My eyelids fell heavy. I closed my eyes, letting the darkness to take over.

THE ARENA went black. The crowd was dead silence. Then, the platform rose out of the stage, revealing the lead singer of the Fifth Death—Axson Scott Linton, my cousin. He had an electric guitar with a strap around his shoulder, the other members followed.

When the light shone, they started with their billboard hit song, entitled, She only mattered to me—Axson sang his heart out. Veins protruded on his neck, sweat shone on his forehead, eyes slightly closed as he strummed his guitar, and the audience sang along.

"Sing with me, Ravenhill!" He raised his arm, causing his shirt to lift up, giving a glimpse of his boxers and abs. The arena went crazy, especially the girls. His curly hair fell errantly around his forehead. He took the mic from the stand and walked to the left corner of the stage, giving the audience a full view of his arse. I rolled my eyes. Don't get me wrong, I loved this bloke like a brother, and his ego never soared high despite their popularity and girls' attention they received. I guessed what he was doing was a part of the props.

"I love you, Axson!" A slender blonde yelled at the top of her lungs that caught my attention. Her and Axson's gaze connected. He winked at her, and I could see her she was about to fake her collapse.

She yelled again, "I just died!"

I'd been watching her screaming Axson's name with her friend for a couple of minutes now. Couldn't blame the girls though. Axson was living his life with his new found popularity. He loved music more than anything.

"Hey. A fan, huh?"

"Aren't we all are?" she yelled to my ear.

The stadium was full. The Fifth Death played their latest single, and the crowd roared as they sang along. This was one of the best crowds so far. Axson was glad I came with them, unbeknownst to my real reason—to meet my close friend in college, Bretton Rogue.

I shrugged. "I guess, we all are." Then she met my gaze. Her brown eyes sparkled. This place was dim-lit, but I could still see how gorgeous her innocent face was. Her mouth was forming an O shaped.

My cockiness kicked in, I smirked, "I'm Linton." I held my hand.

"Linton?" She barked into laughter, mocking me.

I inwardly felt annoyed because I and Axson never had any resemblance though our dads were brothers. He grew up in the U.K all his life. That was why most of the American girls fell for him—for his thick Londoner accent, and sometimes he could fool you with his cockney. I, on the other hand, was faking to be an American. And that was my mistake.

"And shouldn't you be telling me what's yours?" I kept on smiling.

"It's Reighan. Just call me Reigh." She shook my hand—it was soft and warm. I grasped it, not letting it go.

"Wanna go out from here, Reigh? I know a place."

Her hesitation was all over her face. So I nodded slowly and let go of her hand. To my surprise, she grasped it back.

"Sure." Her face lit up.

I brought her to the hotel room, and I could feel her sudden uneasiness. I offered her a beer when she seemed to relax.

"I'm not sleeping with you Linton," she mumbled.

"Who said I'm sleeping with you, Reigh?" I told her truthfully. There was something in her that drew me in. And she wasn't a flirt nor a groupie.

"Oh?" Sounding surprise to her own word, she leaned on the dresser and sipped the beer.

"I just wanna go out from the crowd." I sauntered closer to her.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, my God! Your eyes! I thought it was just the effect of the lights from the stadium." She raised her hand to trace my cheek. "They're magical. I haven't seen like yours before."

Her touch sent zing right between my thighs. My lips dried instantly.

I inwardly cursed to the sensation she was giving me, and she seemed oblivious.

"Most girls were scared when they saw my eyes. So I usually used contacts or glasses."

She cupped my face, making me stiffened. "You're gorgeous, Linton."

"You're beautiful, Reighan." I ran my thumb on her cheek. Her lips slightly parted. "I want to kiss you." My voice thickened, and I'd never been so tempted like this that I wanted to lose control for her.

"Kiss me."

She didn't have to say it twice. The moment she touched me, I already took back what I said earlier. I leaned closer. I could smell the beer she drunk from the soft and sweet breathing that caressed my face. Her eyes flutter closed, and so as mine.

"Reigh!"

Chapter 16

Secrets

Arella

I COULDN'T believe this was happening. From Skip leaving, Brett being mad at me, and the one thing I hid from them was finally out of my chest. And to worsen the scenario, I just broke their trusts. I lost Skip, and there was no way he was going to forgive me after what he just found out. Well, he didn't get to hear the full story.

"And you didn't even try telling us after all these years?" Brett's vein bulged against his neck. His face was red with rage. And it didn't end there. "I can't believe you were keeping this from Nana. You were always honest to her and to us for fuck's sake, Arella!" He walked out of the kitchen, leaving me with Mom, Dad, and Lorcan.

"Here, sweetheart." Mom offered me a mug of hot chocolate sprinkled with hazelnuts. My hands were trembling as I wrapped around the mug. The thought of how I was going to start was nerve-racking.

"Don't you think you should start telling us when Skip is around?" Lorcan's calm and shrink tone made me shrug.

"He hates me. I don't think he's willing to hear it anyway," I mumbled, not meeting their gazes.

"I think he has the right to know, honey." Mom squeezed my shoulder. "I'm so sorry if I wasn't there for you. How didn't I even know that my baby girl was already suffering? I'm not here to judge you, Are. And you were barely an adult."

It scared the hell out of me waking up bleeding. It happened after my eighteen birthday. Alys threw a party for me at her home. Just a week earlier, I found out I was pregnant, and I was so sad and lost at that age, and I was going to have a baby alone.

I closed my eyes as the tears formed at the back of my lids. "I'm so sorry, Mom, Dad. I was so afraid, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know how to hold a child." I brushed off my tears. My shoulders began to shake as I sobbed harder.

"Dominic did hurt you before the divorce, didn't he?" Dad's angry voice startled me.

I nodded. "Attorney-client privilege, Dad. That's why I decided the divorce hearing would be just between us and our lawyers. It still hurt because I always wanted a child, but he didn't like the idea."

“That asshole! I wish I was with Skip so I could pull his sac out of his good-for-nothing body.”

Brett came back, slowly walking toward me. “Arella, I might not be the best brother you ever have, that I’ve always been an overprotective jerk, and a pain in the ass, but I just want you to know that I love you so much. You never complained, and I thought I was doing the right thing. These things between you and Skip, it just caught me off guard. I’m sorry. We may not have the same blood running in our veins, but I care about that guy. He is a good person, and if I want you to date someone, he can be—” He raked his fingers through his hair, then shook his head. “Fuck!”

“Bretton!” Dad chided.

“How did I become so dumb?”

“About what?” I lifted my gaze to meet his—they glittered with pain.

“Stand up and we have somewhere else to go,” Brett said quickly.

“Where?” My brows furrowed.

“Just hurry up, Are. Trust me on this.”

I looked at Mom, Dad, and Lorcan. They nodded and smiled at me.

“Go ahead, sweetheart,” Dad agreed. “We’ll see you tomorrow at dinner.”

I hurriedly stood up and kissed Mom, then Dad and Lorcan.

Brett gripped my hand as we walked to his car.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“Just get inside the car and buckle up.”

He revved the engine and drove off. “I deactivated your account at HeartRated.”

“And I can’t believe you co-owned a dating app, Brett. You keep secrets from me too.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I know. We have a geek friend back in college. Now he is a web designer, so we contacted him, and he will only agree to do one for us if he got to have a selfie with Messi. So, Skip was able to pull some strings. He gave him a VIP ticket to the game. When the subscribers boosted up, his company finally designed an app for us.”

He breathed deeply. “Are, forgive me for being an ass. I’m sorry if I judged you, sis. Just so you know, all I want from you is to see you happy. Believe me, it hurts finding out what you’ve been through in the hand of that asshole.” His words were sincere that touched the center of my heart.

“I don’t think I would be happy again if Skip won’t forgive me.”

He tsked, "How did I miss the clue?"

"What clue?" My curiosity spiked, eyes pinning at him.

"He talked about a girl when he broke up with his ex. It didn't seem to match the description of Audrey. I thought he was just drunk, then, he didn't date anyone after that if we won't count the...you know. He said he was waiting for his girl, but I didn't pry though. When we played pool, he asked me not to kick his ass because he had unfinished business with someone. How did you two meet?" He stole glances at me.

"At the concert," I mumbled, feeling my face flushed. "I thought he was just trying to catch a girl's attention by using Linton. Then he suddenly left after that. I never saw him again. It was my fault because I lied, Brett." I breathed deeply. "I almost ruined his life."

"But you didn't, Are. Don't beat yourself up. You both suffered the consequences of your actions." He stopped in front of the gate, then it slid open when the guard recognized him. "So, how did he find out?"

"He found my ID, and he just returned it to me last week. That's how he knew that I'm a Rogue, and his best friend's sister." My shoulders sagged. This thing between me and Skip was more complicated than I thought.

"He was keeping it all this time, huh?" He looked amused. "Let's go." Then he quickly climbed out of the car.

"Oh, wow!" I stared at the cream house in front of us. It was bigger than my parents'.

I wandered my eyes around while Brett was ringing the doorbell. To my surprise, there was nothing much to see other than the concrete driveway. The door swung open like they were expecting us to be here. A woman around thirties smiled at Brett.

"Whose home is this, Brett?"

"Skip's mom."

My eyes widened. "And why are we exactly here?"

"To explain to your boyfriend." He rolled his eyes that I'd never seen him do that before.

"Ex-boyfriend. We broke up, remember? And he called me a killer." My heart just stabbed a thousand times. I even winced.

"Because he doesn't know the truth." Brett gritted his teeth, glaring at me.

"I-I don't think I'm ready to face him right now. Maybe some other time." I walked back to the car.

“Arella, if you will not going to talk to him right now, you won’t get another chance. He’s leaving for London tonight!”

And that made me stop.

THE DAYS went along like any other days. He wasn’t at his Mom’s house. We found out he took an emergency flight back to London. I was convinced by the end of the day that we were truly over.

It had been a week, and I hadn’t heard from him since then. I called him, Brett tried too, and of course, it went directly to his voicemail. I tried e-mailing him, but something was stopping me. So, I followed my guts.

Dominic was back to prison. Two months after the nasty divorce, he visited me to take his money back. He’d gone physical and that was how he went to jail.

The alarm was still shrieking at Kat’s room, and it repeated five times. “What the hell, Kat? Turn that damn thing off!”

Lying on my bed and not thinking of my life out of my bedroom was on my agenda for today. The alarm was finally off, then Kat’s head peeked through the door.

“Don’t and I don’t.” I covered my face with my pillow.

Soft footsteps approached, then my mattress dipped down, and I knew Kat sat on my bed. She was silent for a few seconds, then my pillow was pulled away from my face. “Are you just going to lie down here for the rest of the weekend?”

“Yes. And thank you very much for asking.”

“How about your family dinner?”

“I’m not going,” I answered pretty quick.

“You can’t just mope here, Are. That’s not healthy.”

“You sound just like my brother.”

“Because we are best friends. We barely talked for the whole week. I know it’s hard, but you just have to give yourself some time to process the things that happened in your life.”

“Now you sound like my shrink.”

She ran her fingers through my hair. “Then it’s time for you to see her again since you don’t wanna open up to your roommate slash best friend.”

"I'm not ready yet, Kat."

"Not ready to tell me or to see your shrink?"

I grimaced at her words.

"To all." My voice cracked. I just missed that bloody brit. He was an asshole for not giving me a chance to explain, and he just ran away again. We confessed our feelings. We just became a thing and turned out that thing we had was a just thing and nothing more.

It hurt like hell—so hurt that it crumbled my world down. Why could I not just live like a normal woman? Why did it hurt like this?

I missed him every single day. This apartment, my bed reminded me of how he looked at me that day. I couldn't even look at the scrambled eggs and toast. *Everything is about him.*

I wiped my tears. "I'm gonna be fine, Kat."

"Well, you won't be if you'll just stay in your bed all day."

"It's only been a week, Kat. Jeez, you are so pushy."

"And a pussycat."

I burst out laughing, and she threw herself at me, hugging me tightly. "I missed your smile and laugh, Are. I missed my roommate."

I pulled away. "Go and get ready for your work."

"And you badly need a shower and a change of your sheet, dear. You and your bed stink."

"I don't! You are just a neat freak, Katrya Jane Park." I smelled my underarm and my pillow. When I lifted my gaze, Kat was wrinkling her nose.

"I'm your best friend, but I have to be honest because your room smells like a rotten egg."

I picked up my pillow and threw it at her. "You're lying!"

She laughed. "But you have to get up and have dinner with your family, Are. Brett actually called me twice today, asking if you're okay."

I suddenly felt guilty about my family. I'd caused a lot of trouble to them, yet they still loved me unconditionally. I had to put myself together and be a good person like they believed I was.

Chapter 17

The Painting

Arella

“SIS!” Brett’s face lit up when he saw me approaching the dining room. They already started the dinner without me because it took me some time to groom myself.

“Brother.” I smiled brightly at him like nothing happened last week.

Brett stood and pulled me into a bear hug. “I missed you, Are.”

I returned the hug and whispered, “I missed you, too, but you’re crushing me.”

“I’m just glad you’re here,” he whispered back.

“Me too.” I pulled away and hugged Mom and Dad. “So, you all started without me, huh?”

“Sorry, kiddo. I thought you’re not coming. Your mom wrapped some food for you and thought Brett could send it to your apartment.” Dad sat back.

“I’m happy to see you, honey.” Mom smiled. I couldn’t sense any tension in the room, which was a good sign. I didn’t want to ruin this dinner with my life full of drama.

“Thanks, mom!”

I took some food on my plate and started digging. The food seemed to meet my taste or I was just starving. I’d been eating instant noodles if not frozen pizza and baked mac and cheese for the whole week because I was so lazy to cook for myself. Our microwave had put to good use since I was already tired of the same food on our takeout menu for months until I started some healthy meals. Kat just shook her head every time she checked our fridge.

“I guess post-hot brits effect is so bad, huh? This fridge looked like from the supermarket. Why don’t you just freeze the kettle and pans, too? They’re no use anyway.”

I kept my eyes on the new episode of Castle Rock. Psychological horror was not my cup of tea, but there was nothing wrong with stepping out of my comfort zone, was there? Okay, that was a bull. I thought I might be able to forget Skip for a while. It didn’t help much though.

“Arella, stop moping around, and just go out and have fun!”

I turned my head to her when she turned off the TV and threw the remote beside me. "This is my way of fun, Kat, please?" My chest tightened again. I was so got ahead of myself, imagining me and Skip watching movies on this couch after he made me forget my own name that day.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you, but please, just believe of what your heart says because it doesn't lie, Are." She sat beside me and gripped my knee. "He will come back. I saw how he looked at you that day. I never doubted he was in love with you."

"Is this your way of helping me move on? Well, news flash, it doesn't." I pressed the power button and focused back on the TV screen.

She sighed in frustration and stomped back to the kitchen.

"Easy there, sweet corn," Brett mumbled across the table. "Did Kat starve you like that?"

My heart melted to hear him calling me this nickname again. He used to call me when we were just kids. He said my hair was like corn silk.

After our family dinner, I decided to come with Brett since he was so adamant that I should stay with him for a night. How could I say no to him when he'd been nothing but a great brother to me?

The elevator rose up to his apartment, and none of us started talking and so as on our way. He just drummed his fingers into rock music he played on his playlist.

"How's the business?" I started while waiting for us to reach his floor. I could feel his eyes on me.

"Is that really what you wanna know, sweet corn? You can ask me, you know."

"Please, don't start. I really wanna know about your business."

Our grandparents started out a small chocolate shop until it grew up when it won in a contest and featured in one of the local food magazines. Then my parents opened another shop in town. When Brett graduated from college, he took over the business and within three years he was able to open another branch in the center of the New York City.

"It's a family business, Are. So you are always a part of it."

"And I can't remember I ever have a contribution to it."

"Is your name not enough?" He laughed. "Sweet corn, it's all over the wrappers and prints everywhere. I can suggest putting your picture on it if you want me to."

I rolled my eyes. "It's Nana's, but I want to visit the factory."

I sighed when I remembered my last visit. It was before my wedding, and the last time I tasted chocolate was on my wedding day since Reigh Chocolates sponsored our deserts.

"Let me take you there. How about next week?"

Before I could answer he asked again, "So how're the scents you're formulating?" He pulled me closer to him and kissed the top of my head.

I'd been trying to experiment for my own signature scent, but I failed to come up with the right scent in my mind. Or maybe I should probably just use my heart instead. My broken heart.

"Been working on the new samples for a week." Then I froze and lifted my eyes to meet Brett's blue one. "Holy crap! I wanna go to the factory on Monday."

His brow furrowed. "What's with the rush?"

"Please? I think I found where I can get my inspiration." I gave him a look that he could not say no to me—just like how I asked him for the tickets to the concert. Wait a minute.

"Brett, can I ask you something?"

"Aren't you already asking?" He smiled bemusedly.

Before I could sigh, he said. "Just kidding, ask away."

"How could you afford the front row tickets?" I watched him slowly.

He shrugged. "I have my way."

"He gave them to you, didn't he?"

"Yeah. I asked if he could pull some strings. And I said they're for my baby sister's birthday. Then after two days, he handed the tickets to me. Oh, he said happy birthday to you." He pressed his lips into a thin line as if he was sad or guilty.

"And just now you tell me that, why?"

"Because he's a chick magnet, Are. The last thing I want from you is to have a broken heart, but I guess I'd been protecting you from the wrong guy all these years." His voice broke suddenly.

"It's all right, Brett. You're the best brother I could ever have." I smiled. "Oh, because technically I don't have a choice." I laughed and I could see his face lightened up. "So, are you gonna help me with the factory?"

"Do you really have to ask me?" He smiled genuinely. "Of course, you can visit there anytime, but I'm always willing to come with you. All you have to do is say a word, besides, my sister rarely asks a favor."

I tiptoed to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, bug!"

"Don't call me that," he groaned.

The elevator door slid open.

His bachelor's pad was pretty neat loft apartment. A ton of brick and lumber material used. It took advantage of the high ceiling on the upper level to serve as his bedroom. The rustic feels and the brick made it look masculine with no effort. His furniture, the wall, and stairs matched with an iron effect and wood paneling. Of course, my brother loved sunshine and I was not surprised to see the curtains being drawn to both sides.

"I always love your apartment, brother."

"We can always be neighbors, Are. There is an empty apartment on the fifth floor, and I can call the owner if you want to move here. Just let me know."

I just hummed because he knew I couldn't move out of Kat. It was not about the lease, but she grew on me already. I moved closer to the painting on his wall. I didn't get it why it looked creepy to me. It had three heads painted in white with red encircled as their eyes. Then the background was just black and grey.

My brows furrowed as I looked closer. "Why the hell do you have this painting on your wall? Is this new?"

"You're really not an art person, are you, sweet corn?" he chuckled.

I could feel him on my back. I rolled my eyes because he knew me more than I knew myself. "Glad you find it funny."

"This was three years ago," he hesitated for a moment. "Are you sure you wanna hear this?"

"Yeah. Tell me why this painting deserves a place in your expensive loft?" I crossed my arms over my chest and stared blankly at the painting.

"I and Lorcan flew from LAX to London to mend Linton's heart."

Just his name made me freeze. I swallowed, ignoring the ache inside my chest. I missed him so much. He always crossed my mind every now and then. He may never forgive me for what I did, but it was for his own good. He was going to thank me later. And I never expected these things to happen between us. I broke his heart, and I broke mine in the end.

"We got drunk and couldn't even hail a cab. His brother, Clyve picked us from the pub and brought us to his apartment. He painted as part of his therapy. So, he asked if he could paint us."

I found myself rubbing my chest. "Therapy?"

“He had a hard time coping when their parents’ divorced and his brother away from him for the first time. He stayed with his dad, while Skip was here with his mom and for his college. So, he felt lost and became an alcoholic. He used some drugs, too, but he’s in good shape now. He’s two years younger than Skip and I. So, sister dear, does this painting deserve a place on my wall?”

“Definitely.” Then I scanned around until my eyes landed on the picture beside our family’s. I swallowed hard, and again, it triggered the pain inside my heart. The picture was a selfie, taken from a stadium. I couldn’t see any sadness in those beautiful eyes. *A recent picture of Skip.*

My stomach twisted, and my heart seemed hollow that he wasn’t affected after all.

And here I thought my brother didn’t have any contact with him.

Chapter 18

Clyve Clifford Linton

Skip

MY BRAIN completely shut down the moment I received a call from Dad.

This wasn't happening all at once—my problem with Arella, my broken friendship with Brett, and my brother in the hospital bed.

Dad didn't give many details about the accident, but he would never rush me to take the early flight to London if Clyve wasn't in a critical condition. I knew Dad when it came to my brother—his favorite son.

The cool air of London seeped through my skin as I stepped outside the airport. I shivered at the thought of my brother. My dad's driver, Aldrich drove us immediately to the hospital.

"Relax, Skipper. Your brother will be fine." Mum gripped my arm as soon as the receptionist told us where was the room of my brother. She insisted on coming with me, and I knew how she felt about being back in London, and a chance of seeing my father again. She and Clyve met in Paris whenever they missed each other, or they spent some quality time together in Ireland where my father bought a house from a famous singer.

We didn't have family traditions since my family fell apart. I barely remembered opening a gift in front of my family during holidays and even on my birthdays, but it was not a big deal to me, and I was a grown-up man to be upset with that kind of thing.

"I was wondering why didn't you ask them what's my brother's condition, Mum. Is there something you're not telling about Clyve?" A quiver in my stomach worsened. I was thinking of the worse scenario throughout the flight.

Clyve had been in hell since my parents' divorce. He took it seriously until he turned sideways. I was a terrible brother to him. When I supposed to be his backbone, I wasn't even there for him. Thankfully, he did the therapy seriously and finished college. I had no idea he'd been in deep trouble until I get back home. Then he got a job on the local news channel. He was seeing someone and seemed happy when I came back to New York.

"You're scowling about the issue you left behind, Skipper." She ignored my question and went inside the lift.

"I'm scowling because I'm worried about my brother, and you seem relaxed." Arguing with my mother was nonsense because she knew me too well. And she was right.

"You don't scowl when your worried, you frowned and drum, honey."

"Well, you missed a few details in my apartment," I groaned.

"I intentionally didn't purchase a drum set. You should start talking when you have a problem."

"I couldn't just spill my guts on you, Mum. The last time I opened up to you was seven years ago. I was still a lad, and now I can't talk to Brett because he and his sister are my problems." I heaved a sigh. There you go again. It just bloody hurts.

Her eyes begged me to listen to her, but I lost control of my pent-up emotions. Her ex-husband just appeared in her apartment and bullied her. her brother just found out that we'd been hiding something from him years ago, and Brett felt betrayed, and then another bomb just blew off on my face. I was supposed to be a father. I was supposed to have a six years old kid.

But that didn't happen. What a sick joke!

Will she or he ever accepted me that I was never in the picture from birth? *Is my baby really gone?*

"My boys are always had a hard time opening up to their mother when the fact is the mother knows best."

I snorted, "Okay. What do you think I was doing yesterday, Mum? Not opening up out on you?"

"That's what I'm talking about. It wasn't so hard, was it, honey?"

"What's this has to do with Clyve?" I stopped in front of my brother's room.

"Family always understand each other, Skipper. Brett will understand his sister. He loves your Reigh so much that's why he tends to be overprotective of her. He considers you as his family—"

"Not anymore." My face fell. It was harder than I thought to lose a best friend. *And losing her was the hardest.*

"You don't know that. He will understand you. If we go back to States, you have to talk to Brett and apologize, and let your Reigh explain."

"Why do you keep saying *your Reigh*? Is this some kind of a title? Like your majesty, your highness?"

"Stop being sarcastic, Skipper!" She was amused while my guilt was sucking up my remaining senses.

"We're over, Mum." I looked away and took a deep breath.

“Are you sure about that? The last time I heard—” Mum suddenly stopped.

“What?”

“Let’s meet your brother, shall we? I missed my CC,” Mum sang.

“Tell me again why I’m not allowed to call him that?” I chuckled. Mum being with us lightened up my mood for a while. That was why I loved her so bloody much.

I pushed the door opened. My brother was lying on the bed, looking up at the ceiling with his brows furrowed. He seemed to be in deep thoughts.

“Clyve!” If I didn’t call him, he wouldn’t have been aware someone already came inside his room.

He startled, then his eyes widened when he saw us on his door. “Skip, *brotha!*”

“You happen to have an only handsome brother. So, that’s definitely me. Hiya? What happened? You worried us.” I hugged him.

He groaned in pain, and I could feel him grimacing, but I missed my little brother. He had bruises all over his face. A cut on his left eyebrow. A busted right eye, and looked like he had a broken nose. He didn’t get into a car accident because his knuckles were damn busted.

“I know, I know.” He looked down. Guilt flashed all over his face. Clyve was a younger version of me. Only his eyes were the same shade of blue, and his hair was lighter than mine. I was two inches taller than him, but he was lean and a Vegan for life.

Mom sat beside him and wrapped her arms around Clyve, kissing the side of his head. “What happened, CC?”

“Dad didn’t tell you the details, did he?” He smiled at Mum, then looked at me.

“No,” I answered shortly since I wasn’t in the right mind when Dad called.

“My girlfriend cheated on me with her gym trainer.” He looked away, then raked his fingers through his hair.

I looked away when his chin trembled. My knuckles cracked when I realized why Clyve had done that. “I think we have something in common, brother.”

Mum shushed him when he cried. I was afraid he was going to the road where he left behind. I couldn’t let that happen. Not when he was on my watch.

“What do you mean?” he asked in a shaky voice, wiping his tears. My brother had a soft heart and a crybaby. He cried to get what he wanted when we were just kids.

I ignored his question, instead, I asked, “And you went to that bollocks and beat him to a pulp?”

He shrugged. "I could have knocked him down if his cavalry didn't come to rescue him."

"I've no doubt on kicking someone's arse. You've been running since you sobered up."

"Tell me what happened?" he pried.

"What I mean is we're both single now."

"There is something in those scary eyes, Skipper."

I rolled my eyes.

"I've read a lot of books regarding behavior. So I know when you're lying."

I huffed. "So, are you psycho-analyzing me now, Clifford M Scott?"

"No. I want to get out of here, Mum. Can you ask the doctor if I'm good to go?" Clyve hurriedly took off the probe and cuff attached to him.

"Are you sure you're okay? You looked beaten up, Clyve," I countered.

"I'm better now you both are here. They just let me stay for observation since I was unconscious when I brought here. Mum can check me up, right Mum?"

"Of course, CC. Are you sure you're okay?" Mum smiled sweetly, then observed him for long seconds.

"Yes, Mum."

"Well then, since your pupils are not dilated. Let me talk to the doctor to arrange your discharge summary."

When mum left, I stepped closer to Clyve. "What really happened, Clyve Clifford?"

"I told you she cheated on me. I saw her being cozy—"

"Stop lying for bloody sake! You know I hate people who lie on my face." I raised my voice and watched him furtively.

"Is that what happened in New York?"

"Don't ask me back when I'm asking you! For once, can you be a little more serious when I am talking to you!"

"Fine. I got sacked from my job, and it narked me off. So, I got into a ramble in the pub."

"How the hell could they fire you? I know you're good at your job. So, how did it happened?" I sighed, feeling guilty for yelling at him. I sat down on his bed and stared at him intently.

"I broke up with my ex. That was true because she was sleeping with someone. Her co-producer to be exact. That's true as well. Then one of my co-workers invited me for a drink. He got pissed, then blurted out something. So, you know what happened next."

"What the fuck? You fraternized your co-worker?" My voice echoed in the entire room, and someone could probably hear outside the room.

He hummed, "Kind of. Since she works longer than me in the production, my boss took her side. She didn't want to go further than that night and called it a mistake that's what American says pissed me off. So, when the boss called me to his office and asked if it was true, I admitted. I wasn't aware she was sleeping with him as well. I was being played out." He let out a sigh. "I know, I cocked up."

"I'm truly sorry, but couldn't you keep your willy in your pants, brother. You bonked your co-worker, really?" Shit! *Better than your best friend's sister, asshole!* I knew exactly how he felt. I saw myself when I looked right into his eyes. We both felt betrayed.

I shook off the thought of Arella. I was here for my brother, and he needed me as much as I wanted to think of her. "So, what is your plan now you don't have a job?"

"Can I come to New York with you and Mum? if that's okay with you."

"Are you sure? What would Dad say about it?" A smile slowly built up on my lips.

"Look, brother. I won't stay at your flat. I can afford to buy or rent one, and I will look for a job as soon as I settled in. I'll behave, I promise."

My brow arched in amusement. "You can behave in New York? Are you sure about that? If you can't do that with your co-worker, what made you think you can in the city never sleeps?"

"Come on, brother." He punched my arm, then flinched, but I didn't buy whatever up on his sleeves.

"I have tickets—"

My eyes widened. Blimey! "No bloody way!"

Chapter 19

Forbidden Fruit

Arella

THE SILKY-SMOOTH texture melted in my mouth was nothing like pure bliss. The perfect mix of sweet, bitter, and a tinge of citrus was heaven. Each bite made me float in the air.

I unwrapped another chocolate in heart-shaped— one of my favorite, and the first and original creation of Reigh Chocolates—The Reigh’s heart. I bit, and the hazelnut crackled under my teeth. Closing my eyes, I chewed and savored the irresistible rich bitter taste of the dark chocolate and the heavenly smell that fed my soul.

“Don’t,” I stopped Brett when he chuckled.

“I didn’t say anything, sweet corn.” He laughed softly, and I opened my eyes.

Our chocolate connoisseur, Michelle smiled sweetly at me. She’d been working for as long as I could remember, and she knew how much I loved chocolate, but I had to stop eating when I got married. Though I knew dark chocolate had fewer calories, still, it didn’t pass on our desserts’ list.

“And you’re about to say something.” I smiled and took a step closer. I wrapped my arms around him. “I know. I missed this, Brett. This is something that I regretted letting go.”

“We’re here now, Are.” His face softened. “You can always do whatever you want now you’re a free woman. There is no leash around your neck anymore.”

“Thanks for coming with me. You’re supposed to be at the meeting though.”

“You will always come first before anything else. You should know that by now,” he said genuinely, “So, anything interests you?”

“Are you kidding me? Everything around here interests me. Can’t you smell them?” I inhaled deeply and closed my eyes again. The cocoa, the sugar, the mint, the citrus, the roasted nuts, a hint of cardamom permeated the whole factory.

The citrusy, I sniffed. “Interesting.”

“I can show you around just like old times, Are,” Michelle suggested.

I looked around, there were racks, tables, and trays everywhere with finish products of different shapes and different colors of chocolates. Reigh chocolates had signature designs of red, golden, and brown wrappers, but they had different designs for Valentine’s Day.

"I think we're good, Mich. Thanks for the sweet welcome!"

"You're always welcome, dear."

We bid goodbye to Mitch and to the other staff when I felt satisfied with my short tour. I could feel a smile on my face when we got back to my brother's car.

"Why didn't you ask when you saw the picture?" Brett started. I knew exactly what picture he was referring to.

"What for? He seemed happy." I looked out the window as we pulled off the driveway.

"He had to take an emergency flight to see his brother. Clyve got into a car accident."

My breathing hitched. "Oh, my God! Is he okay?" At this moment, a certain feeling inside me lightened up, but I was worried about his brother even though I didn't know anything about him at all.

"Yeah. I guess so, in fact, they already went to a football game."

"Hmm. of course." I nodded slightly.

"You can ask me, you know."

"I know, but I have nothing in my mind to inquire," I said truthfully.

I would be fine for as long as I knew Skipper was okay. We had to move on and start our new lives separately. The things between me and Skipper were a little complicated than I thought, so I had to lie and hide the truth from him. I was also shocked when I saw the reaction on his face. He wasn't ready for something that could change his life forever.

Brett squeezed my hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'm feeling better. I've got new ideas for the scents. I hope Skipper will like at least one sample."

"His assistant told me that he'll be back next week."

I stared at him in confusion. "Wait a minute. You haven't talked to him yet?" And here I thought Brett was hiding something from me. I was such an idiot.

He shook his head. "He's busy. The picture you saw at my apartment was on Clyve's social media account. I just printed it."

"Oh," that was all I could say.

"He'll be here soon, and you two need to talk, Are." His voice turned serious.

I had to take a deep breath to ease the pain inside my chest. "We're done talking, Brett."

"No, you're not." His tone was harder than rock as if he was telling me it was useless to argue because I had no choice but to do what he asked me to.

"Brett."

"At least you two need a closure, Are. If..." he sighed. "If there is nothing left to restart over."

"I lied to him and risked his life. I understand if he won't talk to me anymore."

"That's not the Arella and Skip I knew. The Arella I knew, she doesn't give up easily. She's maybe a pain in the ass, but she's been a strong and willed woman. The Skipper I know has a lot of patience and determination. So I know he will come back and give you a chance to explain."

"What if—"

"No more what if, Arella!"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

"You mean it's okay with you that..." I trailed off. "Um."

"I don't like the idea of it, and I don't want to imagine things you two are doing together. You are my sister, and I know Linton damn well, and it's." He huffed and shook his head. "But he likes you, and I know he won't stop until he gets what he wants. And I want you to be happy, Are. But promise me one thing." He glanced at me.

"What is it?"

"You won't force yourself to do something you don't like."

"Of course. Been there once, done that, and it didn't sound good."

He nodded and sighed.

"I'm not presumptuous, am I?"

"Just a little." He raised his hand and gestured with his fingers.

"You're just trying to cheer me up, Brett."

"And it's working, right?"

I scoffed, "Yeah."

"I just missed my little sister who used to laugh with Alys like there was no tomorrow. Where did you go for months after your graduation? You were not home when I came for summer."

My chest felt raw. I felt my world was about to turn upside down again. "I traveled with Alys."

"How come we didn't talk about this?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you were always the best storyteller in our family, yet, you never mentioned about Skipper."

"Not a good idea to talk about our wild days in college to my little sister."

I wrinkled my nose. "That wild, huh?"

Brett beamed. He was handsome or most girls called him a dropped-dead gorgeous. He had prominent cheekbones, dark eyebrows, big glowing eyes, perfect nose, and his famous smirk that made girls fall at his feet. I always felt insecure about my brother.

"And when are you going to introduce someone special to me, big brother?"

"Uh-huh! So, now we are talking about me, huh?"

"No one really catches my big brother's heart yet?"

"I'm only good with the business, but not with relationships, Are. You know me."

* * *

I WAS momentarily shocked to see a tall man in front of my testing table. He seemed familiar, but I was sure I haven't met him before. He was lean like a swimmer. He wore a white crisp shirt with sleeves rolled up his elbows. A casual double-breasted waistcoat? And a pair of dark gray pants. His almost blond hair was shortly trimmed, and there was something in those eyes. Yes, those eyes—an ocean blue. But his face was full of bruises, and then he smiled. At me.

"Finding hard to believe, eh?"

I found myself walking toward him. My brows still were drawing together. "Have we—" I laughed softly. "Your accent," I pointed out.

"I heard a lot about you, Arella Rogue. Well, American people say, a drunken man's words are a sober man's thoughts. So that's probably all true, yeah? Clyve Clifford Linton, by the way." He offered a handshake.

"Hi! nice to meet you, Clyve." Wait a minute, Clyve? Clyve Linton? *Holy crap!* I scanned his face after the short and warm handshake.

"Oh, this?" He pointed at his face. "Got into a car accident."

My smile widened. "Oh? Thank, God, you're okay," I pretended as if I didn't know. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I can see now why my—" He paused. "Speaking of the devil."

My head turned to the man I'd been waiting to see for the whole week. I stood frozen for a bit, then I quickly looked away before our eyes met. As always, he looked gorgeous than ever with his now broody and intimidating look. The reality hit me harder than I truly wanted to settle whatever between me and him. My chest felt heavy all of a sudden. Tears threatened to break free off of my eyeballs, but I cursed them to retreat.

"Arella, why don't you show the scent you formulated?" Mac said with full of confidence.

I blinked twice. "It's not near ready. I'm not aware they'll be here before the end of the week."

"No biggie, Arella. We came here not to pressure you. I just wanted to see—" The soft and low voice of Clyve was quickly cut off.

"I just want to see if there's progress in a week, Ms. James." Skipper's voice suddenly made me shiver—it was cold and almost emotionless.

Oh, God! Please, kill me now!

"Just show us, Arella." Mac looked annoyed.

Skip's expression darkened. He squinted his eyes at unaware Mac. His jaw clenched, making my hand to sweat.

I felt frantic to see everyone's face surrounding me. I'd never been embarrassed around my co-workers, but Mac was running out of patience on me. Why did Skip have to come to me when they had their own samples? It was damn annoying, but I needed to prove to the fragrance world that I belonged there.

"Sure," I muttered. Before I could offer him a strip, Skip grabbed it and sunk into the tube.

Something flickered in Skip's eyes but gone in a second. He literally threw the strip, then he left without a single word.

"Asshole," I muttered.

Why does he have to be rude?

Mac and Skip's assistant followed him as if he commanded them to do so. I even got a chance to glance at his back, especially his ass.

Clyve's eyes widened in excitement as he dropped a sample into his palm, rubbed his hands together, then smelled. "Are, this is incredible!"

"Clyve, what are you doing?" My eyes widened at him.

"I guess this one is for women, yeah? I like it." He kept smelling them. His face lit up. "Just ignore Skip. He's just having a hard time processing."

"What do you mean?"

"He told me everything."

"What?" I asked in disbelief.

A bark of laughter echoed in the room. "I was right after all."

Still confused, I asked again, "About what exactly?"

"First, I don't know who Arella Rogue. I just guessed based on your reaction when you saw me. A lot of people said I looked like my brother, but I'm sure I look more handsome than him. I know you disagree. Second, I saw your ID in his desk drawer. Nobody kept a woman's ID for years for nothing, yeah? And you're a Rogue. I met your brother once. So, I put two and two together. It equals four. Haha!"

With rapid blinking, I closed my gaping mouth.

"Forbidden fruit always tastes the sweetest, darling!"

Chapter 20

Cause and Effect

Skip

“BROTHER, you don’t seem happy of me being here, do you?” My brother, Clyve frowned after we settled at the backseat of the company car.

“Why’d you say that?” I wanted to ignore him, but I couldn’t get rid of him easily. He had to stay with me in my apartment, and the thing was, we had a different lifestyle.

He was a marathon type of guy while I was an indoor type, using a treadmill. I could live with sandwiches while Clyve ate veggies all his life. He listened to classical music, and I went for the rock. He played piano and violin while I drummed. He liked the colorful environment while I chose a boring black, white, and gray. And Clyve was an old fashion and dreamed of a white picket fence one day. But I loved my annoying brother to kick him out, and I missed him being a nosy bastard than letting him stay at the hotel room of this city.

“Well, let me start with this; you barely said a word since we boarded the Airbus, then after long hours of flight, you immediately wanted to go to your work instead of spending time with your brother. Skip, can’t we at least go to a pub and have a great night?”

“A pub on this very morning? Seriously? How about you stay away from booze?” I asked in a serious tone.

Clyve suddenly averted his gaze.

Then I remembered why he came with me. I rubbed my temple, feeling guilty for being an insensitive brother to him, but I got a lot on my plate right now to deal with his annoying bullshit.

“And I had loads of work left when I traveled to check up on you, which I thought you were in bad shape. I’m glad you’re alright though,” I added. I hoped I was not going to mess up my relationship with Clyve. He’d been through hell without me, and I could not let him go on the same path again.

Meeting Arella again bothered me a lot. The truth was, I wasn’t ready to face her today, but my heart was powerful than my brain. This might be worse than the first time I saw her in seven years. After our amazing night and the best breakfast I had in forever, shit happened. The thing I invested for so long just shattered into a billion particles in a second because I didn’t give her a chance to explain.

People lied for a reason, I was sure she had her own. But why it was so hard for me to accept it? Dad broke my heart when he lied to me. He promised to watch my football game, but he didn't appear. He apologized, then did it again. I thought he just sent me and Mum to visit her family, then I waited. When he came back, he took my brother away from me. That was why I loathed people when they lied right into my face.

"I'm sorry if I'm a pain in the arse, Skip." His voice cracked.

I gripped his shoulder. "Don't be. You may be a little pain in the arse, but I'm glad we get a chance to meet more often. I missed the old times, brother. Let me make it up to you once I can catch up with work. I just have to check first the samples in the lab." *More or like I wanted to see Arella today.*

"Can I come with you?" Clyve asked a thousand times what happened back here while we were watching a football game at Wembley stadium. He was able to convince me or rather forced me to take a selfie.

"As long as you'll behave."

"I think I can do that," he grinned. "You need to tour me around the city, brother. I'd love to see the big apple."

"Seriously?" I asked, amused.

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Fine."

"And one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Please return some calls and reply to texts or just keep it in an airplane mode all the time because your phone is starting to annoy me."

I sighed deeply because Clyve was damn right. My phone never stopped buzzing since we landed. Mum gave me a look before she left with her driver. I had missed calls from Brett and Eli. And Arella called and sent me messages as well.

"I'll do it as soon as I get some sleep. I need a clear mind to do it."

"Good."

My assistant was already with Dr. Mackenzie when we arrived. I did a short introduction for Clyve with the laboratory team, but I didn't find Arella around.

I was a little confused.

Then everything stopped. She arrived at her table with some tubes with pink colored formula. She was back to work like nothing happened between us last week. *Just bloody great!* And it pissed me off, especially when she looked gorgeous than ever with her blue dress, her lab coat, and blood-red high heels. And there was nothing hotter than a sexy chemist wearing lab goggles.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her, and the way Dr. Mackenzie treated her almost lost my goddamn mind. It took everything in me not to explode in front of all these people from anger and arousal. I grabbed a strip and dipped it in her sample in annoyance—not even giving her a chance to talk.

I regretted right away for being a condescending arse. Her sample was sweet and spicy. She was right, it wasn't near ready, but the sweet and spiciness reminded me of the mind-blowing and gobsmacking sex we shared. I could still feel how we fit perfectly together. I could still taste her on my tongue and remembered her moan and her whisper in my ear. Jesus Christ!

I literally threw the strip and walked out like a fucking coward because the longer I smelled that scent, and I was afraid once our eyes met, it would blow my fucking senses. And the cause and effect traveled straight right to my dick. No man in his right mind in my position could have handled this.

I faced Dr. Mackenzie when we were outside the lab. "I want samples." My frustrations and anger made me want to punch him on his shitty face.

"That's what we're working on."

"Work harder," I snapped. "Did you forget you're running out of time?"

"We're doing our best, Mr. Linton. How about the other samples?"

"I will not remember them once I step outside of this building." Then I walked away.

Rush footsteps followed me, but I didn't bother slowing my pace. Once I got into the car, I dialed Brett. He'd been calling me since the day I left for London. I should apologize because he was just caught in the middle of this chaos. He was my best friend for fuck's sake!

"Thank, God! It came to your senses, Linton." There was humor in Brett's voice. And I thought it was a good sign.

"I'm sorry. I had a family emergency, and I had to—"

"How's Clyde? I called Eli and threatened him. So, he spilled out. Don't fire him." He sounded genuine.

"He's fine. In fact, he's with me, and I think he'd be here a while. He got into a bar fight, so I want him to stay away from trouble."

"A bar fight? I thought... Anyway, glad he's okay. I wanna talk to you, Linton. Can we meet?"

"Absolutely," I answered without a second thought.

"Let him come with you. I wanna see that bloke."

"Sure. How about on Friday night? He's dying to tour around the city, but we could meet at the Night Stalker. Sounds good to—" I paused. "Look, Brett. I know I'm not your favorite person right now, but—"

"We're good, Linton. Don't beat yourself up. We're all in the wrong foot, mate. Nobody had predicted this would happen, and Are was so sad for what happened between us. I'm sorry for what I've done, and I didn't realize I was so overprotective of her."

Fuck! I'm losing my shit. "I would have done the same thing if I happened to have a sister like Arella. I've done terrible things, but this is really the worse. I-I don't know how I even going to face you, especially your family. I'm such a dick. I wish I could turn back time and—"

"Don't, please, mate? You just have to figure out how to set aside whatever you two had for the sake of our friendship."

"Yeah. that, I was kinda an arse with her earlier."

"Wait a minute. You met her?" He sounded surprised.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I'm here at the lab's parking lot."

"Uh-huh. So, how did it go?"

I grimaced. "Worse?"

"Don't you fucking hurt her, Linton! I will kill you in a heartbeat!"

"Calm the bloody down," I pleaded. "I didn't do anything."

"You just said not a moment ago that you were arse to her. Care to explain?"

"What I meant to say is I didn't even say hi."

"Just stay away from my sister if you can't act politely in front of her. You have no idea how much I wanted to beat you to a pulp, but that won't change a thing. We all made mistakes. So just..."

That hurt to hear. "Stay away from your sister. Yeah, I heard that, and I understood quite clearly, Rogue. Honestly, you're like a broken record." The unvarnished truth just broke my heart all over again. I held my head, looking outside the window to nothingness. *How am I going to do that?*

Then there was a moment of silence.

“So, Friday?”

“Sure.” I clicked the end call button.

“Well, that wasn’t so hard.”

I startled on my seat to see Clyve standing outside the car. I squinted my eyes at him. “You’ve been listening to my conversation, asshole?”

“Hard not to.” He shrugged, then rounded to the other side of the car, opening the door with a huge grin on his face. “Now, I get it why you are so damn obsessed about a certain American blonde because she’s a bombshell!”

My nose flared. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Still grinning, he buckled his seatbelt and ignored me. He knew I hated being ignored when I bloody wanted an answer.

“Clyve!”

“To his flat, Owen.”

“You don’t fucking order my driver.”

“The *company* driver,” he corrected. “And the last time I checked, I owned a twenty percent share of Linton’s.” He beamed.

Now, I regretted taking him with me.

“She’s funny, and guess what?”

“Not interested, and stay the fuck away from her.”

“Wow! Possessive much, bruh?” He faked an American accent horribly.

“Do you want Brett to break your face? I would gladly to tell him so.”

“I’ll take it if he will only do the way he did to your face last week.”

I growled, “I mean it, CC!”

His face reddened.

“Is this how I can stop you, huh, CC?” I mimicked a girl’s voice.

“It sounds girly when you’re the one saying it.”

“Stay away from Arella. And I mean it, Clyve.”

She's mine!"

"Good. It settled then because she was about to cry when you didn't give her a second look, brother."

Chapter 21

Electricity

Arella

“OOOH... I LOVE that dress but you won’t need it anymore. No, you won’t need it anymore. Let’s just kiss ‘till we’re naked, baby,” with my brush as her microphone, Kat sang her heart out like she was at the karaoke session.

I ignored whatever she tried to point out, instead, I looked at my reflection in the mirror one more time, then I grabbed my purse, tossed my phone and keys, and walked past by her.

“Really, Are?” she said with a laugh. “To be honest, I would be a boner right now if I were a guy. That blue dress is perfect for you, darling.” She strolled her gaze on me, making me a little bit self-conscious.

“Yeah, and barely covered my ass. And thank, God, you have a vagina and not a penis because I don’t want you swaying your junk and balls around the apartment.” I turned to look at her, and she was literally grinning.

She looked pretty awesome with a gold mini-dress and black pumps. And of course, her hair—always shiny and glossy without putting too much effort. *I envy her.*

”Are you coming or not?”

“Coming! I’ll drive, Sinderella.” Kat winked. My account already deactivated, but she had been calling me by my username to annoy me.

She revved the engine and drove as soon as we settled in her car. My nerves started to rack as we got closer to the high-end club.

“Are you sure we are meeting his brother? He’s probably there.” Kat side-glanced at me. What was I not expecting was Skip to ignore me even at work. I gave up on my fifth calls and two text messages this week when I received nothing in return. It hurt like hell that he didn’t return any. I’d never done like this even to my ex-husband. And it stung more when Brett mentioned that they already talked.

“Yeah. And it’s hard to say no to Clyve. He’s sweet, and I have this feeling that we’re gonna be good friends.”

“Or you’re doing this to get under Skip’s skin?” Her brow arched.

"I wouldn't do such a thing." I glared at her.

"I know. Now, chill out. I'm just kidding." She rolled her eyes.

"I made mistakes, but I can't jeopardize what Brett and the Linton boys have. I won't do it again, and besides, you have no idea how Skip ignored me at the lab. We are truly over."

I told Kat everything what happened between me and Skip. But she didn't judge me and being Kat, of course, she couldn't avoid to not give sarcastic and naughty comments. She said she saw how Skip looked at me when he went to our apartment. She knew there was something going on between me and him, but she kept it to herself.

"He was hurt, Are. Give the man a break."

"Really? And how about me? It's not like I planned all these things to happen between us. He ignored me, fine. And I'll make sure he won't come to me and ask for an apology."

The Night Stalker was better than the last time I was here with my ex. He loved to party and which was not really my thing. Loud noises, strobe lights, and the smell of booze and sweats made me dizzy, but there was no backing out for tonight—I had to get a life.

We found an empty table at the corner of the bar. A waitress dressed skimpily approached us. Kat ordered her martini, and I asked for a cosmo. A few minutes later, our colorful drinks arrived, and there was still no sign of Clyve.

"Where is Clyve?" Kat asked after sipping her drink.

Before I could fish out my phone, warm breath against my neck made me freeze. "You look gorgeous."

I turned my head and smiled. "Clyve! I thought you won't show up."

"Not gonna happen, sweetie." His eyes danced with humor. Those eyes reminded me of *him*. Clyve cleaned up pretty well with a dark shirt and pants. He looked fresh than the last time I saw him at the lab. And he smelled sandalwood and mint. He sat in an empty chair beside me after he introduced himself to Kat. Kat giggled when Clyve kissed her hand just like a British did.

"So, you're his brother, huh?" Kat started when Clyve got his sparkling water. I didn't pry on why he didn't order a drink, and Kat got my cue.

"And we're not gonna talk about my brother since I am the one here, besides, I am more good looking and younger than him, yeah?"

"Of course, I toss to that." I raised my drink to them. "How about we dance?" I stood up, emptying my drinks. Honestly, I'm not much of a dancer, unless we considered dancing at the party I attended with my ex which mostly I didn't enjoy because he got all the control on me.

"Oh, no. I can't," Kat countered, giving me a go-looked. "I have two left feet." She could dance, but I got what she meant.

"It's okay, pet. Just move and sway. I don't know how to dance as well," Clyve assured her.

Kat rolled her eyes humorously. "Just go. Have fun, and I'll be fine here."

We were pressed against sweaty people to move past them. I ignored the strobing lights and the thumping of the beat from the speakers.

We stopped near the platform where a woman in skimpy dress dancing in the pool. I started to dance when Clyve placed his hands on my hips. I raised my hands in the air, and Clyve followed my moves. I could feel my heartbeat started to thump erratically. I could smell the perfume Clyve was wearing.

I could feel the breathing on my forehead, but his touch didn't feel the same the way his brother did to me. I felt comfortable around him in an instant—it was like my heart told me that I could trust him. It didn't feel like I just met him three days ago.

"You can dance," he whispered against my ear.

"Barely!" I yelled, making him laugh.

"You just did, lady!"

We danced to another music until I was slicked with sweat. I never had this kind of fun for a long time, and it was a good experience.

"I'm gonna collapse right if we will not get out of this dance floor. I'm soaking with sweat." I laughed with him.

"You're soaking wet?" If it wasn't Clyve, I thought he was hitting on me.

I slapped his arm playfully. "I said I'm sweating!"

"I was just messing with you, milady!" His eyes twinkled with amusement. "Let's go back to Kat before she kicks our arses."

Kat was with someone when we got back to our table. A guy with an immaculate suit and sparkling cufflinks laughed to what she said. He looked like he just came out from a board meeting.

"Hi!" Kat was still smiling when she saw us approaching. "You seemed to have fun with Clyve."

"She's a good dancer, don't you know that?" Clyve said with a little mischief in his eyes.

"I know. Anyway, this is Dash. Dash is my friend Clyve and my best friend, Are."

A man with a billion-dollar look smiled, showing his perfect white teeth that almost blinded me. He looked around my brother's age. His chiseled face and firm jaw were tanned as if he spent too much on the beach. "Nice to meet you, Are, Clyve. I hope you don't mind me sitting here at your table." He shook our hands.

"Nice to meet you too, Dash. And please, we don't mind at all."

Dash then looked at me then back at Clyve as if searching something between us.

"We're not together, mate. This is my brother's girlfriend," he simply said, and I almost choked with my own saliva.

"I noticed. You two are not lovers."

"Hmm, you're right. His brother was out of town for a business trip," Kat said.

"What kind of business?" Dash picked his interest.

"Cosmetics and fragrances," she answered, and I remained speechless.

I wondered how far Clyve knew about my relationship with his brother. *Do they kiss and tell?*

"I'll order us another drink, Are. The same for you?" Clyve asked.

"On the house, man," Dash said. If I didn't know Kat I would have thought that they planned to meet here tonight, but she always opened up to me regarding her dating venture.

"Excuse me. I'll be back." I stood up.

"I'll come with you," Kat suggested.

"No, thanks. Kat, I can manage."

"I'll help the lady. We'll be right back." He smiled at them, placing his hand at my back. We walked away from them, then Clyve said, "I think your friend finds a friend."

"A friend?" I laughed.

I damn near gagged at the long line of females in the ladies room.

"Yeah. You know."

"How about you, aren't you interested in looking for a friend tonight?"

"I have you, my dear friend."

Still laughing, I shook my head. “Are you gonna use the loo or what?”

“Nah. I just excused myself from them. I don’t wanna watch them snogging in front of me, you know.” He shrugged, a smile played his lips.

“Nah?” My brow arched in amusement.

“You two seemed to have fun.” The voice at the back of Clyve made me freeze. My heart thudded like thunder as he stared at me with all its intensity. His gorgeous eyes were rendering me speechless over again.

“I think I should find a loo now, right, brother? Make sure you’ll take care of my *friend* for a while, and don’t—”

“Leave!” His thundering voice made everyone around gasp.

“Yes, sir!” Clyve saluted his brother with a goofy smile on his face. He then walked away.

“What do you want?” I asked sternly, and he looked stunned.

His sinful lips slightly parted, then he regained back his composure in an instant.

“Are you dating my brother now, Arella?” His accusing tone made my blood boil.

“Well, I’m single, and he is. So what’s wrong with that?” I scowled. Despite my urge to get closer to him because feeling him could calm my wildly beating heart, it stopped me from doing so. He was rude.

Instead, he grabbed my arm and made sure I would not be able to lose and dragged me out of the line.

“You’re hurting me,” I hissed, but he gripped me tighter. His hand on me reminded me of how Dominic handled me when I missed doing what he asked.

Then he finally let go of me in the dim-lit narrow hallway.

“W-what is your problem?” I rubbed my skin where his fingers almost imprinted on. “You ignored me for almost two weeks. You didn’t return my call. You didn’t reply to my text messages. You didn’t even say a word to my sample in the lab, and now you are dragging me to the hallway, for what?” I breathed hard when I was done talking. I wanted to say more, but I could be just wasting my time.

He didn’t say a word. His piercing dangerous eyes remained cold and flinty like a lunatic, almost freezing me, but I would never flinch for him.

“So, this is where you should say you made a terrible mistake for choosing me over my brother and falling to my lies, right? Just say it, Skipper! This is where you’re best at, *skipping*.” I paused and blinked at him. My adrenaline still flooded in my bloodstream with anger and raw emotions.

He took a step closer to me and stopped when our body was merely an inch apart.

Against the wall, I stiffened.

He cupped my face. His touch sent an electric reaction through my veins.

I took a shuddering breath. No matter how much I tried to hold myself not to fall for his touch again, my heart had mind on its own. It was a sick joke on how I quickly dismantled my self-control and washed out my anger in just a look into his eyes.

His eyes softened as he stared at me. I could feel his pain, longing, and sadness. He was showing me his vulnerability. *Oh, God*. Then he stepped back, released his hands, and walked away.

Chapter 22

The Guilt

Skip

Just bloody marvelous!

DRAWING slow and steady breaths, I faked a smile. My knuckles whitened around the glass of scotch while I stared down the dance floor.

Brett kept glancing at me once in a while, then focused back on waitress' arse who served our drinks. She kept coming back asking if we wanted something, and I tried hard not to roll my eyes.

"You should loosen your hand on the glass, Linton. It breaks in a moment if you keep on gripping as if your life depends on it," Brett lightened up the mood. He knew exactly why I was pissed.

I stood up, leaning against the glass wall. "Is this why you wanna meet me here? To torture me?" My knuckles itched to break my brother's face for inviting Arella over, but I held on to the thought that Clyve was with her because I couldn't imagine another man touching her. Just the dance they shared made my blood boil, what more if she was with the other man?

"This is barely torture, mate. I can't just ignore what you did to my sister, but there is something between us that means a lot to me. And I believe that you didn't know her back then, but still, you're the reason why she acted differently."

"Walking down memory lane is another thing you have on your sleeves, yeah?" I let the scotch burn down my throat. It might help to make me numb but that didn't change the fact that Arella was dancing with my brother, and not with me.

He huffed. "Here's a thing, Linton. Do you think I'm doing this to torture you? First, I have no idea your brother asked my sister. All he said was he wanted us to have a good conversation that was why he left us alone. Second, your brother has no bad intention towards my sister, and he doesn't look at her the way you do. He's nothing but friendly and makes my sister laugh. And lastly, he doesn't think my sister naked beneath him, asshole!"

I allowed him to talk whilst I gritted my teeth in anger. My eyes narrowed to Clyve and Arella while his hands were still on her hips.

"Honestly, I trust your brother to stay a night with my sister than with you. I thought I was just overprotective and paranoid when I noticed how you reacted the first time you saw my sister at my parent's home. So, I let it go."

Swallowing, I muttered under my breath, "I'm truly sorry." Thankfully, the VIP lounge was soundproofed. We could have a good chit chat or pep talk or whatever this shit was all about.

"Just don't hurt her again. This time, I mean it." His voice was damn serious. By mean again, I should stay away from Arella or I was going to lose both of them.

"I won't."

My brother whispered something to her, making her laugh. It hurt like hell, but I trusted him that he would never cross the line.

"Should I call the firefighter?"

"For what?" My head snapped at him, confused.

"My sister will light up into torch if you keep staring at her like that. It hurts, isn't it?"

"Just tell me why are you doing this?" I growled, staring at him intently.

He stared back right into my eyes. I knew he saw my vulnerability, but who the fuck cares? If he thought about what happened to me and Arella had no effect on me, he was wrong.

I was furious about losing our child, but I couldn't hate Arella.

God knows how much I care about her.

She was just barely reaching her adulthood when she got pregnant. I might tell her to terminate the pregnancy if we were together at that time. I never ignored calls from the people I cared about, and she stirred the living shit out of me more than anyone in my life.

"I can't fucking believe this!" His face reddened, sighing in frustration. "Then tell me why are you ignoring her calls?"

"Because I'm fucking guilty!" I yelled and looked away, sucking in a deep breath to calm down because I wanted to punch and throw everything around. God knew how much I wanted to talk to her, but the guilt of losing our child, the guilt of leaving her, and the guilt of how much she suffered alone because of me I couldn't think straight. I was losing my goddamn mind.

Just the fucking guilt!

He nodded slowly. "She likes you a lot, Skipper, but you hurt her." He paused. Suddenly, the tension inside the room thickened. And I was bloody suffocated.

"How can I fucking trust you when you were able to hide this from me for seven years? How am I going to trust you again that you're not going to hurt her? As much as I want to see her happy with

you what if your job ends? You're going to leave her again, aren't you?" Brett never called me by my first name. It only meant he was beyond pissed and damn serious.

"I'll stay away from her. I don't wanna hurt her as much as it hurts me doing it." My eyes landed on them, leaving the dance floor. My brother was holding her hand, and I had to ball my hand into a fist with anger for what was going on with us—with me and Arella, and with Brett. I just said that I was staying away from her. And it was killing me.

"And what do you exactly mean by staying away?"

I faced him again. "I don't wanna cause her more pain, Brett. I will trust my perfumer to check the progress of the perfumes they're creating while I'm still here. She won't see me unless it's necessary."

The silence stretched between us. I could feel he wasn't impressed with my decisions. I knew Brett, his silence meant he had something in his mind.

"She just wants to explain. Why won't you talk to her for closure?"

"I can't."

"And why is that? You two will just talk."

Because I don't want closure, can't you see it?

"It's hard to talk to her when she looks at me in the eye. She can see through my soul, and I can do the same, then what? We end up hurting ourselves more when I go back to London."

"Is this really your reason, Skipper? Because I don't see you as a quitter," he pointed out.

My emotions went raw. "I can't believe you're doing this to me."

"Well, I can't let you give up on her! You must have a bigger reason! Do fucking tell me now, why did you ask me to play pool with you?" He grabbed my shirt and pushed me against the glass wall with a thud—it forcibly knocked the air out of my lungs. His eyes were bulging with anger. His nose flared, and that I had no choice but to tell him the truth. I felt like I drain all my strength just thinking of telling him.

"You're probably right. She was the girl I was talking about when I broke up with my girlfriend. I was not broken because of my ex. I was broken when I found out your sister was getting married. I'd never fell in love with Audrey. I cared about her, but I was not in love. When you sent me an invitation that was when I realized I was in love with Arella all those years. But I can't leave London, I just started my career and got my father's trust, and after what happened to Clyve, he still needed me, then..." I rubbed my face in frustration and heartache, and Brett released me. My chest tightened, my heart broke all over again to what I was about to tell him.

"Then, I don't want to break your trust. You are my best friend, Brett. I slept with your sister who is underage. I committed statutory that's why..."

The shock of my words reverberated through Brett. The blood drained from his face.

"You ran away. Jesus Christ! You were twenty-one and my sister... Jesus fucking Christ!" Brett turned around, stood still and looked away.

"I asked you to play pool with me because I wanted to know if you knew what happened between me and her, but I got it that you had no clue. She was one of the reasons why I came back. Not only because of my family business and Mum."

"I'm sorry, Linton. It almost ruined your future. You did the right thing." He blinked, running his fingers through his hair. Still processing what I said, he sipped his drink.

"And that right thing had caused your sister to suffer."

"I get it now. Stop blaming yourself. No one had predicted that to happen." Brett squeezed my shoulder in sympathy. "You deserve to be happy, mate. And if staying away from my sister will make you at peace, you have my back, but Are will not gonna like it." A pain frowned crossed his features.

"I'm not doing this for myself. I'm doing this for her." I gave him a quivery smile. "I need some air." I walked out, leaving Brett in the lounge. It was hard to admit to him, but he had the right to know. My intention for his sister was genuine, but I never thought of consequences and revelations along the way. It ruined everything I planned.

My chest somehow expanded after spilling my guts to Brett. It was the right thing to do. I slowed down when the love of my life was laughing with my fucking brother. I wasn't supposed to approach her, but again my plan always changed when I was in front of this woman.

Her eyes widened in shock. Remind me to thank Clyve later because with what she was wearing, those drunk and not drunk arseholes in this club would definitely give a second look. My inner caveman couldn't stand the thought of men had hot on her. She was stunning behind that glass, but she was beyond right in front of my eyes, and fuck me if her eyes couldn't draw me closer. They were like magnets.

Before I could realize, my hand was already gripping her arm and dragging her with me to the hallway where fewer people could see us. I regretted right away to see her rubbing her arm where I almost imprinted my fingers on. Irrational, yes, but I wasn't in the right mind the moment our eyes met.

This is where you're best at, skipping.

Her words ripped my heart apart, but I didn't give a shit if it helped her feel better. I deserved more than that anyway.

I found myself cupping her face and about to apologize for ignoring her. The anticipation in those eyes was impatient, and just the way she looked at me, she would never resist if I slammed my mouth on hers and kissed the hell out of her. *Jesus, Reigh!* A little whirl of pride swelled my heart.

She's still mine.

But my guilt pummeled me. What was I thinking?

In one fluid moment, I turned around, walking away from her. Again. Arella sighed in frustration, and it broke my heart to leave her that way. What was stopping me? Because I loved her more than to think first my own selfishness.

Chapter 23

Jealousy

Arella

SATURDAY CAME. After an hour of jogging around the neighborhood, I literally dragged myself to work at the lab even though I should be spending on my couch watching the first episode of *You*.

I should really adopt a dog or buy a goldfish and name my pet 'Skipper.'

I needed to make a new sample so that this thing will be over, and I wouldn't have to deal with Skip again. Okay, that was crap. After what happened back at the club, I needed to keep myself busy. The anger in those eyes was so piercing. *He still hates me.*

Grabbing my phone, I started to play my playlist, then I wore the lab coat and my goggles. I placed a handful of apple blossoms into the flask with a good amount of water, then lit up the Bunsen. I tapped my fingers on the table to the beat of Halsey's song while waiting for my blossoms to heat. My humming was cut off by the soft tap on my shoulder.

I startled, jerking to stand up, causing the chair to fall on the tiled floor. What shocked me the most was when I turned around. Skip was standing in front of me with all his ever glory handsome face with a day or two worth of scruff. His eyes showed longingness, but there was still a glint of anger in there.

I swallowed while rubbing my chest, then his gaze dropped to the white crop top I was wearing. With his height, he could see my cleavage from the square-neck cut of my shirt.

"What are you doing here, Skipper?" It surprised me that my voice was strong and full of confidence.

He met my gaze, releasing a breath through his nose. "You need to come up with new scents. There's a slight change with the date of the launching."

Sighing deeply, I sat back to my chair. "Help yourself." I picked out some strips and offered them to him.

He took it hesitantly, then grabbed a chair and sat beside me.

I arched my brow and shot him an irritated look. "Dip it to the test tube and try it." I rolled my eyes when he stared back annoyed.

"You should work on that attitude of yours, Arella. You—"

"I get it. We work for you blah blah blah, and you're mad at me." I offered him a cotton sock.

"What's this?" he asked in disbelief.

"It's a sock, duh!"

"I know it's a sock but I have a pair, *duh!*" Skipper mimicking my voice made me giggle.

"We smell it when it's hard for us to determine the smell. To cleanse our olfactory palate. Some use coffee beans or lemon slice. Don't worry it's clean. It will just reset your nose." I looked at him and smiled.

His hair was tied down today, and he looked sexier than ever. But sadly, we were over, and I couldn't be hopeful when he easily gave up on us.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like how?"

"Just do what you are doing." He pointed to the second tube. "I like this one, but you can do better than this."

"I don't know, Skip. I went to the factory to get inspiration, and I have this idea in my head, but I can't just put it to work." I frustratedly propped up my glasses on top of my head.

His eyes warmed, giving me a sad smile. "I know you work as a team, but I was the one who suggested this lab to the company. I wasn't aware you work here though I heard about an intern who impressed a baseball player. Don't give up on me now, Arella."

"But you gave up on us," I mumbled and stood up.

"Wait!" He grabbed my arm simultaneously. His dry hand grazed my skin. In just a single touch, it ignited my sleeping senses. He leaned closer to me. My breathing held, and I thought I might pass out. My heart palpitated. I was afraid to move to lean closer, and he might change his mind. Everything seemed to slow down when our face was an inch apart. My fingers itched to rake through his thick hair. My lids slowly fluttered closed, waiting, but I couldn't feel his lips on mine. Only his scent that reached my nostrils—like pine in the winter with a little bit of spice. He then sniffed me.

He sniffs me!

With rapid blinking to put myself back together, I asked, "What are you doing?" His hands were still on me, and I could still feel his fingers digging into my skin.

He dove his nose to the skin of my neck. A raspy gasp slipped from my lips. My head flexed to give him more access before my brain could process what I was doing. I was already biting lip. My sensitive skin fired up, and it went straight right between my thighs. I could even feel the rough slide of his nose on my neck and the hot breathing from his mouth. Then he was gone in a second. Just like that.

“What’s the perfume you’re wearing?” His deep voice brought my senses back to me.

My face instantly flushed with embarrassment. I rubbed my sweaty palm against my shorts. I wanted to give him the answer, but my mouth was so dry to speak up.

“Arella,” he called back and didn’t sound impressed by my lack of reaction.

I cleared my throat. “Um, it’s nothing.” I sat back down after blowing a few breaths. I rubbed my hands together to produce some heat and ease my trembling fingers. I dropped a cedarwood as my base note. “A little trivia. We used 80% water and 20% of 190% proof alcohol. The base notes are the theme of the fragrance. It lasted four to five hours on your skin.”

“Arella.”

“So, why don’t you sit and try mixing for yourself. It would be fun.” I picked up the rod and stirred the apple blossoms I did earlier. “The first thing you smell on the perfume is called the top notes and it dies off. Then the middle notes or the heart of the fragrance appears. It can be oriental, woody, fresh, floral—”

“Reigh!” Him calling me Reigh again made my heart skip a bit.

“What?” I glared at him. “We may have a different wavelength, but if you stay here and watch me as I try to figure out what the hell scent you want, at least bear with my babbling because you lose my concentration. Shouldn’t you be with your friends golfing or skydiving, or do something profitable? Adrenaline junky like you shouldn’t be spending your day off with a boring work like this,” I sighed deeply with frustration.

“So, you want to spend with my brother instead?” His irritation thickened the air around us.

“What’s that suppose to mean?” I squinted my eyes at him, hoping my anger would reflect in them.

“You seemed to like my brother.” His haunted eyes shot back at me.

My hand formed into a fist and itched to punch him in the face. “You should probably go, Skipper. You are just a distraction.” Screw him and his sexy mouth, his talented fingers and tongue, and his gorgeous unique eyes.

I stood up and walked to the door to open it for him. I could sense him following me so closely. In less than a heartbeat, Skip was grabbing my arm, swung me around, and had me pinned against the wall. He stayed emotionless while staring at me that could turn me into a steak.

“What do you think are you doing?” My voice shook. He pressed his hips against mine, letting me feel his unforgiving manhood shamelessly. My lips parted voluntarily.

“Do you like my brother, Arella? Did he make you wet while dancing with him? Were you happy tormenting me while I watched your body pressed with someone else’s?” His fingers trailed a line down my knees to my inner thigh while he eyed me with lust. His fingertips were ablaze on my naked flesh. My breathing hitched with anticipation.

My mind couldn’t form words while he sounded so damn sexy. His jaw clenched, and I could sense him struggling internally. I’d never seen him so antagonistic like this. His eyes burned with jealousy.

“I-I like your brother, but I see him nothing more than just a friend,” I rushed out my words as I was afraid it would anger him more.

“Fuck it!” His lips crashed against mine, making me gasped in utter shock. My hands found his head, pulling him closer than we already were. The kiss was not gentle by any means. He kissed me with hunger, desperation, and fiery. Our lips and tongues moved at a frenzied pace. His fingers fumbled the button of my short, then a finger dipped into my wet sex. A low moan locked in our mouth. *Oh God, I want more.*

I nipped his bottom lip while I bucked my hips to meet the movement of his finger inside me. I was soaking wet, and he added another finger, making me cried loudly into our mouth. The sensation was building up. He rewarded me with a seductive moan when my inner walls clamped his fingers. He coiled and rotated inside, making my knees wobbled. I almost lost my balance. I pressed farther to his hand, craving for more.

I was flying higher and higher. Despite my building orgasm, I knew it was wrong. My conscience told me to stop, but my body said it was incredibly good.

His fingers were gone. My lips went cold. My soul felt empty.

I slowly opened my eyes, but I could still feel the heavy breathing from us. The anger on his face made me want to claw his eyes out, knee him on his hard manhood. He parted his lips and dove his wet fingers into his mouth and sucked them. My eyes bulged with shock.

Then he stepped back and grabbed the door handle.

“Skip!”

He stopped. Before I could say a word, he said, “I want that scent on you for the women’s fragrance.”

“No!”

“Then the deal is over.”

“Wait!”

He turned around, wearing a furious look on his face. “What?”

Taking a deep breath, I spoke, “I wish I could turn back the time to how we met. And I will never go with you.”

Chapter 24

Ice Cream

Skip

IT WAS impossible to concentrate the whole day. Half the time my mind went to her taste on my tongue. She was not even aware of being the sweetest temptress ever. Despite that, there was an empty space inside my chest. She wished she never came with me, and that was the most painful thing I ever heard from her.

The revelation hurt so much, but nothing worse than hearing her wishing we never met. I dreamt of going back to that time and never left this country, yet, she thought the contrary. It just crashed my heart over and over again.

Admittedly, I was a bit harsh for leaving her not finishing what we'd started. Once I saw her come, I couldn't let her go until I buried my cock deep inside her and felt her walls clamping around me as she convulsed. Those feelings were still fresh— her face, and when she came was the most beautiful thing men could ever see on their women's face—it was exquisite.

I'd been grumpy all day after leaving her alone in the lab, but I accomplished one thing. Scratched that. Two things—one, was to see her and kiss her senseless— I wanted her to feel my frustration and my yearning through that kiss. Two, the scent that I ever wanted for the new fragrance.

The constant ringing of my phone caught my attention. I inwardly groaned when the name of my brother popped out on the screen. *Speaking of the devil*. What he wanted this time? He'd been busy visiting some art gallery across the city. He was already scouting an apartment on Brett's building and made some progress in forgetting what he left back in London.

I was furious when I found out Arella invited him to a family dinner. I wasn't a jealous type, but I saw how Arella's eyes lit up just mentioning my brother's name. It pissed me off.

"What?"

"Fuck you, brother! Fuck you! I will shave your hair off when I get a chance, and that's a promise!" His voice was beyond furious, and I had no clue why. It pierced my ear and went through to my left.

"Huh! How about my pubic hair?" I replied, disinterested.

"I am not joking, you bloody shit!"

"Enough! Try to respect me for fuck's sake. I am your big brother!" My eyes narrowed, completely irritated.

"Do you deserve my respect, dear brother? You've done enough damage and yet, it wasn't enough for you. You did it all over again!"

"Wait a minute. What exactly are you talking about?"

He huffed. "That's exactly what I'm talking about, you selfish bastard. You have no fucking clue! You never think about something else other than your willy!"

"That's enough!" I jerked to stand up. My voice echoed and vibrated in the entire office. "You talk to me like that again, I swear to God—"

"What will you do, huh? Exile me? You hurt Arella—"

I closed my eyes, feeling the twinge of jealousy inside my chest. "I see, this is all about her, huh? Did you shag her already?" Those words stabbed right through my heart, but right now, I didn't give a fuck.

"I will never betray you, asshole. I am not like you who—"

"Yes, Mr. Righteous, I get it. I'm an awful bastard. God will burn my soul in hell, happy now?" My chest was heaving violently. My body vibrated with so much anger that I thought I would combust in seconds. "What exactly do you want, Clyve? Just fucking say it. I have a lot of work to do right now to play guessing game with you."

"I didn't touch her the way you did in the lab."

That definitely got my attention. I felt like all my blood in my body suddenly rushed to my face.

"What the fuck? How did—"

"Huh. Did it come to your senses now?"

"Stop being sarcastic. Did she tell you?"

"Well, let me spell it. You bonked her—"

"I didn't!" *I finger-fucked her. Yes.*

Shit!

"Okay, let me rephrase—"

"Clyve!"

"She doesn't know I'm talking to you right now. I told her I'm going to use the loo. Well, apparently, your way of missing each other did cause her trouble. What came into your goddamn mind doing that in the lab? Are you that desperate? You know where to find—"

"Just cut the chase!" My knuckles already whitened against my desk.

"She's fired."

God, no!

Regret seeped through my senses. I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head for what I'd done. Clyde was still talking, but I lost the thread of conversation we had.

The word 'fired' echoed through my ear repeatedly, mocking me and taunting me for what I'd recklessly done.

"Fuck!"

"Yeah, fuck you! The CCTV didn't even cross your mind? Are you just gonna cuss like shit or man up? Come here, and apologize properly?"

I blew an exasperating sigh. "How am I going to face her?"

"Are you not my big brother? You are the strongest person I've ever known. You are my true hero, Skip. Don't be a knob. Make it right before Brett will come and bust your nose." This time, he sounded calm. I could hear the sympathy in his voice, and that made me hopeful.

"Are you with her?" I asked shamelessly.

"She's in her room."

"Thank you for being there for her when she needed someone. I owe you much, Clyde."

"Cut the bullshit and come here."

A small smile slipped my lips when he sounded like American. "Be there soon."

Shit! What have I done? *Just wait for my wrath, Dr. Mackenzie.*

* * *

I DIDN'T waste any time and called my lawyer on my way to her apartment. The rental car my brother used was parked just beside Arella's Chevy Impala.

The guilt and the nervousness worsened on my belly. I breathed many times before I grabbed the plastic bag with Arella's favorite ice cream flavor.

I thanked my driver. "Klash, I can handle from here. Go back to the office. I'll call when I need you."

“Good luck, Mr. Linton!” He knew I had trouble with someone. He then advised me to stop by at the grocery store to grab comfort food. I couldn’t think of anything other than ice cream.

The walk towards her apartment door took me a while. It felt like my insides were twisting. I could take her anger, but it broke my heart to see her crying again because of me. Why did it have to be so complicated? I made things worse between us. But the terrifying thing was when I had to go back to London, and she would say no to me. I didn’t want to let history repeat itself. And I wished I had a choice.

I sent a message to Clyve to open the door for me while I was on the lift. The door swung open, revealing my brother who looked exhausted.

He whispered, “She’s in her room.”

“Thanks.”

He grabbed my arm. “Don’t expect me to leave you alone with her, brother. After what you’ve done—”

My brows furrowed. “Then stay.”

“CC, I think I want ice cream!” Arella’s voice made me freeze, but Clyve grinned when he saw the plastic bag on my hand.

“Right away, Are!”

“You let her call you CC?”

“So?”

“Um, CC?” Arella called again.

“Yep?”

“I think I don’t have ice cream in the fridge. If it’s not too much to ask.” Based on her voice she sounded like she’d been crying.

“Oh, no. The least I can do after what—” Clyve answered, then gave me a look to go to her room.

Her door was already opened. I braced myself to face Arella. She was sitting at the center of her bed with her pajamas and a box of tissue. She pulled some and blew her nose. Then she paused. “Oh, I want a—”

“A strawberry cheesecake with strawberry syrup.”

Her red eyes bulged when she recognized my voice. Her nose was red and her lips redder than the usual. "What are you doing here? You've already done enough trouble for me that caused me to lose the job I was passionate about."

"I know, and—"

"And what? You're gonna tell me 'I'm sorry, and the least you can do is offer me ice cream'." Her eyes narrowed at me, but there was this sexiness emanated when she was angry. "Don't look at me like that!"

I held my hand up. "I have a proposal you might—"

"No." She shook her head. "Hell no!"

"Just hear me out, Reigh." Calling her Reigh was a beg on my part, and judging by the look on her face, it still had an effect on her.

She calmed down a bit. "I don't need your pity, Skipper."

"Here are the bowls and spoons!" My brother, Clyve announced enthusiastically.

"We don't need bowls," we said in unison, making Clyve chuckled.

"Aren't you two perfect for each other?" he said, then laughed.

I turned and groaned, shooting him a glare.

"A simple thank you will do, brother," Clyve scoffed.

"CC, did you call your brother?"

"Guilty!" He held his hands up to surrender with a sheepish grin on his face.

"Can you give us a minute?"

"Sure—" Clyve cut off when Arella disagreed.

"He stays. Whatever you're going to say, CC will also listen."

"What did you feed her, brother?" I asked, annoyed.

"My balls. I mean my meatballs. Spaghetti and meatballs?"

"Just talk, Skipper."

I ignored her voice filled with anger. I needed to calm myself down as well. I took the ice cream container from the plastic bag and pulled the lid.

Clyve offered her a spoon and one for me. "Dig up."

My chest constricted as I made her angrier at me. I knew how much she loved that job. I just broke the promise in not getting involved, and it was because I trusted her capability.

I watched Clyve scoop the ice cream into his bowl. When it was full, he sat on the chair and started eating. "I'm a vegan, but I made an exception for your sake, Are. And I'm not much of an ice cream bloke, but this is really good."

"Syrup?" Arella offered him, and I waited if she would ever ask me. To my dismay, that never happened.

Fuck! Since when did I ever jealous of someone's attention?

"No, thanks. This is sweet enough. So, your family owns a chocolate factory?"

"Yes. You probably saw our chocolates all over the sweet shops in the city."

I swallowed the bitterness as I watched her respond to Clyve. Her face lit up though when she squeezed a good amount of syrup directly to the tub.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I spoke, "Can you talk about it later?" I knew I was an ass for snapping out my brother, but I had an important matter to discuss with Arella. And it couldn't wait.

"Fine," he snarled, but he was actually holding his smile.

"Gosh! I missed this," Arella mumbled with a soft moan, licking the spoon, then darted out her tongue to lick her lips.

At the corner of my eye, my brother tried hard not to burst into laughter. His face reddened, toying his spoon on his ice cream. Clyve was aware of my uncomfortable state.

I silently scooped the ice cream and shoved it into my mouth. The sweet and sour taste of the frozen strawberry didn't help out my mood. Suddenly, I could feel my brain pulled out some junks of dirty thoughts. My mind instantly rolled back to how we ate each other on the pool table, then we ended up sticky with ice cream all over our body. *Let me lick you clean, handsome.* I blinked as my skin flushed in response. My engorged cock strained against my trousers.

Bloody hell!

"Are you just gonna stare at the ice cream, Skip?"

Chapter 25

Interrupted

Arella

NEEDING a few seconds to myself, I took a deep breath. The last thing I wanted was to see Skipper on my doorsteps with a pitying look on his face. He was the reason why I got fired in the first place. If he didn't show up to the lab, I still had a job right now. Truthfully though, it wasn't completely his fault because I could've just pushed him away, but I didn't. I missed him.

My heart was pounding against my chest from the way he looked at me, but the pity I expected wasn't there. Whatever he had on his sleeves it didn't matter to me anymore. There was a part of me that still trusted him. But he kept insisting something about the proposition.

When Clyve left the room, it felt suddenly small to us. Not to mention how he made me felt last Saturday, then left me aching— tormenting me. My urge to finger myself was damn strong, but it quickly awash by just remembering how it ended. Now, it caused a huge downfall in my life.

"Reigh," he sighed at the end.

"What are you doing here?" I leaned against my headboard, not caring how I looked like in front of him. He'd seen me naked and vulnerable anyway.

"I have a proposition for you. It's not that I'm glad you got fired—"

"Don't ever mention it. I was beyond humiliated in front of my boss and to those who saw that footage. You haven't seen the look on his face, and I did. I didn't know how it slipped my mind that there was a CCTV in the lab. I don't like this effect on me when I'm with you. It's..." I tucked my hair behind my ear, feeling my face burned.

"It's been taking care of. You have nothing to worry about. As of now, my lawyer is talking to your ex-boss. They can choose, either they will lose the deal or I will sue them, or they give me the copies of that video and forget that thing did happen. They shouldn't have a camera inside the lab in the first place."

Sighing in relief, I looked at him emotionless. "What is your proposal?"

He smiled— a smile that made me speechless. *Damn this stupid heart!*

"I want your perfume," he started. He suddenly turned into a businessman in front of me. A sexy broody Skipper that exuded power.

"You're kidding, right?"

He shook his head, keeping this thing professional. "No. That's the scent I've been looking for."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. That's mine, and I can do another better scent for you."

"No, Reigh. I don't want another scent. I want the very same scent you used last Saturday. It's sweet, seductive, exquisite, and strong."

"I'm sorry." I looked down at my hands. When he didn't respond, I lifted my gaze, and it was a mistake because the moment our gazes locked, the lust consumed me. My body heated. My skin tingled, and my desire to jump into his lap and feel his lips and mouth on me again was overpowering my every being.

His pupils reacted. He then swallowed and looked away.

A nervous energy overtook me. "Why?"

"Why what?" His voice deepened, but he didn't look at me again.

"Why my perfume?"

"I already told you," he sighed with frustration.

"I won't accept your proposal until I hear the truth from you. Let's be honest, Skipper. What's so special in it?"

He let out a sigh of relief, then smiled. "Okay, just don't freak out."

"Now I'm freaking out." I laughed nervously.

His smile widened, making the wrinkles beside his eyes more evident. "This probably doesn't make any sense to you, but I remember the exact smell when I first kissed you." He scratched his thick eyebrow as if he was shy.

My heart started to pound. "What? I-I don't think—"

"You—"

"How do I smell when you first kissed me?" I lifted my brows. A slow smile built up on my lips.

"Like your perfume—"

"Guys!" I almost jumped on my bed to the voice of Clyve whose already standing at the door with an impish grin on his face.

Skip groaned and turned his head to his brother. "What? We are in the middle of a serious conversation here."

"I thought you two are done snogging—"

"Clyve!" Skip chided his brother.

"Okay, calm down, lover boy. I'm going anyway. I just wanna bid goodbye to Are. I have to check on my potential flat." He walked toward us. "Doll, call me if you need anything, okay? Don't believe everything my brother said. Sometimes he gabbled, but just look right into his eyes to see the truth."

At the corner of my eye, Skip rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Thanks, brother. Don't worry your friend is safe with me." With an emphasize on the word friend.

"I doubt it." He shot his brother a warning looked.

"CC, I'll be fine. Thank you for coming and listening to my jibber-jabbering. I'm going to knee his bollocks if he tries something on me." I winked at him, and when I looked at Skip, he wasn't look amused at all.

"Brilliant!" He bent down to plant a kiss on my cheek, causing Skip to groan again.

"Seriously, Skip. We already talked about this, haven't we?"

"Just get your daft arse out of here!"

Clyve made his way out of my room, laughing.

"You were rude," I chastised.

"I know, but couldn't he see us? He kept interrupting while we were discussing important matters."

"And you wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Clyve."

"So, now you're on his side?" He narrowed his eyes at me.

Did he just snap at me? Unbelievable!

"Of course, I am. He's nothing but nice to me. He was there when I needed someone. He understood and never judged me!" My voice echoed as I yelled right into his face. My pulse sped up in anger that I wanted to throw him out of my apartment.

He had no right to be angry at Clyve. In fact, after what he did to my life, he must be thankful that I still allowed him to come into my apartment. Then, he just snapped at me. Who gave him the right?

"I'm sorry if I overstepped." I could feel the sincerity in his voice, but it was not going to budge me easily.

"This conversation is over. If you have a proposal, let your assistant arrange a business meeting. I guess you still have my email, haven't you?" I stood up from my bed and crossed my arms over my chest as I watched him releasing a few deep breaths. Regret and hurt plastered on his face. Then, he got up, towering me—not in an intimidating way. Our closeness made my breathing to hitch. I could smell the spiciness of his perfume—manly that oozed sexiness.

"I meant what I said before I left to London," he said in almost whispering.

"Which one? The vile part? I know—"

"No. Not that one. I regretted everything I said right away, Reigh. That was a beastly move, and I have no right to say those words to you. It was vile. You know how much I lo—" He stopped abruptly to withhold his words. "How much you mean to me. I was just shocked the bloody hell out that everything just came crashing down on me in one day." He held my arms. "Give me another chance, Arella. I would do anything for you to forgive me and for us. I'm so sorry." His words melted my heart, seeped right through my bone with a tiny thrill of excitement sent down my spine.

"But you didn't return my call and text. Why?"

"I was an awful boyfriend. I broke your heart, Reigh. I should have been with you when times like that and not running away again. I was torn between guilt and my feelings for you. I didn't know what to do until I saw you dancing with my brother. I wanted to rip his hands off of you, but I trust him and I love him dearly. And I know he would never cross that line. And then your brother kept taunting me that made me realize that I couldn't just stand there doing nothing because I know you wouldn't wait for me for the rest of our lives."

"I'm sorry too—for keeping things from you. I just didn't know where and when to start, and we just started our relationship. And I thought it would only complicate things if I just drop the bomb on you. I swear I was planning on telling you."

"I completely understand, Reigh. It just took me a while to process things. Let me make things right if you—"

"Please, don't." I couldn't afford for him to break my heart again. I knew his stay was only temporary. Clyve blurted out something about Skip's project, and he was not going to stay here for good. Why didn't he tell me about this?

"Reigh, please." Skip begging me was like a stab to my chest.

"You know this doesn't work, right?" I looked at him right into his eyes, and he looked sad.

I was waiting for him to confirm, but instead, he closed the gap between us, cupping my face. My lips ached to kiss him, even though I wanted more than just a kiss, but I could live with it if he tried. Skip was like a drug—addicting once you tried.

My heart raced. We could try and took a risk—this might work, and we could see where it went while he was here. I grabbed his shirt and dug my nails into his chest. The look in his eyes was a confirmation. My lips parted, ready to receive his kiss.

A slight moan skipped my mouth when his lips locked with mine. My body ignited, sending a zing right down between where it ached for his unfinished task. My knees buckled when he went all in, delving his tongue, encircling, and tasting me. We devoured each other.

I craved him.

I couldn't remember I crave sex and release, but there was something between me and Skip that was hard to ignore. It was more... like a lifeline.

Skip's head dipped down. My hands released his shirt and ran through his neck and up to his head, pushing my hands through his hair. Pressing my chest to his, I pulled him as if it wasn't enough, but it was too much. He rewarded me with a groan and ground his bulge on me.

We both snapped out and pulled away to my phone vibrating on my nightstand, both panting and unable to form a word. He pecked my lips again and smiled genuinely.

"We need to talk." I released his hair.

"I know." Then, he shifted his head to look at my phone. "Shit!"

Chapter 26

Wrath of A Roommate

Skip

She tastes so incredibly good!

I FELT like a goddamn teenager—always horny and hungry for her. I didn't want to let her go yet, but the vibration of her phone made us both freeze. Probably Brett.

"We need to talk."

"I know," I said as I shifted my head to the side, checking the caller ID. "Shit!"

Then her eyes widened. "I forget Kat's shift has ended. How did I always forget everything when you're around?" She propped her hand on her waist and the other was rubbing her temple.

I smirked, feeling my heart raced. "I take that as a compliment."

"Not funny. We really should talk." Her face turned deadly serious and that looked alone made me prouder. "I want to tell you something."

"Okay, love. Let's have a seat then." Sitting down, I held her hand and let her sit on my lap. "What is it? You know you can trust me, right?"

Her eyes glittered with pain. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Bitch!"

Arella startled to the voice of her roommate—it was comical how she quickly on her feet. I turned my head to the door and stood up.

The look on Kat's face confirmed she was shocked and not fancy to see me, then quickly turned fatal, squinting the already squinty eyes. "What the hell is going on here?"

She dropped her bag causing it to thud against the wooden floor. "You!" She pointed her finger directly at me as she prowled towards us. "You broke her heart. You made her cry, you, Skip. No matter how hot you are, you don't have the right to hurt my best friend, you fucking hotbrit! And what do you think are you doing here, huh? To feel sorry for your arse? Get the fuck out of my apartment, you, arsehole!" She jabbed her finger on my nose.

My nose. And she smelled ethyl alcohol.

My mouth fell open and dried. I was about to say something, but my brain went blank. I closed my gaping mouth and blinked rapidly. Before I could say something, she burst into laughter, throwing her head back, while her hand was guarding her abdomen.

What had just happened?

“Oh, my god, Are. Marry this guy or I will! He looked priceless and about to cry in front of me. No doubt he loves you, you lucky girl!” Then she left me alone. Still laughing, she hugged Arella who I didn’t realize was also laughing with her.

“Blinding! How many days did you two plan to pull those stunts?” I narrowed my eyes to Kat.

She just flipped her dark silky hair. “Huh! At least it worked, but what I said was true, Skip. If you ever hurt her again, I will—”

“Knee me on my goolies?” My balls had been seriously threatened these past weeks, but I guessed I deserved it.

“Nope! I will slit your neck with the Kampilan, my Lolo owned,” she corrected.

“Cam— what?”

“It’s similar to a machete. Do you even know what a machete is? Never mind.” She waved her hand to dismiss. “Anyway, it’s an old folks’ weapon to fight against bad guys.” She raised her brow as if intimidating me.

“Brilliant, that must be quite deadly,” I commented wittily. This tiny little creature was feisty. I liked the idea of her protectiveness over Arella.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

I watched her while I crossed my arms over my chest, offering her a bemused smile.

“Okay, enough threatening him, Kat. So, why are you so early?” Arella butted in.

“Well, your brother asked me to check up on you.” She turned to pick up her bag.

“My brother? Why didn’t he call me instead? What is going on between you two?” There was something in Arella’s voice that made Kat look pale.

She looked like someone had caught her hand in the cookie jar. She blinked rapidly, but neither of them looked away.

When she didn’t respond Arella watched her closely. “Oh, my god! Did you sleep with my brother?”

Now I didn’t see that coming. I huffed unknowingly.

That's ridiculous, love.

Did she think before she says that? I didn't like how she questioned Kat's loyalty to her. I couldn't blame her though, everything was possible, just like what happened between us.

Kat's eyes narrowed back, yet her brows were furrowing. "Really, Are? Do you think I would ever do that to you? No offense, hotbrit." She looked at me, then back to Arella.

"None taken," I mumbled.

"But no matter how hot your brother is, I value our friendship more than my itch," she said defensively.

"Then why is he calling you instead of me?"

"Are you jealous of me now? Did you even check your phone?"

"Cut the crap, Kat."

"Why are you here anyway? Aren't you supposed to be at the lab?"

Arella sighed deeply. Her shoulders drooped. "I'm fired."

Shit!

"What? You can't be fired," Kat asked in a disbelieving voice.

"It's all my fault," I admitted, grimacing.

"Not entirely," Arella defended.

"Wait a minute. Did you happen to punch Duke?" Kat's face lit up at me, then she laughed again. The tension in the air suddenly vanished like a cloud of smoke.

"I was about to, but my lawyer advised me not to interfere. Why?"

"It's nothing, Skip. Let's go out to the living room." Arella grabbed my arm.

"You, two ate ice cream alone, huh?" Kat eyed at the tub on the nightstand.

"Clyve was here, but he left a while ago when Skip arrived."

"What do we have for dinner?"

"What do you want?" Arella asked back.

"Do you mind if I stay for a while?" I asked them. I didn't want to impose, but I hope Kat would agree.

"Of course. You're the first guy to step into our apartment, aside from Brett. But please don't let me disinfect the entire apartment and autoclave the utensils." She walked away to probably her room.

"No promises!" I yelled when her back disappeared.

Her head peeked out, gesturing 'I'm watching you'.

Arella was already sitting on the couch with a remote in her hand. "Are you sure you don't have a business to attend to?"

I sat beside her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders as I pulled her closer to me. "I don't give a fuck," I whispered, kissing the side of her jaw. She shivered. I wanted to be closer to her, to breathe her scent in, feel her soft curves, and the heat of her body against mine.

"Didn't you understand Kat was warning you?" she giggled.

"We are not spreading bacteria, Reigh." Fuck! My cock started to strain in my trousers, thinking of how am I going to spread something else on this seat.

"Watch a movie with me," she was requesting, though she didn't need to because I'd rather spend my sleepless night with her than going to my apartment and sleep alone.

"I'd love to. What do you have?" I dipped my nose into her hair, letting her smell flood my senses.

"Do you like action?"

My brow arched. "Action? Aren't you supposed to watch movies on Hallmark Channel?"

"Huh. I'm kind of surprised you know what's on the Hallmark, but I'm not *fancy* of romance," she said, pinching my chin.

"Okay. I guess now I know one thing about you, not-so-fancy-of-romance."

She smiled at me. "Let's get to know each other then."

Feeling my heart slice into two, I smiled. Almost bitterly. "I like that. Anyway, before Kat arrived, you're about to tell me something. What is it, Reigh?" Again. My chest tightened. Why do I feel I was not going to like what she was about to say?

"It's nothing." She shrugged.

"Arella."

"Just drop it. I still can't believe I don't have a job."

"Accept my proposal. I will arrange a meeting with you tomorrow, how about dinner?"

She smiled brightly. Her eyes twinkled with excitement. “A business dinner?” She bit her bottom lip. The urge of letting my teeth sank on it instead was painful to bear.

I had nothing to do than agreed, “A business dinner, it is.”

I dipped my head to kiss her when someone cleared a throat at my back. Closing my eyes, I groaned, “Yes, Kat.”

“You two can make out when we’re done with dinner. I need to eat, guys. I have hypoglycemia, and I’m still young to die. I still want to snuggle someone or make out with a hot Italian.”

I shook my head. “Are all—”

“Asian?” She cut me off.

Had she been treated differently by those pigheads? Racial discrimination wasn’t new either in the UK. I couldn’t quite understand what was the point of people bullying someone because of colors and race? Some of those they discriminate were far more intelligent than them.

“Kat...”

“I’m not ashamed of my ancestry, Skipper Linton.”

“You shouldn’t be, Kat. You’re a wonderful person. From where we came from doesn’t define who we are. It’s what’s inside our heart.” I felt Arella’s hand gripping my thigh. “I was about to say earlier something different. It was kind of—”

“Annoying?”

I shook my head again. “Jesus! Love, where did she come from?” I asked Arella. I’d not been entertained like this in a long time. And she instantly grew on me. Arella just smiled, certainly enjoyed watching us.

“Your mom is a great doctor, hotbrit. I wonder why none of you followed her path. She’s so passionate about her job, and she loves kids.”

“I don’t think I can see sprogs crying from pain. It breaks me before I can treat them.”

“Aw, hotbrit.” She glanced at Arella, mouthing, “Marry him already.” Then looked at me again.

“You should give her more grandchildren.” Her words made Arella stiffen in my arms.

“Planning on it since I lost one.” My chest felt hollow when I realized what I’d just said. What if Arella had trauma and didn’t want to have a kid again? *You are so ahead of yourself, mate!*

I didn’t think I had planned on impregnating someone else other than her. I definitely wanted to have children. My not so successful relationship with my ex had something to do with starting a

family. We had a different perspective. She didn't believe in marriage. She wanted to travel, and not going home to the same place again.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to—"

"It's okay, Kat," Arella mumbled.

"I'm sorry." Whispering, I rubbed Arella's arm to loosen her tensed muscles.

"It's okay."

"Alright?"

She nodded.

"I should go to the kitchen and stir fry some vegetables before they rot and go to waste." She stood up, then Kat mouthed, asking if Arella was okay.

I gave her a thumb up, then she walked towards the hallway.

"Are we really good, Arella?" The anticipation of her answer made my stomach flutter.

"We'll see how this thing goes before you leave."

I was beyond shocked by her words because I was not expecting her to say at all.

How does she know?

Chapter 27

Business Dinner 2.0

Arella

MY HEART sped up when the doorbell rang. I was in the middle of inspecting myself in front of the mirror if I didn't look underdress for this business dinner.

"You look gorgeous, Are. Don't let your date wait outside, or someone else will snatch him from you." Kat smiled through the mirror. She looked satisfied with the outcome of spending her two hours watching me as readied myself. She chose the red cross wrap crop top with the bodycon short skirt dress, through I wanted to wear the mustard yellow one-shouldered, but I had to go with her choice when she suggested stepping out of my comfort zone.

After taking a long deep breath, I walked to the door and opened for my date. I almost tripped to the man standing in front of me.

My mouth agape.

God, he is delicious.

He was wearing a white crisp shirt beneath his razor-sharp stylish double-breasted suit. I'd never seen him wear like this before, and that made Skip marked out as a man of distinction. His tie and scarf matched my dress. It was like we planned it out together.

I devoted a few moments to ogle him, unblinking.

He beamed, and my heart beat a little faster. "Did I pass your inspection, Ms. Rogue?"

I didn't answer him, instead, I strolled my gaze from his head down to his toe. His long hair pulled off into a slicked back, and his face was freshly shaved. His clad thighs fitted perfectly in dark pants. He wore a sleek watch too that effortlessly upgraded his look.

"Arella, as much as I want you to check me out, but we have a reservation, love. And you look stunning, tonight." His eyes glittered with amazement, and I knew he meant it. He leaned over to kiss my cheek, then inhaled deeply and murmured something that I wasn't able to grasp.

"Thank you, Mr. Linton. And you look dashing as well." I snaked my hand around his arm when he offered.

A man in a black suit stood beside the slicked black Mercedes Benz. "Good evening, Miss Rogue!"

I smiled politely. "Good evening!"

"I want to kiss you so bad, but I'll wait until the dinner is over," Skip whispered in my ear, making me shiver to the hot spark invaded my skin.

"Good thinking." I kept a distance between us at the backseat. I wanted to kiss him senseless because he looked sexy, hot, and powerful at the same time. I hadn't been kissed him since the last time he came to my apartment. But I reminded myself that this was a business dinner. We could break the rule later tonight once it was over.

The car moved smoothly on the road. My hands gripped my purse tighter than necessary as I felt his eyes on me. His intense stare sizzled my body that made me want to fantasize something here at the backseat. I felt the back of his hand feathery running on my arm, making my heartbeat instantly quickened. I bit my bottom lip to stifle the moan as my naughty thoughts worsened the scenario. My toes curled with the wicked pressure of arousal between my thighs. My arms pricked with goosebumps.

"Business dinner, Skip," I said through a shaky voice.

"Business fucking dinner it is," he groaned in response, low and throaty. Then his hand was gone.

A few minutes later, I turned my head to see him. Skip transfixed his gaze outside the window, but the sexual tension between us hadn't cooled down. And I felt terribly bad for putting up a wall between us.

We arrived at the high-end restaurant that exceedingly difficult to book a reservation even for at least three months, and still, they politely told you to be put on the waitlist. The waiting staff led us to our reservation table. Skip sat across the table like a gentleman he was after helping me out to my seat. He acted like a businessman, and I felt somehow awash with disappointment.

Skip ordered for a bottle vintage wine. He poured us the twenty-three-year-old deep ruby-purple liquid into our glasses.

The smell of excellent aromas of currant, blackberries, and vanilla reached my nostrils. I sipped it—the mixed berries and the long-aged in processing made the taste subtle. "You have an excellent choice in wine, Skip."

"I have an excellent taste in everything, Arella. Especially in women."

I almost rolled my eyes because he wouldn't just drop it. "I can see that, Mr. Linton."

The waiter came back to take our order.

"A black truffle, crayfish with white wine, black pepper sauce, and vegetables for me. A white fish on a bed of tomato pulp for my business date," Skip ordered, smiled wickedly at me, emphasizing the word business.

As the pianist in a tux played jazz at the corner of the restaurant, we casually talked in between our meal, but I couldn't help to not notice the smile on Skip's face. He seemed to make this dinner more casual than I had expected.

"How about we choose a chocolate mousse with lime and a chocolate fondant," he suggested.

"What can I say I like chocolates."

Our dessert arrived a few minutes later. We dig in, and the taste of bitter and tanginess of the lime was an excellent combination—it melted in my mouth. Closing my eyes, I licked my lips, causing Skip to groan.

I raised my brow playfully. "How about we talk about the proposal, Mr. Linton?"

"Brilliant idea, Miss Rogue." He beamed. Just the beam alone was already an ultimate aphrodisiac of all aphrodisiacs. "I hope we can seal this deal, and I'm a little bit persuasive. So, let's cut the chase. I want your perfume, and your name will be on the label. You can choose the name yourself as long as the board accepts it, and matches with the men's. Your choice." He poured another wine into our glasses like an expert.

I grabbed the glass and emptied it in a gulp. He said to take it easy, but I thought I didn't hear him right. This has been my dream—to have my name on the bottle. For a perfumer, who could refuse it?

I blinked twice or maybe more when he remained serious. With wide eyes, I opened my mouth to respond, then closed it again. Was he serious?

Then his brow raised and stared at me, probably waiting for my answer, but all I could do was to stare back at him.

"Arella?"

"Are you kidding me?" Finally, I found my words.

"I don't kid when it comes to business."

Leaning over, I whispered, "Are you serious? You don't look drunk though. Is this some kind of a prank?"

He shook his head. "Yes, and no. This is not a prank, love."

I looked around the entire restaurant, and everyone engrossed in their food and their company.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" I smiled.

"You didn't give me a chance to talk."

My smile widened—I was actually grinning like a fool. “You’re not gonna take it back, are you?”

“So, is that a yes?”

“Of course, it’s a yes!” I answered with a little exaggeration, causing him to chuckle.

“How about the deal with the lab?”

“There’s a little change, but you have nothing to worry about. Let’s have a toss then. For our partnership.” We clinked our glasses.

I glanced at him one more time to see that he was not joking.

“I know I shouldn’t say this, but I’m still saying. I’m glad we did that.”

“Did what, Reigh?”

I rolled my eyes when I saw the glint in his eyes. “I don’t know, Skip.”

“Let’s get out from here. We need to celebrate.”

“But we already did.”

“Not this kind of celebration, partner.” He winked at me.

I bit my lip to control my giggle when I got what he meant. My anticipation rose high. We haven’t slept together since that night, and I missed him terribly. My heart hammered in my chest when the car door closed behind me.

Skip pressed the button and said, “Give us some privacy, Klash. And don’t stop the car until I told you so.”

As soon as the privacy partition slid closed, I quickly closed the distance between us and grabbed his head, tangling my fingers in his hair. His mouth crashed into mine with a savage kiss. It was full of hunger and intensity. His hands dipped inside my skirt, causing it to slide up my waist. His touch buzzed every fiber in my body. He shoved his tongue into my mouth, dominating and tasting me. I straddled into his lap and positioned myself to rub my already wet center into the bulge against his pants. I pressed my chest against him, desperate for more.

“Your gonna kill me,” he groaned against our mouth.

Breaking the kiss, he then gripped my ass that could probably leave a mark, but I didn’t even give a damn. His hand slid further up, then his fingers reached the edge of my thong. Keeping his eyes pinned at me, he drew circles against the lace, making my desire spike up.

“Fuck! You’ve been wet for me all this time?”

“So confident, Mr. Linton.”

In a second my thong was ripped off of me. He groaned at the snap of the elastic of the torn fabric.

“I want you so bad, Skip,” I whispered in desperation in between panting. I was damn greedy for him.

“You have me, Reigh. Why are we letting ourselves suffered like this?” He paused. There was a minuscule of sadness as his eyes transfixed on mine.

My patience crumbled, I fumbled to unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants. I slipped my hand into his boxer and grabbed out his hard, yet smooth length. He hissed. With my thumb, I spread a bead of his pre-cum around his crown.

“Fuck!” Skip tipped his head back against the seat. With jaw clenched, he ordered, “Sit on me.”

I hurriedly slid into his length. “Skip!” My eyes widened in panic. Our body locked together perfectly. Our gaze met for good seconds in understanding. None of us move or talk, feeling our world stopped.

Grinding myself into him, I sought a release for this maddening pressure. He groaned and I moaned, feeling the fullness and stretching my walls as he was buried deep inside me.

I could hardly breathe.

He buried his face into my neck and whispered to muffle our sounds, “Reigh, it feels so good, but we don’t want to make him hard while driving, yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

I couldn’t say a word as he began to move in and out of me. I shut out the world around us—just me and Skip. We rocked along together. This experience was new to me, it sounded wild, yet it somehow felt right. My breathing became choppy.

“Fuck! Come for me.”

My fingernails dug deep into his shoulders. Every muscle in my body tensed. I nearly lost my grip as my inner walls began to pulse around him.

“Reigh—”

I came before he finished his words, panting and sated. Skip collapsed his head against the backseat, breathing heavily. Then I realized something as I felt a hot liquid inside me.

“Crap!”

Chapter 28

Begging

Skip

THE SUN was setting when I stepped out of my car. Feeling my stomach twisted, I forced myself to march towards the front door.

There's no turning back, Skip.

I wanted to decline her invitation to her family dinner as it felt like I was overstepping. I'd been here before, but this time was different. I was dating Arella now, and something happened between us that quite affected her family. I didn't know what to expect throughout the night, but I could take whatever they threw to me.

"Come in, son," Davin, Arella's father welcomed me with a warm smile.

I forced my words out, trying to be casual, then I shook his hand. "Thanks, Dave."

Then his eyes landed to the bottle on my grasp. "Thank goodness! Someone brought good wine," he chuckled, closing the door behind us. "They're in the dining room."

"Thought I could bring one." I handed it to him.

Taking a deep breath, I made my way to the dining area. I heard Arella and her mother, Suzanne laughing. Then, Brett said, "So, that's it, mom?"

Before I could say something, Arella met my gaze. The transformation of surprise on her face and her eyes lit up like the city lights at night that made my heart pound inside my chest. "Skipper!"

My smile widened like a schoolboy. "Good evening, guys!"

Jesus!

"Good evening, honey. Good to see you again." The warm smile of her mom reminded me of Mum—who was beautiful inside and out. I was glad to see Mum worked hard on her drinking problem and had a plan on the remaining collections of her wine in her home.

I leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. "Thanks for inviting me, Suzanne."

Brett stood up, giving me a brotherly hug. "Mate, Clyve didn't come with you?"

"He couldn't come. Something came up," Arella butted in.

I was a little confused for a moment. Clyve didn't mention about this weekend dinner. Or did he have to tell me though?

"Hey." I kissed Arella on her cheek when all I wanted was to feel the softness and taste the strawberry red lipstick on her lips.

She instantly stiffened. Arella chose not to tell her family about our relationship. If I had only a choice, I would rather tell the world who this woman belonged to.

"Hi," she said awkwardly as if I didn't eat her on my couch last night after our dinner date. A business dinner as she named it.

Since then, I couldn't see that thing the same way again without thinking how breathtaking she looked when writhing and moaning while my head was between her thighs.

"Thank you for offering Are a job, Skip," Davin said.

I looked at Arella, wondering if her family knew the reason why she had a new job now. Brett for sure didn't know about it, otherwise, he already punched me the moment he saw me inside their family home.

"She deserves it, and the company is delighted to have her on board," I said proudly, not only for the business but for her.

She worked hard like a real employee. I heard Dr. Mackenzie abused her professionally, and that dimwit just ordered around and relied on his subordinates.

The dinner was better than I thought, and I didn't end up having broken bones.

"So, how long are you gonna stay in States? Jett mentioned something that you're staying for a certain project," Davin asked, clearly curious.

The voice in my head said for good, but I couldn't give Arella a false hope. I didn't have an exact date on when I was leaving because my stay here was not permanent. Well, that was the plan. My shirt suddenly tightened. My heart was racing when everyone was waiting for my answer. Arella took her glass of wine and sipped.

"The scent for men is not ready. He's leaving after the launching." Her thumb played the stem of the glass. The defeated look on her face was palpable, and it tightened my chest that I was the reason.

I thought I could stay here for a year, but we already found what we were looking for, and it was my fault that I rushed them out.

It had never crossed my mind that we still had a chance after her revelations. Now, I regretted it big time because my feelings for her were still intact, and it overwhelmed me how strong love could change someone entirely. And I didn't even have a strength to control.

"My stay is not permanent, but I wasn't expecting the perfumes will be ready in such a short time. I guess I should compliment our brilliant perfumer over there." I raised the glass for a toss, winking at her.

"To Are."

* * *

"I'm sorry about those questions earlier." Arella sat beside me on the porch.

"It's alright, love." A mix of emotions ran through me. Sadness and guilt were the strongest. How was I going to leave her here? Was she willing to move to England with me? She could still work there if she was worried about her job. Now, that I had her, I didn't think I could let her go and wait for more years.

"I want you to come with me." I faced her to meet her in the eyes so she could see my soul.

Arella looked away and took a deep breath. "We are just enjoying each other's, remember?" She tried to ignore the effect of this situation, though she knew it was hard for both us.

"Skip, we forgot to use a condom!" Her eyes widened in shock. Her face still flushed from orgasm, yet I wanted to make her come again.

I pulled my trousers up after offering her my scarf to clean up. "Aren't you on a pill?" I wasn't trying to be an insensitive asshole, but thinking of her having my child inside her womb again gave me hope.

"Skip?" I could hear she was stressing out. She sat back on her seat when she was done smoothing out her dress.

"Yes, love."

"Oh, my god! Are you trying?"

"To get you pregnant? No. I mean not now, but soon, yeah."

"Skip, we can't—"

"You're joking, right?"

Seconds stretched out and none of us able to talk.

"Please, let's not ruin the moment." I gripped her thigh, making her stiffened. My skin tingled, longing to be inside her again. "I'm not planning on knocking you up as the American would say, but how could I think

straight when you were a damn tease of a century. I am having a hard-on the whole time, and I'm sure you're aware of it. Let's just enjoy each other, okay?"

I fucked up once, and I was not going to repeat it. I could quit the job with my dad, find another one and stay here, and the best part was, I could stay with Arella, and I would be closer to Mum.

But Dad couldn't handle the Business anymore. He was sick and suffering from Coronary heart disease since last year. And being the eldest, I had to carry everything on my shoulder.

I let out a sigh, mentally releasing the fear and stress inside me even though I knew it was impossible. "Arella, I—"

"I can't, Skip. Even if you have to fire me. I can't leave my family. This is my home, and you know that. I just have them back and I just get my life back." Her lips trembled, and I wanted to kiss her badly.

My stomach felt heavy. I wished I had the power to erase the sadness in her eyes.

I skimmed my thumb on her cheek. "I can't stay here for good, Arella."

"Then we'll make the best of the time you have left here."

My stomach sank.

Damn it!

Brett suddenly appeared, showing something off on his face. "Arella."

Arella turned to face her brother. "Brett, we're just—"

"Can I have a moment with you, please? Alone."

"Sure." She stood up.

"Is everything okay?" I asked Brett.

Brett just heaved a sigh, pressing his lips into a thin line.

"I'll be right back," Arella assured me with a small smile.

"Okay." Nodding, I squeezed her hand.

I watched them walked away, ignoring the gnawing pain in my stomach with dread.

I looked up at the dark sky, hoping God could hear my prayer. I couldn't even remember the last time I reached out for him, instead, I chose the strongest liquor ever made to numb me.

When I saw Arella weeks ago, something inside my chest warmth again—just like the first time I met her. These past few days I spent with her was the best things ever happened to me, then I realized it had an ending. It was possible to have a sad or a happy one, and I was hoping for the latter.

I turned my head to the faint angry voice of Brett. Resisting to overreact, I clenched my jaw, blocking out whatever made him mad.

I was right, Brett was upset, but about what?

A few seconds later, I was running out of patience and stood up. He may be in his house, but I was not going to tolerate him yelling at Arella. He may be her older brother, but it didn't give him the right to treat her badly, especially when an arsehole almost screwed her brains up terribly.

Their voice still muffled, but I knew they were in his old room. I knocked twice and opened the door without bothering them to answer.

Profound sadness consumed me upon seeing the sight in front of me. Arella was shaking and sobbing on the bed. Her hands were covering her face.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" My blood rose up that dizzied me.

"Apparently—"

"Brett, please? I'm begging you, please?" She dragged herself down, kneeling in front of his brother. She then wrapped her arms around his legs, hugging them tighter. "Please, don't do this to me."

Her position lost every energy in my body—it was too much to bear. My eyes watered at the sight of her begging for something I didn't even know. For sure it was as larger than this world.

Brett took a deep breath and looked down at his sister, looked so broken. "Stand up, please."

I swallowed hard, not realizing my fists cracked at my side, and my jaw ached at how stronger I was clenching them, resisting not to punch Brett for being a terrible brother. I walked towards Arella and helped her to stand up. She quickly launched herself into me and sobbed harder.

"It's okay, love." I rubbed her back to soothe her while glaring at her brother.

Chapter 29

The Hot Drummer

Arella

NORMALLY, after our amazing sex, I fell asleep right away with a smile on my face, but last night I stayed up repeating the scene in my head that Skip witnessed, and I spent a lot of time thinking. Thankfully, he didn't even ask what happened. I knew it, the guilt would eventually kill me.

Last night wasn't a dream.

Brett opened the door of his old room and let me enter, then closed it behind him. I rubbed my hands together to ease the trembling of my fingers. The way he approached me, I knew something was off.

My neck chilled.

"Is everything okay, Brett?" I spoke.

"You tell me." His voice was a cold knife that sliced through my heart.

"Tell you what?" I watched him closely as he crossed his arms over her chest with narrowed cold eyes.

His nose flared, trying to control his anger, and added to it, he wasn't impressed by me asking him back. He kept on narrowing his eyes at me with an intense focus, waiting for my answer.

"Cut the crap, Brett. Just tell why did you have to bring me here to ask me. Well, you can tell me now or else I'm going back to Skip." Then I realized something. I raised my hand. "Wait a minute. Is this about me and Skipper?"

"Tell me where did you go the whole six months after you graduated from high school? And don't you ever lie to me and tell me shits, Arella." It wasn't a question, it was a demand. Brett clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth, barely holding his patience.

My eyes bulged with complete shock. My breathing became labored. Brett continued asking me and started to yell. The sound of my heartbeat thrusting in my ears made me seeing black spots.

Clutching my arms tightly, I found myself walking towards the bed and sat there, searching for something to cling on.

I breathed deeply because I might pass out before he got the answer.

"Did you really traveled outside the country with Alys or did you stay the whole damn time at Seattle?" Each word he threw at me was like a dart. It was bull's eye and painful.

Tears fell from my eyes, and I shook to cry. He knew everything.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell us? Why the fuck did you have to decide and do that on your own? Did we not really matter to you at all? What do our parents think about this if they found out, Arella?” His furious voice and piercing eyes continued haunting me.

My brain could barely focus on how I was going to answer him. I closed my eyes to start talking, but my sobs made me harder to speak.

“Does Skip know? He doesn’t, does he?”

My eyes went wide open, alarmed to his question. Lowering my gaze down, I covered my face.

I took a risk by shaking my head. “P-please, Brett. If you still love me, don’t do this. I-I promised—”

The door swung open, and I knew it was Skip. The only thing came to my mind was to slide down the bed and beg for my life to keep whatever Brett already knew would stay between us.

My morning with Skip became a routine. He was not an early riser before I stayed in his apartment, but he moved his alarm to an hour earlier than the usual time had been set. I dragged my lazy ass toward the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. I watched my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were still swollen from crying last night.

I grabbed my phone to check my calls. Mom sent me a message, asking what upset my brother last night. I couldn’t even remember how did I get back with Skip to his apartment. The last thing I knew was him hugging me tightly and helping me out of that room.

A message from Brett caught my attention. My eyes started to sting.

Brett: Tell him or I will.

I typed a reply.

Are: I will. Just give me time.

I tapped the send button.

The apartment was silent. I quickly got out of the room and searched for Skip. I needed time to think of what should I do. I made a promise, and that was the only thing I would never break, otherwise, I was going to lose the only chance I had.

The living room was empty and it looked untouched. I sauntered towards the kitchenette—a half-empty glass of water on the sink and a brewing coffee maker. One thing I learned about him was he didn’t drink tea like the British used to.

“Skip?” I called out.

I unlocked the door of the pool room. I flinched at the sound of drums welcoming me. Skip sat straight on the stool, giving me the complete view of his sweaty sexy bareback. His hair tied up in a bun. He was only wearing dark blue jeans that made him look hotter.

“Skip!” I called his name, but he didn’t seem to hear me. That was when I realized he had a headset on.

For good seconds, I watched how his muscles flexed every time the drumsticks stroked the set and the simultaneous movements of his feet on the pedals. The beat was perfectly in rhythm even though I could only hear was the drums. I wasn’t aware Skip actually like music much less played drums of all the instruments. He looked hot and sexy when he headbanged and got lost to whatever song he was playing. Judging by his moves he was throwing all his frustration into it.

I stepped closer to him and grabbed his shoulder blades. He stiffened, then turned around, eyes still closed. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. I pulled the headset away from his ears.

“How long have you been here?” I wiped his sweat dry with my shirt.

Skip pulled me closer and slipped his head inside my shirt, then snaked his arms around my waist. He dove his nose just down my braless breasts and inhaled in. “I woke up early.”

His hot breath made me suck in a deep breath.

Ignoring the sensation he gave me, I complimented, “I don’t know you play drums. And for the record, you look hot in here playing half-naked.”

I pulled up my shirt, releasing him. Then I leaned down to cup his face and give him a soft kiss on his lips.

Suddenly, Skip frowned. “Your brother called.” His words made me freeze.

I swallowed. “What did he say to you?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Just asking if I got you home safe.” He looked up to me with concern in his eyes. “Care to tell me what happened last night?”

I loosened his arms around me. “Let’s have breakfast, Skip. I need to go home, and I have an appointment with my therapist today.” I told him I was seeing a therapist after my divorce and stopped it a few months ago.

“I won’t pry, Reigh, but it breaks me that I can’t even help you with your problems. It’s your call. Most people have skeletons in their closets and water under their bridges. I just wish you can open up to me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Just give me some time, okay?”

Skip just smiled tightly. "Let me send you home after breakfast."

"You don't have to. I have an app."

"You can drive my car," he suggested, and I didn't need to argue with him, so I nodded.

Skip stood up and wrapped his arm around me for a sweet quick embrace. He loved to do this, and it was like comforting him. "I'll pick you up for dinner tonight?"

"You just had me last night, Skip. I have laundry to wash, friends to call, and a roommate to talk to. Get a life, mate." I dragged him out of the pool room toward his kitchenette.

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I can't believe my woman just called me mate, and she likes to spend time with other people than her man."

"What do you want for breakfast, your majesty?" I asked as I grabbed two mugs from the cupboard.

His hands ran lazily on my waist toward my abdomen then slowly pulled my oversized shirt up until my panties were exposed. "You should feed your majesty according to his wish." His warm breath and his sexy voice behind my ear made me shiver. I could feel his bulge pressed against my butt.

"And what would be his wish?" I turned around, making him groaned. It meant to say, his tease didn't affect me, were in fact, it was a total lie.

"You're a killjoy." He was holding his smile, then planted a kiss on my forehead. He stepped back to fix his front jeans.

I couldn't help to not smile when I grabbed the coffee pot.

"You wounded me, woman."

"Am I now, your highness?" I bit my lip when I noticed him looking at me with his eyes sleepy with lust.

"Are you playing with me, Arella?"

"Of course not, Your Excellency." I placed the mug in front of him and filled it with coffee. "Can I re-heat a donut for you?"

"No, thank you. And you? Stop that diet shit you're doing, Arella. You are already beautiful inside and out. You can go to the gym or run as you like, but do it for yourself and not for me or other people." His words were dead serious.

"Thanks for the confident-booster, lad! And what made you think I'm not doing this for myself? I want to look great, feel good, and have a healthy lifestyle."

“Then I’m not gonna stop you, but you already look stunning in my eyes. And if my memory serves right, we burned quite a lot of calories last night, yeah?” He smirked, and I tried hard not to roll my eyes with his ridiculous attempt of stopping me from going back to my apartment. It looked good on him though. “And did you forget I have good tastes in women?”

A minuscule of jealousy swirled in my stomach. “I don’t like the idea of your good tastes on other women—”

“Shit!” He looked alarmed. “That’s not what I meant, love.”

“I know.”

“So, can I come tonight?”

I sipped my coffee. “No.”

“Okay. How about on Monday after work? And we have to discuss the perfume.”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“Love, we have a deal with you, and not to mention a tight deadline.”

“Fine. See you on Monday.” I drained the remaining coffee to the sink and washed it with water. I opened the dishwasher and placed the mug inside.

“Can I call you tonight?”

“Oh, my God, Skipper! What’s wrong with you?”

“You can call your friends from here. I have a room at your disposal. It’s all yours. You can lock the door while you’re talking to them, and I swear I won’t interrupt you until you’re done. Do whatever you want as long as you will be in my bed and my arms every night.”

“You are incorrigible!” I walked away from him.

“Think about it!”

* * *

TAKING a deep breath, I ran my fingers through my hair nervously, then pressed the video call button.

Connecting...

Chapter 30

Alys

Arella

“HEY, ARE. How’re you?” Alys’ smile widened as if she saw something funny on my face. “Oh, my god! It’s your turn to spill what’s with the glowing look on your face, bitch! You look stunning!” Alys was the type of person who never filtered—that was why she knew everything about me and knew if I was hiding something from her.

“I’m good,” I immediately corrected it. “I’m actually doing great. How about you?” I was glad they could cam with me today since I couldn’t make it two weeks ago.

She didn’t have any idea what I was about to tell them, and that made me nervous. They had the right to know after Brett found out everything I’d kept from my family for over six years. Now, it felt like the whole world was against me. It was even hard to breathe every time I thought about it.

“Who is the lucky guy?” The excitement on her face was palpable. She tucked her chocolate brown hair behind her ear. Alys had an exotic look with a caramel blemish-free skin. Her mother had Columbian blood, and it was where she got the large brown eyes with long ebony lashes.

“It’s him.” Then I closely watched her reaction on the screen.

“Who’s him? What did I miss?” Her dark thick brows knitted for a few moments, then her eyes grew bigger than the already big she had. Her hands flew to her gaping mouth. “Holy shit! You’re not kidding, aren’t you?”

“No, Alys. Linton is back for more than a month now.”

“Oh, my god! How can you keep something like this from me, Arella Rogue?” She only knew by Linton back then.

Then I told her everything from how we met, to the disaster that made me cancel our video call, and until I left his apartment this morning. Alys listened attentively until I was done.

“You two need to set aside the past and think about what’s at this moment, Are. This man is all over you. Choose him over your job when he asks you to go with him to London. Your family would understand, Are. Trust me. You can find another job, but there is no other Skip Linton in this world. And it’s been like seven years? Yet, he still came to find you. So, take the risk, please? I can see it right now that he makes you genuinely happy. And that glowy thing on your face, it has

nothing to do with sex alone. He. Is. The. Right. One. For. You.” The sincerity in her voice seeped through my soul. When it came to decision making and advice I always asked help from her.

“How’s sex? Was it awesome, mind-blowing, amazing? Or was he a lousy lay?”

My face instantly heated, not with embarrassment, but how I would describe how great the sex was with Skip.

“Oh, come on, Are.” She was literally grinning.

“It’s earth-shaking.” I laughed, shaking my head in amusement when I saw her reaction.

“I knew it. When I first saw your face appeared on the screen. I knew it! No words in the thesaurus could describe, huh? Was it like you saw stars, space, constellations? Or was it like sex in the spaceship that you both float after orgasms?” She laughed. “Anyway, they will be here in a minute. I came early, and I thought I could have some time alone with you.”

“Thank you. Yeah, it was great.” I ignored the knots in my stomach. “I have something to tell Anna and Ferry, and to you as well, Alys,” I sighed. A chill of apprehension swept over me at the thought of how they were going to take the news. The last thing I wanted to happen was to cut the only communication we had if they were not going to take it well.

“Is it about Linton?”

I shook my head. “No. He doesn’t know anything more than what I told you, but it’s about Brett.”

Her eyes widened, yet a frown puckered on her forehead. “Oh, my God! Is he okay?” Alys loved my brother like for forever and never forgot to ask if how was Brett every time we talked. Sometimes I thought they both had a thing when we were still in high school. But after what I was about to tell them, maybe she was not going to see my brother the way she used to before.

“He’s fine.” I saw her released a deep sigh. “Alys, he knew everything and threatened me to tell Skip if I won’t tell him myself so soon.” Tears gathered behind my eyelids. I looked up to hold them back. I already thought of the possible scenario if Anna and Ferry didn’t like the idea. We had an agreement, and I had no problem with it until Skip showed up again. They were great people, and I would never intentionally hurt them. Now, I was about to.

“Oh no!” Alys suddenly turned her head back. Then I saw Anna holding the tiny hand of Rynna, her adopted daughter. She wore the butterfly printed pink dress— my gift on her fifth birthday.

Alys stood in front of the laptop. “Are, I’ll talk to you soon. Love you!” She blew a kiss.

“Is that Are?” It was Ferry’s deep voice.

He appeared on the screen with a few shopping bags on his hands. He was taller than my brother with a body built like a bouncer. His hair always cut short. Despite him being a not smiley person, Ferry had a heart of gold.

“Yes, it’s me. I’m sorry if I made your shopping time short, guys!” I yelled so that they could hear me.

Suddenly, Anna’s body tensed. I watched the whole time she talked to her daughter. Like the sweet girl she was, she nodded to her mom and walked away.

My heart sank. No doubt, they already knew. I wanted to hate my brother, but I couldn’t do so.

Taking a breath, I wiped the tears before they saw me being helpless and weak again. I was the one who decided and arranged for this. Now I regretted every bit of it.

Speechless, I looked at him when he took the place of Alys. His face wasn’t angry, but not happy either. “Hi. Sorry, we’re late.”

“It’s okay, Ferry. I’m glad you give me time to see all of you even it’s not supposed to be today. It’s just something came up—”

“Do you wanna talk to your doctor?” he asked, smiling timidly, and he was referring to his wife. He worked as a consultant at one of the government agencies. He didn’t talk much about his job, so I suspected it was classified. He traveled a lot too—that was why when they had Rynna, Alys needed to stay with her sister.

“Thank you but I’m good. I was actually hoping if I can talk to both of you.” My pulse sped up.

“Of course, Are,” he quickly replied without a second thought. He then called his wife.

“So, how’s a job?” he asked while waiting for Anna to come to appear.

“I was fired before I finish my training. But I got a new job though. It’s an exclusive three-year contract from a famous brand. You probably heard about the Everly.”

“I guess, I did.” He nodded. “It sounds familiar. So, how did you lose your job when you’re one of the best they got?”

“It was my fault—” Before I could continue, I heard Anna yelled for her husband’s name.

Ferry stood up quickly and said, “Talk to you soon, Are. I’m sorry.”

I sighed and slumped my back to my headboard in defeat.

* * *

THE COFFEE shop Maj chose for us was like transporting back to the '80s where comic books were popular. It had cozy couches, vintage car decor, and classic coffee machines which they should be displayed in the museum instead. The aroma of lattes, sugar, roasted hazelnuts, and coffee beans made the place more we were like in the street of Paris or Italy.

I chose the table near the glass window where I could see her immediately after ordering my white chocolate latte that cost quarter my apartment lease.

"Are!" Maj arrived before my butt reached the chair.

"Hey! You look gorgeous." We kissed each others' cheek and a warm hug. She wore a pastel blue lace dress and her fringe bangs made her effortlessly stylish.

"Not as gorgeous as you." Maj winked. She probably heard the reason why I lost my job. "My god, you are glowing, girl!"

Rolling my eyes, I called the waitress and asked Maj even though I knew her favorite—a dark mocha latte.

"I can't say I'm glad you get fired, Are, but you worked harder than the regular chemists," Maj said, and I stayed silent for a while.

"You deserved a permanent job with a better salary than a trainee. You were his best shot, and he used your skill for his benefits."

Maj was my closest friend in the lab. I told her once when Duke Mackenzie asked me out on a date when my divorce was finalized. I declined because I didn't want to date my boss or a co-worker. I couldn't mix my work with pleasure.

He then asked me again a month before Skip showed up. That time I thought about it because he seemed to be a good person and always complimented my work. Then when Skip came to the picture, he pushed me to work harder than other chemists. Did he know something between me and Skip before that thing happened?

"I heard something at the lab, but whether it's true or not I don't care, Are. And I'm not judging you."

"What it is... that you heard?"

"Duke only wants to date you for his social purposes since your family has a well-known business. And your ex actually a former actor?" She looked surprised. "And how come I never heard about that? You married an actor?" Maj swiped her finger on the whipped cream then licked it until it was all gone. She liked doing it, and I found it amusing.

Dominic had a few appearances on investigative and crime shows, and a few minor roles in action movies, but then he suddenly lost an offer when I filed the divorce. The hearing was closed-door and didn't even come out to the media. It was just me and him, and our lawyers.

I swallowed, unable to talk. Maj didn't have any idea Dominic had been locked up until now unless someone had told her. And we never talked about my ex-husband, and that I liked about her.

"Did he now?" I asked sarcastically, sipping my latte.

"You did the right thing in turning him down, Are. He was a total asshole?"

"Who's a total asshole?"

Chapter 31

Reasoning Out

Skip

How did I turn into a creepy stalker?

WHEN ARELLA didn't reply to my text, I drove to her apartment and she was just leaving. I trailed her car not close enough for her to see me or suspect someone was following her. It might freak her out.

I watched Arella entered the café. I didn't have any idea if she was meeting someone or probably her brother since their last encounter didn't end well. A few minutes later, a woman in a blue dress entered. She looked familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on where did I saw her.

Then she sat across Arella's table. Okay, she was meeting that woman. I checked the time on my dashboard once in a while until I got bored.

I hopped out of my car and crossed the street to the coffee shop. I snuck inside quietly, but the chime made a few customers turned their heads towards the door, but not the two. I walked closer to their table, then Arella's friend said something about an asshole.

"Who's a total asshole?"

Her friend made a turn, and Arella's eyes widened. Just as surprised as she was to see me, I could see the excitement flashed all over her face. I smiled at her as if I didn't follow her earlier. I could easily tell her I was just grabbing a coffee, then I saw her, but it was pointless to say shit like that.

"Skipper, what are you doing here?" Her eyes shone when she asked, and it was kind of cute.

"Oh, my God." Her friend giggled.

"I would lie if I say I came here for a coffee, love." I closed the distance between us.

Leaning down, I grabbed the back of her head and kissed her already parted lips. I was not much of a PDA person, but I couldn't just stop her from going back to her apartment, and now I wanted to show how much I missed her already.

When she left my flat, I felt alone and lonely. I called Mum and Dad, but it didn't fill the emptiness inside my heart. And I felt even lost to the news I received from them.

A gasp slipped her mouth, and I delved my tongue inside. I tasted something creamy and sweet from whatever she was drinking. But I wanted her taste more because she was way sweeter and

addictive. Arella gripped my arms, kissing me back just as much as how I poured my feelings through that kiss, then murmured something into our mouth.

I pulled away before someone scolded us for displaying affections in public. Her eyes still closed. The cheers behind me made me pull me back. Arella murmured and her face was creamy red.

When I turned around, I saw a familiar face grinning at me. The Hughes' heir.

"Bash Hughes?" I asked in a disbelieving voice.

I met him a few times back in London. He and Clyve went to the same uni together. He didn't change much other than he looked matured and fancier.

"That was quite a show, man." He extended his hand, and we hugged each other.

"And you watched me throughout the scene," I chuckled, feeling my face heated.

"Hard not to, Skip. How are you? How's Clyve?" Then a redhead snaked her hand around Hughes' arm. "By the way, meet my wife, Kiara. Baby this is my old mate, Skip. I had the same classes as his brother."

His wife smiled. "Nice to meet you, Skip." We did a handshake, then she looked at my back.

Oh shit!

"Arella, my girlfriend that I kissed a while ago," I said proudly. Arella was already standing beside me, smiling at Kiara.

"Please to meet you both. I apologize for the show we put earlier." Her face flushed.

"Don't mention it." Giggling, Kiara rolled her eyes as if that was new to her. "You have no idea how Bash proposed to me. He kissed me in the middle of the street market in Paris."

Arella looked down at Kiara's whacking and sparkling diamond ring. I felt a warmth inside my chest. After hearing from Dad today, I knew I was running out of time. Mom said the same thing that Dad needed to undergo bypass surgery, but Dad unyieldingly declined the idea. Flashes of Dad's words shot through my mind. The whirlwind of sadness sat in my chest.

Just promise me you will take care of each other, Skipper. I know I was hard on you the whole time, but I love you and Clyve equally, son. And please take care of your mum for me.

The girls had their conversation when Bash said something.

"Pardon?"

"I wasn't aware Clyve is here in town."

"Oh, yeah. He's been here for a few weeks. I'll give you his number so that you two can catch up." I took the phone from Bash and saved Clyve's contact.

"It's nice really meeting you, Skip, and girls. Call me when you two are free." Kiara kissed them both and waved at me.

I nodded and smiled at her despite the knots in my stomach.

Bash patted my arm. "We should meet sometimes, man. It's fancy seeing Londoners around. I let you know through Clyve, yeah?"

"Sure thing, mate."

I grasped Arella's hand when the couple walked out of the coffee shop. "Reigh, let's sit." I glanced at her friend. "I didn't catch your name, sweetheart."

"Because I didn't tell you, Skip. And my friend over here doesn't talk much about her co-worker, am I right? I'm Majielyn." She wrinkled her nose. "Just call me Maj."

I smiled, then it hit me. "You work at the lab?"

"Correct," Maj asserted.

I chuckled, mentally shaking my head. She probably knew why Arella lost her job. "Do you like working there?"

"Yes. Now I lost my partner in crime, and the lab is not the same anymore without Are, but I'll live and I need this job. It's hard to find one for chemists that specialized in perfumery, eh." She shrugged.

"All right, Reigh?" I gripped Arella's thigh when she kept quiet.

"You didn't answer me on why are you here?" She was not interrogating. I felt like she needed me here. It tightened my chest, thinking she didn't trust me enough to share whatever was going on in her life right now.

"I followed you from your apartment. Don't freak out," I warned her. And she gave me a disbelieving look. "You are so unobservant, love. I've been waiting for you over there." I pointed to where I parked my car.

"And why are following me?" Her brow arched.

"I was alone and lonely in a boring apartment, and every time I looked around it felt like the wall was mocking at me."

"And what was that kiss all about?"

Her question made grin brightly. "Oh, that... it's my way of saying hello and I missed you." I leaned closer, letting our noses touch.

Before I could kiss her again, Maj cleared her throat. "Jeez! You two can go home and finish what you have started here."

"So, tell me who is the asshole you were talking about earlier? I hope it's not me."

"It's Duke," Maj answered, giving Arella a side glance.

Suddenly, my blood rushed to my head upon hearing that asshole's name. My lawyer let him sign an NDA, and made sure no one had the copy of the video. I burned after it was handed to me. I had no reason and planned on keeping trash like that. What I did to Arella was terrible. I hated myself for that, and leaving her alone was the most painful part.

"He won't get a chance to get near Arella or he won't see the sunrise again." My jaw clenched, thinking of what he did to her. I hadn't told a soul that I paid someone to dig on Dr. Mackenzie's past. It wasn't that nasty, but not impressive either.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Because I won't allow him, Arella. You *are* mine whether he likes it or not."

"My God! You two look like about to rip each others' clothes and forget there's everyone around."

"Silly." Arella laughed softly.

"I knew it, Are. The first time I saw the way he looked at you at the lab, I knew there was something magnificent and powerful between you two, and you couldn't just easily shake off the attractions that were so strong, girl."

"I got that a lot, sweetheart. Thank you for pointing out to Arella because she seems to have a hard time believing that we meant for each other," I said truthfully, but I joked to lighten the situation when Arella suddenly tensed up beside me.

"She will get into it, Skip. Don't worry. Just give her time."

"That's the problem, we don't have that luxury." Did I just say that out loud?

"What do you mean by that?" Arella's brows knitted in confusion.

"I am getting older, Arella?" I smiled wickedly.

She rolled her eyes. "My brother is still single and doesn't have any plan to settle down soon, said he's not good with relationships. And you two are of the same age."

“Well, haven’t you forget, love that I’ve waited for seven years before I get to have you in my arms?”

“My God! Did I just heard a bell—”

“No!” we said in unison.

“Then what are you two talking about?” Maj inquired.

“I’m testing the water,” Arella said to her friend.

“So, is it cold or warm?” Maj laughed out loud, making everyone to look at us.

I couldn’t help it, and I laughed with her. “Yeah, Reigh. Was it cold or hot?”

“You two, stop making fun of me.” Her eyes lit up, then suddenly her face fell. Then she sighed,

“You know I can’t come with you if you go back to London, right?”

The ache burned in my chest. So many raw emotions coursed through me—ache, confusion, dread, and loneliness.

Does she even care she’s breaking my heart?

“Why not? Your contract didn’t dictate your workplace for as long as you will continue concocting your scents.”

“I’m sorry, Skip. I just can’t.”

Chapter 32

His Loss

Skip

I NEVER felt so sad like this that it felt like the darkness has swallowed me, and my brain has been detached from my body. Arella stayed silent the whole ride and even inside the lift. I couldn't even open my mouth to talk. I was completely lost and shattered.

The key fell from my hand as I fumbled it to the keyhole. I didn't realize my hands were trembling until she gripped them.

"Let me," she mumbled. Her voice laced with worry and sadness.

The moment we got inside, I made my way to the small cabinet in the kitchenette, grabbed the bottle of whiskey, and set the glass that came first to my sight. I poured a shot and glugged the amber liquid, hoping to numb the gnawing pain I felt. I ignored the burning sensation in my thickening throat and leaned on the kitchen counter for support.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. When I opened them, Arella looked like about to burst into cry. A stabbing pain jolted my stomach to see her as affected as I was.

"Are you okay?" It was total bullshit—a ridiculous question.

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Women said their fine is complete bullshit, Reigh."

"Can I have a shot?" She pointed at the whiskey bottle.

I quickly poured her a shot with the same glass I used and offered it to her. She drained all at once just like I did. I thought we needed this before I poured my heart out.

"I'm going back to London tomorrow," before I fell apart, and like a coward, as I was, I said it without looking at her. It could kill me if I saw something on her face, but I definitely should because I needed to see her face eventually. She was the only strength I got in my arm's length.

"What?" The rasp, shakiness, and shock in her voice forcefully made me look at her.

The pressure bearing down on my chest threatened to crack my ribs when I met her gaze. "Come with me, please?" Gripping her hand above the counter, I begged as if my life depended on it. "I don't think I can stay sane without you by my side, Reigh." I blinked when I felt my eyes sting.

"I thought you could stay until the launching." She wiped her face, and that broke my heart again.

I rounded quickly and wrapped my arms around her. "Please?"

"I'm so sorry, but I can't. You mean a lot to me more than you probably know but... I-I can't. My life is here, my family, my friends, and my job. And I made a promise to... someone." She sobbed in my chest. I could feel her tears soaking my shirt.

I inhaled her smell deeply, hoping it would last longer in my senses. The loneliness inside me grew harder and deeper. "If what you said is true at least prove it. I need you more than anything I can grasp right now. I can't promise I can come sooner, Arella. I need to be there early tomorrow, but I can't find a flight."

"Clyve left London without talking to Dad." I loosened my arms around her. Her eyes were red and wet. They softened, but she didn't say anything. I cupped her face and planted a kiss on her forehead. "Dad was devastated when he found out. Then when I called him after you left, he's actually admitted in the hospital. He had a heart attack."

"Oh my God!" Arella rushed out her words, eyes widening in shock. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. Is your dad okay?" She held my hand, but the moment she loosened it, I knew what she was about to say. Nothing was going to change her mind.

I shook my head. "Dad's fully conscious, but Clyve doesn't know yet though. The doctor advised him to undergo surgery, but the problem is, he might not be able to make it if he will not going to decide it quickly. And Clyve might have broken down once he knew he had caused it somehow. I can't afford to have him on that track again. And Dad made me promise not to tell my brother until the surgery is successful." I looked at her, and she turned to walk away, somehow thinking about it.

I didn't want to force her to come with me because she wanted to comfort me or help me. I wanted her to come willingly because she cared. I wanted us to be together badly. I needed her to want the things I wanted, and I wanted her in my arms anytime I pleased. I could not guarantee her a perfect life, but I would do everything to make her smile every day.

"It might take a while before I can come back. I need to handle the business until dad recovered completely. I will let the manager handle the project, and the launching might have to be moved. Clyve can't handle the work here. He has no experience of running a business yet."

She shook her head. "I wish I can, Skipper. I'm so sorry, but we can still talk, right? I—"

"You made a promise to someone I get it. That someone must be so damn important to you that you chose to stay over me than breaking the promise. He's lucky, Reigh."

"You don't get it, Skip. I'm torn between you and—"

“And him?” I stood straight. “Who is that fucking bastard, Arella? Can’t you see me?” I walked towards her, grabbed her hand, and pressed it against my chest. “Can’t you feel it? Am I not enough for you? I fucking love you for seven years. I know you would not believe me because who fucking loves someone from thousand miles away without telling her how he feels? I came for you, and now we are together, then something came up and circumstances break us apart. I sacrificed something, will you please do something for us this time? I know how you feel towards me, and I know you are just afraid to trust your heart again to someone, but I will never intentionally hurt you and break you all over again. I’d rather die.”

“I wish it’s easy.” She looked at me right into my eyes. I knew she could feel and see me now.

“What’s so hard in loving me back? Please tell me? Make me understand. We can make impossible things possible together, and you know that.”

“She, Skip.” Her chin trembled. Her tears kept falling, and I almost broke apart to see her like this.

“You *are* always in my heart, a part of me. And I will always think of you no matter how far you are. You don’t have to worry that I can easily replace you with any man, because I don’t look at them the way I look at you. You’re right, you know exactly how I feel toward you. Don’t ever doubt it. I just wish I-I can come with you.”

“Who is she, Arella?” I tried to catch her gaze, but she avoided me. I wished I knew the answer, what was inside her heart, and what was swirling in her head—it fucking exhausted me. “Arella, please?”

For like a billion years, she finally met my gaze. Her face laced with wary. Her mouth opened, but before she could speak my phone vibrated in my pocket. She blinked. “Answer that. Could be an emergency.”

“Please don’t go anywhere?” I forced a smile.

She cupped my face and planted a soft kiss on my lips. I needed that. I fished out my phone. My heart galloped in my chest, then momentarily stopped when I saw the name on the screen. Jesus Christ! It’s Ma’am Marione. Dad’s assistant who I respected most. She was an old-fashioned British woman who wore a conservative dress. When her husband died, she replaced him because they treated my dad as their son that they never had.

“Ma’am, how are you this fine day?” I heard a sigh from the other line. By the sound of it, she was about to drop another bad news because we kept in touch through email and called me if it was not crucial.

“You should probably take a sit, Skipper.”

I closed my eyes, feeling my heart squeezed tighter, and I was already struggling to breathe. Swallowing hard, I opened my mouth to speak but I couldn't find a word until I felt something rolling down my face—I was crying.

"Son, I'm sorry to tell you this but your dad—" My phone fell from my grasp before Ma'am Marione could finish her words.

* * *

I DIDN'T know how I'd survive this.

'I'm so sorry for your loss, Skip.'

Arella's last words echoed in my brain. After packing my things, she cuddled me throughout the night. I wasn't expecting that night would end that way, but it happened anyway. Her dad and Brett extended their sympathy over the phone when I called her brother to look after her while I was gone.

Mum burst into a cry when I informed her of the terrible news. I knew deep in my heart, she still cared for her ex-husband. Then we decided to tell my brother together. When we boarded a chartered private jet to London, Clyve had not said a word throughout the flight, and I was damn worried about him.

The funeral was harder than I'd anticipated especially when people paid respect had said the same words over and over again.

Finally, I was able to breathe for the first time since Dad died when Clyve cried on my shoulder as we watched the casket rolled down, blaming himself for leaving Dad alone.

After a week, I thought everything was going back to normal, but I was wrong. Dad left tons of paper works, but I was thankful to the lawyers, employees, and Ma'am Marione for they made everything easier for me. I had to put myself back together now I had a huge responsibility in keeping my father's legacy.

Two days after the reading of my father, late Braddock Clifford Linton's last will, Mum returned to New York for the auction of her wine collections, and the money would be donated to the Autism Foundation.

Only two things were keeping me sane: One, Arella was true to her words, and we kept communicating now and then, but my chest still felt empty. And two, Clyve was on the right track so far—we had conversations over dinner, and somehow made his every damn day productive.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not going back there, brother. We both lost Dad, and I know exactly what are you doing."

“Brother, I want you to teach me how to manage the business. At night, I can take classes online, and I will work my arse off during the day. I want to help you like how you helped me stand on my feet when I was lost. I had some business-related classes that might help, you know. You are the boss now, brother. You can move the headquarter to New York, and I will manage the work you left here. Just tell me what should I do.”

I froze to the words of Clyve at my back. The London Bridge somehow disappeared from my view through the window of my father’s office.

“You’ll help each other, son. You are the big brother. I know I wasn’t a good father that you can be proud of, and I failed your mother as well, but I hope this business will make your life better in the future. You are damn good at this, Skipper. And I am so proud of you.”

“Come on, old man. You are stronger than of a Windsor castle.”

“After my divorce with your mother, you two are the only things that made me not to fall apart, and the thought of your mother’s success somehow made my regrets lesser. Tell your brother that I love you both so much.”

“Tell him yourself that, Dad. Why do I feel like this is goodbye?”

“A path to happiness is to follow your heart, Skipper. That’s what I’m struggling, and I don’t want you to follow the same path I walked in. I regretted that I let your mum go without doing my best. And trust me, Skipper, I still love and will always love your mum till my last breath.”

When I turned to look at him, he was wearing a double-breasted suit which he hated for as long as I could remember. “I am not forcing you into this, Clyve. I can still manage, and this is what I did for seven years. And I am your big brother. And every big brother will do anything for his little brother.”

“And every little brother will do anything just to see his big brother happy.”

Chapter 33

The Visit

Arella

THE AIR blew my face as I walked outside my apartment building. It had been two weeks since Skip's father died. Our goodbyes were painful than I'd ever anticipated. I couldn't even look at him in the eyes because I didn't want him to go without telling him everything.

The moment he walked away, he took the other part of me.

"Reigh, I didn't plan on parting this way. I just want you to know that you are the best thing that ever happened in my life." He held my chin and lifted. "Look at me, please?" And I had no choice but to meet the sullen-filled eyes. "I love you."

I covered my head with the hood of Skip's sweater I took with me that night. My heart raced as I started running toward the peaceful neighborhood. This had been my routine every morning since Skip went back to London. It helped me not to sob against my pillow.

I found my usual spot—a small park. I sat on the bench when I felt my exhaustion. I haven't run for ten minutes, but I already felt drained. I cast my mind to the time after my divorce—it didn't hurt this way. Would this crushing devastation ever subside? Was there any pill or liquor to relieve the pain?

The chattering of a young couple caught my attention. The blond guy wiped the sweat off of her forehead by his shirt. The pang in my chest worsened as I remembered I did the same thing to Skip. I had to look away.

I rolled my eyes and groaned when another couple was strolling through the park. The guy wrapped his arm around his girl and kissed the top of her head. My eyes quickly stung of how the situation played me.

The torture didn't end there. A sudden flashback shot right through my brain. Skip was not an outdoorsy kind of guy. So he prepared breakfast for us even though he'd never done it before I came to his life. He even set his alarm an hour earlier than he usually did.

I stuck my AirPods, playing my playlist and ran again. My chest started to burn in an excruciating way—not from the exhaustion, but from how I was so damn selfish. He did something for me, and I did nothing in return. And for God's sake, he just lost his dad, and yet, I chose to stay when he badly needed me.

An hour later, I ran back to my apartment. A familiar car parked beside mine. I pulled my AirPods and walked toward Brett.

“Hey.” He saw me before I got closer to him.

“Hey.” I made sure my smile wasn’t forceful. I couldn’t remember the last time I smiled at anyone since post-Skip.

“How are you holding up?” I could see the sadness in his eyes no matter how hard he tried to hide.

“It’s only been two weeks, Brett. We constantly talked over the phone though. And he and Clyve seem okay.” I pulled my hood down.

His face fell, nodding. He knew how things affected me, and he knew why I couldn’t go with Skip. In one swift move, he pulled me into a hug, and it almost broke me down. I badly needed this. “We always have a choice, Are. How I wish you tell him how you feel before he left.”

Losing him was not an option if I had a choice. But I do have a choice.

My heart ached. I opened my mouth to speak, but my tears fell like they had their sympathy. If I only told him it might don’t hurt like this. It might lessen the burden. It might change something.

I let out a long deep shaky breath. “He’s not coming back, is he?”

Brett planted his chin above my head. I couldn’t hold it anymore. Even a strong woman broke down. My body shook as I sobbed harder on Brett’s arms. At least Skip loved me—he truly did.

“I didn’t! I was so stupid and thought men were born to hurt me just the way Dominic did. But deep inside, I know I can trust Skip with my heart. I love him, Brett. I never thought I’m such capable of loving someone this strong that blinds me.”

But I lost him.

“Everything will be okay, sweet corn.” Brett was rubbing my back in the parking lot, but it soothing.

I nodded speechless, hoping Brett was right.

Loosening my arms around Brett, I wiped my face. I stepped backward and looked at him. A sharp pain hit my gut when I met his gaze. I’d no doubt Brett was affected just like I was. His best friend’s dad just passed away and couldn’t do anything.

“He’s hurting, Are. Please, tell him the reason before he’ll lose his mind. He has the right to know, you know. You need to prove to him that you didn’t let him just walk away. You are both hurting, I can feel it, and it was unfair on his part that he didn’t get a chance to know why you couldn’t

come with him. He just lost his dad. He utterly feels that he lost you too.” Brett held my upper arm. “Please?”

I nodded. “Promise, I will.”

“Why didn’t you tell him you love him?”

I shrugged, crying again. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“It is, sis. But you also have to tell him how you feel. A man needs to hear it from the woman he loves.”

“Coming from the man who’s never been in love.” I looked at him. Now it might be too late to tell Skip face to face because he was thousands of miles away.

“It’s not too late. Never been. Oh, I almost forgot. You have a flight to catch, right?” He smiled warmly. “Can you kiss her for me?”

Tears of joy fell from my eyes. I chuckled, “Yes. later tonight.” I tiptoed to kiss Brett on his cheek. “I will kiss her for you. I love you, Brett.”

“I love you, sweet corn.”

* * *

ONCE AGAIN, I looked down at the entrance ticket on my hand before I placed it back inside my bag. Taking a deep breath, I made my way out of the hotel.

The cab pulled in front of the South Park school. Parents and their children rushed toward the entrance. My phone buzzed in my bag—this was probably Anna or Alys. It was a text from Alys indeed, saying they were already in the auditorium. I’d been here twice, and I knew already where to go. It was separate from the school buildings—a donation from one of the billionaires in Seattle.

As excited as I was to watch the show, I rushed inside and instantly found them on the third row. Alys already waved toward my direction as soon as I spotted her. My heartbeat thrummed in my ears, and I couldn’t wait to watch the whole performance of Rynna again.

“Hey!. How’s your flight?” Alys asked while squeezing me with a hug.

“Quick?” I chuckled. “I missed our last video call.” I hugged Anna, and so as Ferry.

They’d been busy searching for Rynna’s costume when they didn’t like the one they bought online. I suggested that I could search another in New York, but Alys said to give me time for myself since I wasn’t exactly at the right mind to even care for my food.

“It’s okay, Are. I’m glad you made it.”

"So, how are you?" Anna asked when we sat on our seats. She knew what happened to Skip's dad and how the things between us had ended. Not exactly ended since we still talked.

"I'm good. Thanks." I smiled timidly.

"At least not 'I'm fine'." Her words made me chuckle. "You should go to London, Are. Time is too short to waste moments. You two should be together right now. I know you made a promise, but sometimes you have to sacrifice somethings to make other things right. You don't have to stay there for good, and when you come back we're still here for you. That's a promise. We already talked, and we won't stop you if you want to tell him the truth."

I closed my eyes, living the moment of happiness I felt inside my chest. When I opened them, Ferry and Anna were smiling at me. They nodded in unison.

Alys gripped my shoulder and whispered, "You've been through hell, Are. We want you to be happy and be with him. It had been difficult for you for carrying these secrets for so long, and I admired you for keeping your sanity intact." She giggled.

"He has the right to know," Ferry seconded.

"Thank you, guys! I don't know how grateful I am for being there for me all these years. I didn't want to hurt you all, and I thought if I asked this thing from you, it would affect our agreements."

"It supposed was, but we couldn't ask for more," Ferry answered.

The emcee announced that the program was about to start at any moment, and the auditorium was almost full. Rynna was already at the backstage preparing for their performance.

A few moments later, the music played, and the first group started to sing. They were all wearing colorful fruit costumes. I hummed and to their sweet voices as they sang and moved accordingly. Kids always had a spot in my heart. I may have failed once, but I still believed I got another chance.

The group left the stage, then Rynna's group of insects walked to the center. She was a little bit taller than the rest and was placed at the center wearing a ladybug costume. She smiled sweetly when we waved at her. She was such a sweet little thing.

My heart swelled of how she grew up into a beautiful child. Her parents did a great job.

I ignored the sweet pang inside my chest when they started to sing and perform.

The proud dad continued clicking the camera on his hand, capturing the moments.

I barely heard the audience awwing in amazement. I focused my gaze on Rynna alone as I was afraid this would take a while before I got a chance to see her again.

A loud of applause roared inside the auditorium once they were done. We stood up and did a group hug out of joy.

“I’ll go take her from the backstage,” Ferry said, kissing his wife, then left us.

“We’ll take pictures when she comes,” Anna said. The excitement and happiness in her voice did a burning sensation in my chest.

My posture went rigid. The hair at the back of my neck suddenly lifted. Goosebumps crawled up everywhere in my body. I rubbed my exposed skin involuntarily.

My heart was beating madly in my chest.

There was a part inside me and in my brain that told me to do something. Then I let out a sigh and turned around.

Chapter 34

A Phone Call

Skip

A WEEK after my heart to heart with Clyve, we were on the same page. We finalized our decisions, and Mum was beyond terrified to hear the news. Clyve was right after all. What was I doing here when my life and my heart were left in States.

Arella made me think of my life in the future. It was not a question if I ever gave up my career for her. Call me a fool, but I believed in love and money couldn't buy happiness. Whether I would continue my father's legacy or not, it was all up to me. And Clyve was willing to trade his freedom over my happiness, but he didn't have to be impulsive for that when we had a lot of options to choose from.

She also changed my view on sex. I even deactivated my HeartRated account because I didn't need it anymore.

People could have had sex without love and relationship, but one thing Arella had taught me— it didn't feel the same when you were having sex with any woman compared with the one you loved. The touches, the orgasms, the moans, the every exerting effort, those kisses, the fuel she gave me that energized my body, the way she made me feel when I was buried deep inside her, and utmost feeling I had inside my heart only Arella could fill it again.

An attracted lass flirted in the pub, but there was no tingles, no excitement, and I couldn't feel the closeness and the connection the way I had with Arella.

So, what am I still sulking here?

I grabbed my phone on the nightstand. It was just passed ten In the evening, but I had to get up early for a flight to catch tomorrow. A faint buzzing interrupted my musing.

"Linton."

"Good evening. I hope I'm not interrupting you, Mr. Linton," a very American-ish answered from the other line. When it was from an unknown number I thought it was Eli. Sometimes he used any phone he could grab to call me when his phone ran out of battery.

"You're actually interrupting me, mate. Who is this?" I sat up, rubbing my tired eyes. "Haven't you noticed what time you're calling me?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Linton. I notice that, but I was busy—"

"Cut the bull, what do you want?" I groaned. Could some annoying solicitors, and I could have just hung up the call, but this man knew my name, and he wouldn't waste his time and money calling me from miles away if this was not supposed to be crucial.

"It's about Arella Rogue," he seemed to have a hard time saying those words to me, and that made me freeze.

Dread slithered into my chest. "Who the hell are you? What the fuck did you do to her? If you ever touch a single hair on her body, I will use all my power to hunt you down and I'll make sure you will rot in jail!"

"That won't be necessary. Just calm down." By the way, he said it, he made grit my teeth even more. "She's in no harm, and I don't have a plan on touching her or worse hurting someone dear to my wife and my family." His words made sense of relief in me, and I felt a stab of guilt for accusing him of harming Arella.

"Then what do you want? Where is she and why are you calling me at this time?"

I was already walking outside my room, down the stairs to grab something to drink when he introduced himself. "I'm Lt. Ferry Frias Byrne. I worked in a gov't agency, and my wife is a close friend of your girlfriend, Are for a long time. You probably heard about Alys and Anna. Anna is my wife and Are's therapist. Do you have some time or if you have a plan to come to States I'd really like to talk to you in person."

"I apologize for my rude behavior earlier. It's just that you probably know what she'd been through. And if something happens to her, I felt helpless that I can't even protect her while I'm a thousand miles away."

"I know. And I heard about your dad. I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Linton."

"Thank you, Lt. Byrne. I have a flight tomorrow evening to New York. I'll arrange my schedule and let you know as soon as I arrived."

"Just Ferry, and I hope you don't mind if I call you Skip."

"No, please, I don't mind at all."

"You might wanna change your flight to Seattle and Are will be here tomorrow in the morning to watch my daughter's play."

I froze at the mentioned of the word daughter. How old was she? Could have been the same age as my baby if she could have been alive? I swallowed the thickness forming in my throat of jealousy.

Arella mentioned to me about visiting her friends and occasionally had a video call with them.

I cleared my throat. "I'd like to take a flight right now if there is any." My voice cracked at the end. I gazed blindly into the darkened window in my flat, wondering if my daughter would look like me or her mother?

Tears stung my eyes when the call ended. Why did I feel there was something more? I called Eli to change my flight from LHR to SEA instead of JFK.

* * *

IF IT wasn't due to my exhaustion, I wasn't able to sleep the entire flight. The undercurrent frustration swept through me, and I couldn't just drunk in that call. I still had this strange feeling that there was more than that than just meeting Arella today.

Ferry arranged a ride for me from the SEA to the hotel Eli had booked for me. I dialed his number quickly as soon as I entered the hotel room. I haven't told Arella that I was coming back to States, but her brother was already aware.

Ferry immediately answered, "How's the flight?"

"Exhausting, but thanks for the ride, Ferry. Let me just take a quick shower, then I'll be heading to the address you sent."

"Good. We'll see you there then. The ride still waiting for you. Bye!"

After a short shower and wearing something presentable, I looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't have much time to clean up. I just combed my hair with my fingers after blowing it dry. I should probably cut it short since I should look like a CEO.

I chuckled. Since when I cared how did I look like in front of my employees? It still sounded odd in my ears to be a chief executive officer of the company Dad had built.

The ride to the school was awfully silent. I stared out of the highway trying to calm myself. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been nervous like this that my heart felt as if it would burst. For what reason, I certainly didn't have a clue.

I thanked the driver and sent a message to Ferry. He militarily typed the direction. I rolled my eyes and slipped my phone in my pockets. I approached and asked the security. He explained but told me I couldn't get inside because I didn't have a ticket. Funny!

When I reached the auditorium, an old woman stopped me and smiled brightly, pushing her glasses up her nose. "You must be related to Rynna Byrne?" *Byrne?*

I smiled back. "Yeah, I am. I just came from a long flight, and it would be lovely if you could help me get inside. I wanted to watch my niece, please?" My lie just came out natural.

“Of course, dear.”

“Thank you, ma’am!”

After she talked to the man on the door, she gestured me to come in. I thanked her again. The auditorium filled with parents and families, and kids wearing bugs costumes were currently on the stage, singing. I remembered myself back when I was young like them. I always wanted to be a soldier and Clyve a journalist, but none of us followed those dreams. The performance ended, and the crowds erupted with cheers. I found myself applauding for them.

Kids walked out of the stage, and the parents stood from their sits. Ferry caught my eye and with probably his wife. He sent me his picture earlier just in case I needed it. Then there she was. I couldn’t have been wrong. It was Arella—my Arella. The way my heart slammed against my ribs when I saw her.

Joy flooded through me. Even she was just a few steps away, I found myself in distress. I wanted to stride towards her and pull her in my arms, but I was afraid she’d be out of my sight.

Then as if she felt me staring at her, she stiffened, then rubbed her arms warily. A few seconds later she turned slowly.

My world suddenly stilled. Our gazes locked. I swore I saw her eyes glowed and grew wider. Feared of being lost in my sight, I never blinked, and the anticipation of her being in my arms again was million times stronger than before. A few people passed by blocking us made my head tilt. Then in just a moment, Arella was gone.

Jesus!

Where the hell is she?

At my height and I was at the elevated area, how did I lose her? I felt suddenly drained that I could barely stand, but I knew I would see her again eventually. I let out a sigh in frustration and closed my eyes to calm my heartbeat. Taking a deep breath, the faint sweet smell of cheery and vanilla hit my nostrils that made me stiff.

Chapter 35

Acceptance

Arella

OH MY God! *He is really here.*

Thank, God!

I went out of the row to the corner where I could easily get out from the crowd. He was closing his eyes when I stepped closer. I kept my eyes on him the entire time as I was afraid I lost him out of my sight.

“Skip?” I could feel the trembling of my hands when I reached out. The jolt of perfectness and the warmth spread all over in my cold body.

His eyes flew open in surprise. “God, Reigh!” Awestruck, his widened eyes flitting back and forth on me. His big hands cupped my face, thumbs gently caressing my cheeks.

I closed my eyes to cherish each moment that I missed so much. I didn’t hear any word from him anymore. It seemed that he was still processing the moment if it was just a dream or surreal. Just like what I was doing. His thumb moved down to my lips, tracing gently, then stopped.

I released his hands and closed the distance between us, wrapping my arms around him as I buried my nose into his chest. I was instantly intoxicated with his smell. He smelled the same—the man I loved so much.

“I missed you. I missed you so much. I thought I would never see you again. God knows I planned to travel just to be with you. After what happened to your dad, I realized something, that I shouldn’t have waited for so long. I’m so sorry. I don’t think I would be sane if it’s not because of you. And just by talking to you over the phone, I knew it wasn’t enough. I need you, and I want to be with you, Skip.”

Skip didn’t say another word, and that bothered me. He didn’t even hug me back either.

Was it too late?

Blinking off the tears that blurred my sight, I lifted my gaze, and that was when I saw Skip’s eyes shimmering with tears. “You don’t have to travel far, Arella.”

My heart sank, and I felt a stab after a stab. “Y-you don’t want me anymore?”

He took a few moments before a frown wrinkled his forehead. “Why would you say that? I came back because of you.”

“Oh? What about your business?”

“I love you too.” A slow smile spread across his face.

The euphoria buzzed my brain and made me tizzy. I could feel my eyes widened a little.

“I-I didn’t say I love you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Um, can we get out of here for a moment? I have something to tell you.” I grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the crowded auditorium before it was too late.

“I missed you, Reigh. But I have a lot of things to discuss with you.”

“I know.” We certainly had a lot of things to discuss. My heart thudded loudly as we walked out to the parking lot. I stopped in front of the Ferry’s SUV. I opened the door and grabbed my tote bag from the captain’s seat.

“This is not what I think it is, love.”

I turned around to see him grinning mischievously. It was contagious, and I found myself grinning back. “No, silly. I might miss you terribly, but I’m not gonna have sex with you in their car.”

“Who said I was talking about sex?” I heard the teasing on his voice.

“I was not born yesterday.” I rolled my eyes.

Skip trying to suppress his smile, he said, “Then what it is?”

My heart caught in my throat, but I managed to smile back.

Taking a deep breath, I unlatched the strap of my bag and about to unravel my secret when I heard Ferry calling Skip from our back.

My body stiffened when I realized one thing. Did he just call him Skip? Did Ferry know he was coming?

When I whipped around, Skip was freezing on his place, but his wide eyes transfixed between Ferry and Anna—to Rynna.

My throat was parched. My entire body trembled as I watched Skip stepping closer toward them, robotically.

Tears stung my eyes. The sight of them together was difficult to bear—it was almost unreal, yet it was the most surreal of my life—it was beautiful and terrifying.

What if?

Skip knelt and said nothing—devoted a few moments to dutifully gawked at her. Then I saw the trembling hands reaching out with uncertainty as he held her arms. Ferry said it's okay to Rynna. He then pulled her into a hug.

My tears fell like a stream. My chest was heaving as I watched them in awe.

"Your eyes!" Rynna gushed.

I sighed in relief, feeling relieved that I finally had myself freed from years of secrecy. I hugged myself and cried alone.

Despite my frazzled state, I laughed a little. She was bullied as scary eyes sometimes, but now she looked amazed to see that she was not alone having unique eyes in the world.

Skip chuckled as he wiped his face. "Yes! And I think we have the same eyes, pretty girl. Oh, where are my manners? I'm Skip by the way, and I'm your dad's friend and Are is my um, good friend." Skip held his hand out, and Rynna smiled shyly and shook his big hands playfully.

"You have a big hand, Mr. Skip. "She giggled. "I'm Rynna."

"You're so beautiful, Rynna."

"You are pretty handsome too, Mr. Skip. I like your hair because guys usually don't keep their hair long." She reached out to touch his hair. "I like Harry's, but he cut his hair short though."

"Who is Harry, sweetheart?" I could feel the curiosity in Skip's voice.

"Harry Styles from 1D."

"Huh! Well, Rynna. Mr. Skip's hair is quite better than Harry's, yeah?" Skip used his thick Londoner accent, making Rynna giggled more.

"See, Daddy? He sounds like Harry." Rynna turned to her dad.

"Then we should probably treat Mr. Skip to your favorite ice cream parlor, right?" Ferry suggested.

"Sure, Daddy. If Mr. Skip would like to come with us, that would be awesome." Rynna was literally jumping with still her ladybug costume on. A smile of joy transformed her face.

"I'd love that. Can I ask another tiny favor?" Skip asked, gesturing his fingers.

"Sure, Mr. Skip."

“Can I get a hug again before we go to your favorite Ice cream—”

Rynna launched herself to Skip before he could finish his words.

The scene crushed my heart. I couldn't stop myself from wiping off my tears. Anna and Alys gave me a smile of assurance that everything would be okay.

Skip laughed with her.

Blood is really thicker than water.

“So, it means we're friends now?” Skip offered his pinky finger.

“Sure, if that's okay with mom and dad, and Aunt Alys and Aunt Are?”

“Oh. So, should I pass from them first, sweetheart?”

“I guess so.” She shrugged her shoulders, making us all laugh.

“I'll treat them ice cream then, so I can pass the test.”

“I love ice cream, too.”

My heart hammered in my chest when Skip stood up, then turned around. Our eyes met. My world had stopped for a moment. His eyes were expressive as if he wanted to ask a million questions at the same time.

Without a doubt, he knew. What was he going to do now?

I looked down as guilt and dread were slicing my heart into two. I couldn't move nor speak as the thuds of his footsteps got closer, and as I just watched his shadow started to hover me.

“F-forgive me.” That was the first thing came out from my mouth.

For seconds I waited for his reply, but I heard nothing.

He moved closer, then the last thing I knew was he pulled me into his arms, hugging me so tightly as I shook to sob.

“Don't ever apologize for making the right thing. She's alive, Reigh, and in good hands. They love her like their own. I couldn't even prouder of you, and I knew it since the first time I met you that you were the strongest girl I've ever met. I knew it wasn't easy to decide on your own, yet you pulled yourself together. And for that, you made me love you more than I already did.”

“The moment I saw her face I knew it, and I instantly felt the pull. I knew without a doubt that she was mine, Reigh.”

“God, God knows how much I badly wanted to tell you every day, and I felt terrible for keeping it from you.”

“Hush. It’s okay. When you chose to stay over going with me to London, I couldn’t even open my mouth to ask you who’s she. Then it hit me now, so bloody hard, that I was a jealous and giddy asshole over my child. It feels awful that I even cursed.” He laughed softly with amusement. He then released me, cupping my face. “Look at me, Reigh.”

I lifted my chin, and I met the most beautiful smile that I’d been yearning for a long time. His unique colored-eyes shone with love and amazement. “When you and Brett were talking at your parents’ house, it’s about Rynna, isn’t it? He knew.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“God, I wanna kiss you so bad, but they’re waiting for us.” He planted a kiss on my forehead. “I love you more. I can’t guarantee you anything, except I love you and I will love you for the rest of my life, Reigh. And I will make you the happiest person on the planet. That’s why I am here today; for the rest of our lives, for you and me. And for Rynna.”

Chapter 36

Her Eyes

Skip

BEING her in my arms again, feeling her warm body against me, smelling her scents, listening to our heartbeats was still a dream to me—it felt like I was floating above the clouds. The feeling of satisfaction—the completeness was overwhelming, and I could definitely live this kind of life forever.

There was no such thing as perfect, but this was the meaning of perfect for me—to be with Arella. Where ever Dad was right now, I knew he would be proud of me because I chose to follow my heart.

I was in razor-edge with the urge of kissing Arella inside the auditorium. I bloody and terribly missed her, and it was insane of how I managed to remain compos mentis away from her for two bloody weeks. Maybe because if I came back and I didn't have to worry about what I left behind?

I hadn't seen Ferry in person other than the picture he sent to me, but the voice that called my name from my back was definitely him. He was a huge man and at least older than me by a few years. A dark haired-woman, that was probably his wife gave me a warm welcoming smile. Then a child wearing a bug costume, squinting her eyes from the sun had my heart almost stopped from beating. She was craning her neck as she talked to her mum. All of a sudden, something inside me had awakened, and it was bizarre that I couldn't even explain.

My smile froze.

My heart utterly suspended when our gazes locked. My body stilled for seconds, and the world seemed to slow down. I could feel the goosebumps erupted all over my skin.

While our eyes still glued, I found my feet walking towards them as if I was being drawn. Once I was close enough, I now saw her crystal clear, making my heart thundered in my chest profoundly. Her angelic face reminded me of someone. My eyes watered for an unknown reason, but I could probably give one—I was overwhelmed—overwhelmed to see this child in front of me.

Jesus Christ!

My breathing slowed down a bit when she smiled at me shyly. Her parents released her hands. And when I was in an arm's length, I was beyond shocked to the core, making my knees weakened and knelt. I shivered—her eyes.

My limbs were still shaking. Tears finally fell from my eyes. She looked at me as if she was examining my face. Her eyeballs were flitting from my hair to my eyes and stilled for a few seconds as if she couldn't believe what she saw then moved down to my jaw.

My trembling hands raised tentatively as I was afraid to scare her. Then I held her arms when I couldn't take it anymore. I pulled her into a hug.

She gasped and stiffened, probably from surprise as to why a stranger was hugging her, then she relaxed a few seconds later. I could feel her tiny body, her smell. Good Lord, her smell—she smelled just like her mum. The smell that I'd been dreaming about and missing for seven years. How could this even possible?

When I released her, I thought I scared her away, but she was beaming at me. She just looked like her mother—her hair, her nose, and the shape of the face. I couldn't contain my happiness anymore. And I felt something deep inside me lightened up.

"Your eyes!" she gushed. Then her tiny hand was touching my face, just below my eyes.

My mind just blew away.

I just lost my father, but I got someone that was a huge part of my being and found out that she was actually alive. Judging on how she grew up into the most beautiful and wonderful kid there was no doubt that her adopted parents were good people. And they still gave Arella chances to see her.

* * *

RYNNA sandwiched between me and Arella at her dad's SUV, riding to the ice cream parlor. Alys, Arella's best friend received a phone call and had to leave early.

Rynna was an enthusiastic kid, talking about her performance throughout the ride, then she changed the topic. "So, Mr. Skip, did you meet Harry Styles?"

I smiled at how she addressed me. A tiny pang of jealousy swirled in the pit of my stomach though. How I wished I was the one in Ferry's, but things happened for a reason, and she seemed so happy and grew up like a normal kid.

I looked down at her, and she was tilting her head to look up at me. "I will answer that if you will drop the mister and just call me Skip."

"But Mom and Dad said I should respect older people."

Her mom laughed softly at the passenger seat. "Honey, you can call him Skip from now on. He's Aunt Are's good friend." Aunt Are.

I blinked and shook the thought off of my brain.

“Okay, then. You can answer my question now, Skip.”

“Okay, thank you, Anna. Well, unfortunately, I haven’t met Harry Styles in person, but maybe one day we can arrange and go to his concert. How does it sound?”

Her hand held my thigh. With wide eyes, she gushed, “Really? I would love to!”

“Sure. I will check out online about his concert schedule.” I hoped one day, I could tell her how I met her mother.

Arella seemed so quiet, and with what had happened earlier it felt like unreal to me. It was too good to be true, but I knew I was not dreaming. And I didn’t notice she was actually staring at me, smiling. I couldn’t help but smile back and showed her that everything between us was great.

At the Rynna’s favorite Ice cream parlor, we found an empty table, and Rynna chose to sit beside me, still smiling sweetly.

“Ry-Ry, honey, give Skip a break,” her mum chuckled.

“I like him, mom!”

My heart just melted. Jesus, what do I get to deserve all these? Arella gripped my thigh under the table.

“I like you, too, sweetheart.” I tucked a strand of her blonde hair that loosened from the braid behind her ear, causing her to giggle. How could I leave this place without breaking down? She was just lovely.

Out of the blue, she blurted out, “Can I braid your hair?”

“Oh?” My brow arched. I chuckled, and so as her mum. “You want to braid my hair? Did you happen to do yours on your own?”

“No.” She shook her head, pouting a little, and caught her braided hair. “Mum did this for me.”

“It’s okay. You can do mine.” I didn’t have any idea why I hadn’t cut my hair, but if I had to spend a lot of time with her, I would rather keep it long, and she could do whatever she wanted as long as I could see the smile on her face.

“Yes! Thank you, Skip!” She faced her mum. “Did you hear that? He said I could braid his hair.”

“You are in deep trouble, Skip.” Ferry returned with a tray of ice cream in cups. He placed down a cup in front of his wife, and for Are and me. I chose the same flavor as Arella’s. Then I noticed what he ordered for Rynna. It was a strawberry cheesecake with syrup and fresh strawberries on top. I inwardly shook my head in amusement. Just like mother like daughter.

* * *

THE BYRNES sent us to the hotel. I couldn't just go without another hug from Rynna. I lifted her and hugged her, and she instantly wrapped her little arms around my neck and giggled. I closed my eyes, hoping this was not my last moment with my daughter. She may not be mine legally, but she was still mine by blood and nothing was going to change that.

"Thank you for the wonderful treat, Rynna."

"You're welcome!"

"Be a good girl always, okay?" I looked at her in the eyes one more time and smiled.

"Do I get a chance yo braid your hair?"

I nodded. I didn't want to disappoint her. "Of course, sweetheart. Your mom and dad will tell me when can I see you again, okay?"

"Okay." She suddenly turned shy when I put her down, and it made me uneasy.

My brows met. "What it is, sweetheart?"

"Can I ask you something?"

I smiled, trying to lighten up. "Of course, anything."

"Why do we have the same eyes?"

My jaw dropped. For a moment my brain suddenly froze. I honestly didn't know what to answer. I cleared my throat and looked at her parents, who were waiting for us. Judging by the look on their faces, they were not expecting Rynna to ask me that question.

I held her hands. God, help me. "Rynna, there are other people around the world have different eye color like us. As you grow up, you will see and meet them everywhere. And we may have different eye color, but just remember this. We're cool and awesome."

She beamed, "I know right? We're awesome!"

"Yeah. We definitely are!"

Everyone sighed. Thank, God!

"Don't I get a hug now, Ry-Ry?" Arella asked.

"Of course, Aunt Are." She launched herself to Are. It was quite a view to watch how close they were even though Rynna wasn't aware who was Arella to her.

“Anna, Ferry, I can’t thank you enough for that call and—” I took a deep breath. “And for giving me a chance to meet her. Although I know and maybe that was not a part of the plan, I wanna thank you both!” How I wished this would not end. I turned to look at Rynna, and she was still talking to her mother. I could see the love and adoration in Arella’s eyes, and Rynna was fancy of her as well.

My heart swelled.

“You won’t take her away from us, will you?” Ferry tensed.

My brows furrowed. “Why would I? Jesus, no! I can love her as a father without taking her away from you. Honestly, I feel awful and guilty for saying terrible things to Arella, but I can see now how you both are so important to her and how much she loves you. And the last thing I would do is to hurt her feelings. You both give her everything like the real loving parents would. I’ve no doubt she’s mine, and I can feel it in my blood and my heart, but I should respect her mother’s decisions. You don’t know how happy I am right now that you all allow me to see her and be a part of her life.”

Ferry seemed to relax, nodding slowly.

“Thank you so much, Skip.”

“No, Anna. Please, don’t thank me. Thank you so much for being a wonderful mom. And if you two need anything, I’m here. I’m offering this as a friend, and not because of my daughter.”

Chapter 37

Seven Years Ago

Arella

WITH SHAKY limbs, I made my way into the elevator. Skip followed. He had not said a word after bidding goodbye to them. And now, I could pass out with nervousness and worry.

Honestly, I didn't know what to say.

The door closed in front of us. He pressed the number eleven button. The elevator lifted, and each change of the digits made my heart race. I wondered if he would ever see me the same person again. He said he loved me more. Did he mean it? Because now that just the two of us, he had not said anything. It felt like he distanced himself from me and suddenly turned stone cold.

Argh! I'm over-thinking it, ain't I?

The elevator dinged on the eleventh floor. I felt his hand on my lower back, but he remained silent, and I couldn't even turn to look at him. I was afraid to see his raging face and hear the fury in his words.

Unable to fight the tears forming in my eyes, I stopped in the middle of the hallway.

I waited for a moment and raised my chin to face him, and my chest was already heaving. "Why are you not talking to me?"

Skip didn't make eye contact, just grabbed my hand and dragged me, but I stilled on my feet. He groaned, briefly closing his eyes. A squeal escaped from me when he scooped me, lifted me, and threw me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing.

"Skip!" I wiggled, and all I got was a smack on my butt. "Put me down, please?"

Skip ignored and unlocked the room. Once we were inside, he kicked the door closed and threw me to the bed. I bounced, and it knocked the air out of my lungs.

"What was that for?"

I earned nothing. Complete disappointment flooded through me.

Panicking, I abruptly sat on the bed when Skip still didn't say anything. I was beyond worried about how his face seemed emotionless. With tight jaw, he shrugged off his suit jacket and kicked off his shoes, then sat silently at the edge of the bed. His elbows propped on his knees and his hands were cupping his face.

All of a sudden, his body shook. My eyes bulged out of each socket to witness Skip sobbing.

Oh, my God! No, no, no.

I almost had a heart attack with worries, and here he was crying. Slowly, I dragged myself and moved closer to him. Pressing myself against his back, I wrapped my arms around him. I could now feel all his emotions he'd been concealing all this time.

I pressed my nose on his head and sucked his scent that always calmed, but my eyes were leaking tears again. With him. He then took my hands and planted gentle kisses on each finger. He continued crying, and so did I.

I closed my eyes for a moment and felt him, listening to his breathing and heartbeat. He said he came for me before he met Rynna. Did something change on us now?

"Say something, please? You're killing me." My words broke, but I felt his hands still on mine.

"I don't know what to say, Reigh. You blow me away. What happened today seemed unreal, but here I am, crying my bloody arse out because I know it happened and everything is real." He released my hand and faced me, wiping his tears.

My tears never stopped falling when I looked at him so sad, yet happy. He wiped my tears and finally smiled—the smile of acceptance, and he also blew me away.

"Don't cry, please?" he said with a pleading voice.

"Yet you are crying." I let out a soft laugh.

"Couldn't help it. I could've lost my mind if I think of how you managed to do that all by yourself. For nine months, then." He shook his head. The guilt flashed in his eyes. He then looked away.

"Christ! I couldn't believe I accused you of something."

"We did and said terrible things, Skip, but that's the good thing because what we said and done was already in the past."

He slowly nodded. "She's just beautiful. Just like her mother." His chin trembled.

"And she got your eyes." And that, he cried even more.

Good God! Skip was crying, and I couldn't help it anymore. I pulled him into my arms and hugged him tightly.

I lied down, and he placed his head on my shoulder. I could feel him sucking the air through his nose, taking my scents.

"I was so scared that day when I saw blood. I felt relieved when the doctor told me it was normal to have spotting. That was when I realized I should keep the baby."

"I was already three months when I finished high school. Mom and Dad didn't like the idea that I should stop for a year. I was thrilled when they finally agreed, and Dad said I could take a break. I tried to lose weight because I couldn't let my family know that I was pregnant at eighteen. They thought I study hard were in fact, I almost failed. A day after graduation, I and Alys flew here because a week after that Brett would come home, and I couldn't let him find out. He expects a lot from me, Skip."

"I still talked to my family though, and I missed Brett a lot. They thought I traveled, but I was pregnant with Rynna." I shrugged. "And that guilt was eating me alive for seven years."

"I could've met you there if I came to see Brett, right?"

Skip hummed.

"Then Alys told her sister about my situation. They're newly-wed that time, and Anna wanted to have a child. And I couldn't." I took a deep breath and sniffed. "I couldn't raise a child alone, but God knows how much I wanted to take my child home with me. I don't want to be a disappointment to my family at the same time, and I was only eighteen, Skip. I couldn't kill an innocent child, too. Alys and the Byrnes took care of me, gave me home, and provided what I needed." I looked down at Skip and he was still in the same position with eyes closed. I knew he was listening as he was hugging me tighter and tighter.

"Then when she came, and her eyes..." I sobbed harder, shaking my head. That was the best feeling in the whole world. "I-I t-thought of you a lot, Skip. Your eyes and your smile. That was what kept me sane. "

"I couldn't imagine what you've been through, though I know you're not alone. I just wished I was there with you. And fuck me what was I doing that time while you were suffering. It made me an awful person, Reigh. Then when I came back, all I did was to make you cry, threw you with hurtful words when you should be the one should hurting me for being an asshole, and not the other way around."

"Stop blaming yourself. You were not aware of my situation, and I lied to you that I was on a pill. Let's bury the hatchet, Skip." I caught my lip between my teeth, then he lifted his head and looked at me with furrowed brows. But I didn't miss the amusement flickered in his eyes.

"Huh!"

"That's it? Huh?"

“Well, we can’t take it back anymore, can we? And I could have checked the drawer or their luggage. I know they have plenty.”

“Oh?” Why it didn’t come into my mind?

“Oh? That’s it?”

“Why do I always forget things when I’m with you?”

“You asked that like a thousand times. To answer your question, you should definitely forget things when I’m with you, love.” Skip quickly hovered me. He met my gaze—a kind of gaze that could penetrate through my soul. The desire and love were pooling in his eyes. He kissed me quickly and crawled out of bed.

My brows furrowed. “Where are you going?”

“Not going anywhere.” He unbuttoned his shirt, unzipped his pants, and took off his socks.

I momentarily stunned when he turned to me.

“What are you waiting? To let me rip your clothes off from your body?” He smirked. His manhood already bulged against his white boxers.

I hid my smile, crawling lazily out of bed, causing him to groan.

“Hurry up, Arella.”

The more I made myself slower like a sloth.

“Don’t test me, woman!”

I faced him, rolling my eyes. “Then you should be helping me.” I was already on my underwear when he strode to my side, rounding at my back.

Skip hastily unclasped my bra, slipping it off my arms, then not wasting any seconds, he shoved my panties down my ankles. I stepped out leisurely, granting me another guttural roar.

“Ugh!”

Skip sank his teeth on the round of my butt—it definitely stung. But then, he licked the area where he bit me. A shudder rippled through me. It was so arousing that I had to fist my hands and close my eyes.

“Wanna try to defy me again?” His hand was already on my inner thigh, tracing up slowly, then stopped just a thread-thin to my sex—my wet sex. The anticipation made me catch my breath. Then a moment later, nothing happened.

“Skip,” I called him in a shaky voice.

“Yes, love?” I could feel him grinning at my back. He continued to torture me on my other thigh, and I could feel his warm breath on my bare butt.

“Take steps forward until your knees reach the bed.”

I followed what he said, or rather ordered.

“Turn around.” His voice thickened.

So I did.

“Sit down.”

I sat down. Before I could talk he stopped me with another command. “Just do what I say. Now lie your back. Flat.” I did and I found myself exposed and vulnerable. The temperature of the room seeped through my bare skin, but I didn’t shiver because of it—It was from how Skip commanded me. It slightly terrified me, but it turned me on so much. I could feel the coldness as the air blew my exposed sex. I was dripping wet.

“Skip.” I bit my lip and closed my eyes.

“Reigh,” he said with a groan. “Spread your thighs wider for me.”

What?

Before I could protest, my body voluntarily did.

Chapter 38

Raw Emotions

Skip

What a beautiful sight?

MY HEART swelled that this was all mine. My arousal was about to burst at any moment, but I had patience in myself. My priorities now were to satisfy my woman in every way possible to mankind, and one of them was to give her a mind-blowing orgasm.

Gripping her thighs and spreading them apart, I sighed in wonderment. She was soaking wet for me, and I was so damn proud, and I could already smell her arousal. I buried my nose to her wet, swollen, and warm folds—it made me salivate.

Fuck!

She smelled rich and pure.

“Skip!”

“Yes, Reigh?” I lifted my head. Her eyes were closed, chest heaving. Her nipples peaked, and I ached to tug them between my teeth. Her hands fisted the sheet. “Feels good?”

“Yes,” she replied between moans.

“Haven’t started yet, love.” I used to control and decide in bed. I decided how I should fuck a woman, how deep, how rough, how long, how many orgasms should I gave, but I threw it out the window a long time ago when I met Arella again. All I could think was to satisfy her.

Dipping my head down, I swept my tongue on her wet nether lips. Her loud moan almost made me come as I was already burning inside. Pushing my tongue between her folds, I slid inside slowly and she welcomed me with warmth and sweet taste.

“Skipper!” *That’s it, love. Just my name.* My name just sounded like a king coming from her.

I pressed my thumb on her clit, rubbing rhythmically. And I delved back my tongue inside her. I wanted her to lose control and just think of how she came in my tongue. Her back arched, and she moans louder and louder as I removed my thumb and lightly sucked her clit instead. My grip tightened on her thighs as she was writhing with pleasure.

“God, Skipper!” And that was it, I rewarded her with a thug of her clit, and she went wild. Her hand flew to my hair, gripping it, pushing me down. It should be painful, but it had aroused me even more.

She squirmed against my tongue as I pushed inside her again, then her inner muscles pulsed. She screamed like she didn’t care about the world, struggled, then shuddered as her orgasm shocked through her.

It was devastatingly beautiful.

“My God!” Breathing heavily, her legs sagged. I stood up and pushed my boxers down. My aching cock showed how my hunger on her intensified. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand when she slowly opened her eyes and able to regain her sense to help herself up.

“On your stomach.”

She stiffened but did as I say. She positioned herself on all fours, but that was not how I wanted to do it tonight.

“No, Reigh. Flat.”

She glanced at me, down to my harder than ever cock. It had been two weeks since I was inside her, and now I was about to come just the way she looked at me.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m barely hanging on a fine tread. Don’t make me jerk off on the bed.” I was trying to calm my cock down because I was afraid that I might come in a second once I was deep inside her. I never lost my control during sex, but with Reigh, it was always possible.

Crawling down to bed, I straddled her and supported my weight with my elbows and forearms. I sucked her exposed neck that I knew it would leave kiss bite. She moaned with pleasure, and I was fighting myself harder.

“I never did this before,” she said lazily with her voice laced with desire and anticipation.

“Glad to hear that.” I bit her shoulder then licked it. I lowered down the hard ridge of my erection just between her arse’s cheeks. She responded to me by arching it.

“Don’t. Just trust me.”

“I badly want you inside me.”

“So do I, Reigh. You have no idea.”

Arella whimpering made me groan as I slowly and achingly pushed my cock inside her.

Fuck!

She just welcomed me home. My veins bulged everywhere. I let out a shaky breath. I put my strength altogether not to come right away. I delved my face on her neck, my nose to her head, inhaling her jasmine, honey, and chocolate scents.

Her *scent* was magnificent and arousing.

“Skipper,” she moaned my name. I knew she wanted me to move, but I had to feel her, her heat, our body, and her walls clamping tightly around me.

My balls were aching for release, but I needed this moment. This unbearable intensity I only felt it with Arella.

“Do you feel me, Reigh? Do you feel us? We’re perfectly perfect. After all these years, our bond has never been broken. Everything that crumbled down between us has begun to put back together. That’s us. The impossible things become possible when we are together.” I pulled out completely, and she sucked her breath.

“Did you hear me?” My voice was firm, but not intimidating. I positioned my tip again, and she arched her arse with urgency.

“Yes, yes! I heard you. Oh, please?”

“Don’t beg now, Reigh. I will give you everything you ask just don’t beg.” I thrust inside her again, and it was my time to feel breathless at the sensation when she tightened around me, and I was so deep inside her—deeper than the usual. Determine and desperate to make her come before me, I quickened my thrust and sucked her scent into my senses while grabbing her hands and pinning them with me.

“I don’t think I can take it. God!”

“Yes you can, and you will.” I gripped tighter as she tried to loosen her hands.

She whimpered, shuddered, and moaned as her orgasm was about to explode. I quickened my thrust as I couldn’t last any longer, then she spasmed around me. Fires surged through my veins. I shut my eyes closed as I lost myself in the overwhelming sensation of the pleasure of being inside her.

“Reigh.”

My eyes rolled back, and my muscles clenched everywhere, and I almost forgot to breathe when she purred like a kitten under me with my name under her breath.

My orgasm tailed. “Fuck!” It ripped through my body with such a powerful force that my vision darkened for a moment, then I collapsed on top of her.

A moment later, I regained back my senses. Arella had not moved a muscle.

“Love?” My voice was a little shaky, or I just panicked.

“Hmm.”

“You okay, love?”

She turned her head, opening her sleepy eyes. “That was intense.”

I moved to my side and reached out for her to lie down beside me. After covering ourselves with the blanket, I pulled her into my arms and kissed the top of her head.

She started stroking my chest. “I was imagining stroking your chest’s hair the first time I saw your picture on the HeartRated.”

“I’m gonna break every bone in his body if I happen to bump into him in the future.” I stared at her indignantly.

“Really?” She laughed with my snarky attitude.

“That’s a promise.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Thank you, Arella.”

We fell into silence for a moment. When I looked down, she was grinning at me. Her eyes were glowing with love and cheerfulness.

“What?” I smiled, kissing her softly on her lips.

“Nothing.” She shrugged.

“Arella,” I warned her.

“It’s just I thought I was too late to telling you how I feel.”

I cupped the back of her head and kissed her more passionately, slowly, and poured all my emotions as if telling her it would never be too late. I ignored my cock as it thickened again. I just wanted her to feel how much she meant to me. I knew how hard to breathe without her in my life. I knew how it felt when she was in my arms, and I would never trade her with anything the world could offer. I will always choose her.

“I love you, Arella.”

“I love you more.”

“Not the way I love you.”

“Ugh! Just shut up and accept that—”

The loud knocking on our door made us both freeze.

“Shit! What time is it?”

“Who’s in there, Skipper?” she whispered with a panicking voice.

“You brother.”

“What?” Her eyes grew big. “Why my brother is here and knocking at our door?” she pried, and I knew I owed her answers.

“Relax.” I kissed the top of her head and crawled out of bed. I picked up my boxers when I heard another knock on the door.

Impatient!

Arella was already out of bed, stark naked, and I couldn’t help but admire her for being so comfortable now with her body. I honestly like her shape; more toned and her effort to stay fit was admirable.

“Love, what are you doing?”

She glared. “My brother is outside that door, and you’re asking me what I’m doing?”

“He will not come inside, and even if he insists I won’t let him. Go take a shower or soak yourself in a tub. Be there in a minute. He just brought your things here.”

“What exactly is going on?”

“Just trust me.” I leaned closer, kissing her again. Before I could deepen the kiss I heard Bretton calling my name.

“Linton!”

“See?” I shrugged. “I’m bloody coming!”

Arella running towards the bathroom made me chuckle. I walked out toward the door and opened it with stoic looked. “What?”

“For fuck’s sake, wear something, you asshole.” He eyed me in disgust, but I saw the glint of a smile in his eyes.

“Start respecting me from now on, Bretton.” I grabbed Arella’s suitcase on the floor when I sensed he was about to ask something.

“Not now.”

“Then hurry up. You won’t let my parents wait, will you?”

“What the—”

Chapter 39

Good News

Arella

AT THE Byrne's, I was terrified. Skip just informed me earlier that my parents were here. At first, I just stared at him in horror for a good minute. I wanted to argue for not asking my opinion about this matter, but it was too late, and maybe this was the right moment I'd been waiting for.

How far did they know about Ry-Ry?

Minute passed by so slow, and I was getting more nervous than being in the delivery room and during my divorce hearing. The fact that I kept this for six years, at this moment I didn't know how my parents would react, and let alone they were about to meet their first granddaughter, and I was supposed to be the one watching Rynna grew up, and not the Byrnes, but nothing was going to change the past now.

"Relax, Are. Ferry and Skip are right, we can't keep your parents in the dark for the rest of their lives, can we? And I know it has been so hard for you, so whatever is going to happen tonight consider it as a new chapter of your life." Anna gripped my knee as we settled in their living room.

"They will understand you, Are. Trust me." Alys gave me an assurance smile, and I had to smile back despite my stomach continued twisting as every minute went on, unaffected with their kind words.

Ferry and Skip were at the corner talking about a certain businessman.

"Skip!" Rynna ran towards him.

Skip's eyes lit up the moment he spun to the beautiful girl calling his name. He lifted her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck like they knew each other for so long.

My feelings lightened at the beautiful sight. Never had I ever thought that Skip would take everything so easily. I gathered all my strength of how I would explain it to him because I saw how he reacted when he knew I was pregnant. I was scared and terrified of losing him again.

"Miss me, sweetheart?" He then planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Yeah, but Mom said you would be here, so I wear a pretty dress for you. We could have a tea party later, and I could braid your hair." She giggled.

Skip's brow cocked up at his daughter, smiling in amusement. "Really? How did I become so lucky, Rynna? And you look beautiful in your dress."

"I know right? I told Dad and Mom you're gonna like it. Thank you!"

"Don't thank me, sweetheart. You definitely own the night." Skip put her down.

She then curtsied like a princess before she ran to us. She kissed us after her dad. "I want to go to New York, Aunt Are. Mommy said there is a big apple there, and the central park is awesome." She settled in between her Mom's thighs.

We laughed when she mentioned the big apple.

I always felt jealous when I saw them in that position, but they gave her a beautiful life, and I was so thankful for that.

I suffered from post-partum depression, yet they never left me alone. I continued seeing Anna as my therapist. It was hard to admit my feelings when she was the reason why I felt that way, but somehow I overcame it.

During my first year in college, we did constant video calling and had arrangements to see Rynna as she grew up. Then I met Dominic. He was charming. He accepted my flawed life though he never knew about my child until we got engaged, and he promised me we could come to meet her.

But that never happened during our entire marriage, instead, I got my worse nightmare. He threatened me to tell my parents if I would try to come and see my child.

For three years, I saw Rynna in person only twice—only when Dominic was out of town and when I was finally a divorcée.

"We can take you there, Ry-Ry. Before you start your school, right Aunt Are?" Alys nudged me.

Seeing her face lit up was enough for me, and I could never say no to her. "I'd love to tour you around, Ry. I can show you some cool places."

"Really? With Skip?" She beamed, and it just melted my heart.

"Did I just hear my name?" Skip and Ferry came to join us.

Before Rynna could answer, the doorbell suddenly rang.

"It's okay, Reigh," Skip whispered and kissed the top of my head.

"I hope you're right."

"Forgive me, love."

I smiled. "If you are not so charming I would never forgive you."

Skip chuckled. "Thank, God, I am."

I was frozen to my place when my father's figure was the first to come to view—it felt like the air in my lungs had been sucked out when our gazes met. The world around me stopped. Then Dad smiled and approached Anna and Ferry.

"Hey, honey." Dad pulled me into a hug. "I'm so proud of you. I'm glad you made the biggest decisions of your life on divorcing that asshole, otherwise, we wouldn't be here tonight."

"Dave," Mom chided Dad.

"What is an asshole, Mom?" I heard Rynna asked.

"Oh, sorry. Don't ever say that, kiddo. You won't get the sweetest chocolate from your oldie friend." Dad winked.

"You, little angel are." Brett stared at Rynna for a moment, focusing more on her eyes. "Beautiful, aren't you?" And I swore I heard him chuckle, then he looked at me, nodding slowly as if it confirmed that Rynna was mine and Skip.

Rynna just stared at her without blinking. "I think I saw you before." Then tapped her tiny finger on her chin as if thinking seriously.

"Ry-Ry," Alys warned.

"Oh, I know now." Her eyes widened. "You have a picture at Aunt Alys'. Yes! It's you."

I turned my head at Alys and shot her an inquisitive looked.

"What? That was our picture in your home back in Ravenhill." She rolled her eyes with a little defensive tone.

"Okay. This is getting weird," Anna announced with amusement on her face. "Dave, Suzanne, and Brett thank you for coming over. And well, Skip and Are, too."

Her husband snaked his arm around her waist and said, "Let's head to the dining."

My parents followed, and I felt a hand on my lower back. "Alright?"

I let out a deep sigh. "Never been better. I've never been able to breathe for about seven years until tonight. How about you? I've never been able to ask you this, but how are you feeling?"

His lips curved up in a smile, and it took my breath away. "Perfect."

"You're not in the hotel room, so you two behave like adults," Brett cut in unabashedly.

"Jealous, aren't we, mate? Why don't you go and talk to Alys," Skip scoffed.

My brows met together as I asked my brother, "What did I miss?" Then I snapped my gaze to my ever gorgeous man. "What do you mean?"

"Don't tell me you don't know?"

"Know about what?"

"One more word, Linton," Brett warned, and I turned to look at him. "Don't."

"Fine, I won't say a thing, but just so you know. She's been single for as long as I can remember." I rolled my eyes. And I swore I saw his eyes twinkle.

Really, Brett? If he allowed me to date his best friend, why couldn't I let him if that made him happy? Once in my life, I wanted to see him seriously dating someone, and if it would be my best friend, I couldn't be any happier. Besides, Alys was the kindest person I'd ever met.

The meal was delicious. Anna made homemade pistachio and cinnamon ice cream.

While we were savoring our dessert, Rynna blurted out of the blue, "I'm gonna be a big sister!"

"What?" Alys and I asked in unison. Our eyes nearly pop-out from each socket, staring at Anna in disbelief.

"I thought you two can't," Alys said, looking gleeful.

"That's what we thought, but we had some thorough tests and did a treatment. And last week it was confirmed that I indeed six weeks pregnant," Anna said in teary eyes.

"Wow! That's wonderful news, Anna. I'm so happy for both of you. Congratulations!" I stood up and pulled her into a hug. "You both deserve this."

"I know right? Thanks so much, Are!"

* * *

Dad and Mom stood beside me as we watched Brett and Skip having a tea party with Rynna. They looked gigantic sitting on her pink glittery princess chairs.

"Is it true the queen does drink only tea?" Rynna asked Brett.

"You should probably ask your fa—"

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest, and I could see Skip stiffened on his seat.

"I mean your friend here, Skip, pretty girl."

"You're my friend, too, right?"

"Of course."

"So, can I ask you something?" She gave Brett a side-glance.

Oh, no!

"Ask away. And I also want to ask you something." Brett grinned at her.

My brows furrowed when they whispered as if Skip wasn't around.

"No way, Rogue. Leave Rynna alone. If you want to know something, ask it directly from the source."

"You're no fun."

Rynna just giggled as she placed a cup for Skip who flashed her a dimpled grin. Rynna stood at Skip's back and started pulling off his ponytail.

Is she really gonna braid his hair?

I couldn't help but smile that it seemed nothing serious revelation had happened earlier.

Dad cleared his throat. "Couldn't be more proud of you, honey. You can finally breathe. And please, no more secrets, Arella. I mean it."

I launched into his arms as emotions shook me over. "I'm so sorry, Dad. I don't want to be a disappointment to our family. Brett always came with flying colors while I had nothing. And he was always the center of attention, then things happened—"

"Hush, honey. It's been ages, and you have to be proud of yourself. Deciding and standing at what you believed? That made you the stronger person, and you should give yourself credits for that." Dad pulled away and looked at me in the eyes.

"Arella Reighan, you may fell and thought that the world had turned against you when your life crumbled down, but you made to stand up all by yourself and get back to your life. A life that even better. Then you decided to follow your heart, that's the most amazing thing, honey. Despite that someone had broken it once, you still believe that love is sweeter the second time around."

"Did you just say that, Dave?" Mom asked in amusement.

"Yes, dear. And what's wrong with that?"

Mom just laughed at him. "Are, we love you. And whatever happened in the past is already in the past. How I wished I was there. We were there for you, but that was your decisions, and I respect

that. I'm sorry if we didn't even know what you'd been through. You are stronger than you thought you are, honey. You should be proud of yourself."

"It's alright, Mom. It's all my fault, and I thought I was nothing but a disappointment. I barely passed my grades, and then another thing I thought I was so irresponsible." Before I could continue, Mom pulled me into a hug.

"It's alright, Are. Enough of that drama. We're family, and we always have each others' back when a time like this. That's what a real family does. And you are scaring this beautiful creature beside me," Brett said.

When I looked at them, they were smiling at me, including Rynna.

Chapter 40

The Father Instinct

Skip

“CLYVE, listen to me, brother. I told you to take a break for a month or so. This is a tricky job that you need to focus on. Anyway, whether you’ll work or not, no one can kick you out of the board,” I groaned in irritation.

Clyve had been training himself by day and studying online by night. His determination to learn about business made me a proud brother, but I wanted him to enjoy his life as well.

I knew it was hard for him especially without Dad to guide like I was. He could’ve just taken business major if he ever planned to be on board, but I knew he loved different things. Running a business was like stepping into another world for him.

“You’re a broken record. You know that, right? I told you I don’t want a bloody break,” he groaned from the other line.

“Just don’t be too hard on yourself because everything is under control. Don’t rush, ‘kay? Why don’t you just come over and buy an art gallery or teach.”

“Brill! Now you say something good. Look, I know you don’t trust me that I can handle business—”

“Why’d you say that? I trust you, Clyve. And you just handled things on your own. I want you to take things easy because the last time I heard, you didn’t even take a shower before going to the office.”

“Of course, that bloody caretaker! Don’t worry about me, I’m doing fine. Once I’m done with this six-month training, I could use a vacay.”

“Good. Take care, okay?”

“Oh, come on. I’m not a bloody eight years old for God’s sake.”

I burst into laughter. “I wasn’t thinking like that. I just want to tell you to take care. That’s it.”

“Fine, asshole! You are living a perfect life with a perfect job, and a beautiful woman at your disposal.” His voice lowered.

My heart ached. This wasn’t what I wanted him to feel—to feel pity for himself.

"You do have a great life, a hefty of money, and a position on the board, but how would have a beautiful woman if you haven't been taking a shower or shave? And let my app to good use, you arse."

"I want a relationship, and not a fuck buddy or a one-night stand, mate. I'm not that kind of bloke."

"Well, you can start by looking for a date, brother."

"Just shut up, and stop mocking me."

"I'm not mocking you." I burst into laughter again that my eyes started to water. I knew he was annoyed, but I missed this.

"Whatever! Anyway, say hi to Are for me, yeah?"

"Sure thing. And as if you two are not chatting every day."

"I know, and she sent me a new picture of Ry-Ry."

My brow arched. "What picture? When?"

"Before you call me. Why?"

Clyve knew everything about Rynna. Since we came back from Seattle, I told Mum and him about everything. There was no way I would keep my child away from my family. I was glad he and Mum were eager to hear more about Rynna. Clyve even said she had the combination of me and Are.

"Seriously? Ry-Ry did not send it to me, and sent to Arella alone?"

"So? What's wrong?"

"I sent her a selfie in my office earlier, and you know I'm not good at that thing. And she replied with a voice message thank you, Skip. That's it."

Clyve laughed. "Wow! You're such a baby when you get jealous."

"I am not."

"Yes, *you are*, brother."

"Go ahead and laugh at me. Talk to you later. And mate, please get a life. Bye!"

I quickly dialed Arella.

"Hey, hottie." She sounded smiling or maybe flirty.

"Hey, love. I heard from Clyve that Ry has sent you her picture."

"Yeah, and?"

"And she didn't send me one, why?"

"Because you will tell her no, Ry," she was even mimicking my voice.

"What exactly she's doing?"

"Okay, don't freak out." Her warning alarmed me completely.

"What was exactly she was doing on that picture, Reigh?"

"Her Aunt Alys bought her a skateboard, and they were in the park when she took a selfie."

"Love, did she wear protective gear?"

"Um..."

"Arella, answer me or I will call Alys right now." My heart pounded.

I stood up from my chair, loosening my tie. I knew I didn't have the right as her Dad, but I was still her father. No matter how great they did in taking care of Rynna, I could still fight to have full custody of my daughter, but I would not do such cruelty and broke a family who did all their best for her. And the fact that Ferry called me to look after her family when he went to the Middle East for a job put me at rest that he trusted me, and I would never going to break that.

"You need to calm down, Skip. She only got a little cut on her knee."

"A bloody cut? So I was right, after all, that Alys did not let her wear a gear."

"Jeez, Skip! She's fine, and enjoyed her practice."

"Yeah, Reigh. And she got hurt as well."

"Skipper, Alys is already cleaning her scrape. She chose not to send you a selfie because you will tell her not to. See? Now you're freaking out."

"I'll talk to Alys about this later."

"Skip..."

"Fine. Why a skateboard though? She could choose a bike with training wheels." I just loved Rynna, and no parent would ever want to see a child got hurt under her or his watch.

I got back to my seat, rubbing my temple. I know I was overreacting. I just wanted to be a father to her, and to teach her how to skateboard, ride a bike, and send her to school. And I also wanted her to call me Dad, but, it was near impossible because she got her own. I was still grateful that I got a chance to get to know her more.

"Well, apparently she's just like me and Alys. I used to skate when I was a kid."

I calmed down a bit. My brow arched. “Really? Why haven’t you told me about that?”

“Well, we didn’t have much time to talk about me on a skateboard. We kind of busy with something else,” she was whispering. “But we have a lot of time to talk about it, right, hottie?”

I blinked, trying not to picture out naked Arella in our bed with her hair askew. “So, how’s your new lab?” My dad closed the deal before he died, so the head chemist and the staff transferred from France to the new lab here in New York.

“Oh, dear. It’s great. It’s modern though, and the people here seem to be friendly. I just wish Maj is with me, you know.”

She may have a new job, but it felt different to work with someone you already knew. I’d been in her position.

“You can do a little convincing, Reigh. She could meet new French people there. Anyway, have you thought about the name?”

“I did and already submitted this morning.”

“Really? Without telling me.”

“You’ll know it, boss of the boss.”

“Stop calling me that, love. I will spank you tonight.” My brain instantly flooded with a lot of naughty thoughts. I just couldn’t get enough of Arella and never a night we didn’t make love and fuck before we went to sleep. And I just loved to see a smile on her face before she fell to slumber.

“I’ll see you later, Skip. Got to go back to work. I love you!”

My phone dinged. *1 Image received.*

* * *

JUST AS I placed the two wine glasses on the table, I heard the door unlocked open and clicked close. I ran my fingers through my hair and made my way to the living room.

“Skip? What’s that amazing smell?” Arella shouted from the door, kicking off her heels.

“You’re the smell expert. Guess what is it?” I wrapped my hands around her waist and kissed her lips. I missed her already, and all I wanted was to make love with her, fall asleep, and forget about the dinner I prepared, but I knew she was starving. One thing I learned about her that she was lazy to cook, so I had to teach myself so that we were not going to die with high cholesterol from the takeout food.

“I get it you missed me. And I missed you too, handsome.”

I smiled and gave her another kiss. “You wouldn’t drop it, would you?”

“It grew on me. So why would I?”

“Fine, Sinderella. Care to tell me the story behind that username?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Maybe because I felt I have a lot of secrets. Can we talk about it later?”

“Sure, love. I know you’re starving.”

“Anyway, it smells like butter, garlic, pepper, and thyme?” Then she moved to sniff me. “And you, my love, smells delicious, but I know you’ll be my dessert later.” She caught her lip between her teeth.

Good lord! Something strained down there.

“Good plan. Let’s go and feed you well because we have a long night, and I need your strength for something else.” I threw her bag to the couch and led her to the kitchen.

She was grinning when she saw the table with our dinner. A lit candle and flowers I picked up from the flower shop before I headed home.

“Since when did you become romantic, Skipper Linton?”

“Since I met you, love.”

Epilogue

Where It All Started

Skip

THE RED and golden motif of the venue made the silver nude and fully embellished evening dress I chose looked spectacular on Arella’s curves. The low V-back added to my dark fantasy after this evening affair. Then the floor-length skirt with side high slit showed her ever toned legs.

Jesus!

After grabbing a champagne flute, I had to look away. I couldn’t have a constant hard-on while entertaining the guests. Clyve was in a conversation with French perfume critiques. Some American, French actresses and former perfume endorsers were also here tonight.

The highly awaited fragrance, Scent ‘d Arella showcased at the center. The spoke person was an Academy Award-winning actress chosen by the perfumer herself. The high-end scent made the night bloom with flowery, sweet, and spicy, yet seductive effect.

I couldn't help but think her smell that made me crazy, and now we were launching it. I wanted it to share with all the fragrance enthusiasts all over the globe. I was so proud of Arella at the same time for concocting such great creation. She didn't just do a great job, but she made her dream come true.

The launching held earlier, then followed by the music played by the guest musician who also sang the ad for the perfume. What I liked about this campaign was the emphasis of love, passion, and dreams of women—it exactly reminded me of Arella.

Most of the critiques had positive reviews and that was a plus. The advertising department did an impressive job with campaign videos and was now playing on the 3D walls.

"This is great," Brett complimented.

"Yep. My girl who made this possible," I replied proudly.

"I wasn't impressed when she chose to be a chemist, but I was glad she stood for what she loved."

"Glad you didn't stop her. I believed what she was capable of, Rogue. That was why I never gave up on pushing her beyond her limit."

"I was worried after her divorce, but when she got her life back, I knew she would soar high. And I'm glad you came back, asshole."

I side-glanced him. "What did I say about respect, Rogue?"

A laugh erupted from him. "Couldn't help it. You being with my little sister. You who I'd avoided mentioning to her, yet, she ended up with you? It's ridiculous!" Brett stared right into my eyes. He was amused and happy. He then shook his head. "The fact that you have a daughter with her. Jesus! I'm still processing it until now. I love Ry-Ry though."

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I sighed in relief. I remained silent for a few moments, and thanked God! Just a few weeks ago, my life had turned upside down, yet I felt the contentment inside my chest right now.

I had a beautiful woman who loved me dearly. I had a profitable business. I met my child who I thought she never existed. My brother was doing great and seemed happy. I had a supportive best friend and a family who accepted me as their own. What else would I want in this world? Everything was perfect and more than what I ever dreamed of.

What else? A family?

"I love your sister, Rogue. So much. That's to sum it up."

He snorted, "That's not so obvious." He then patted my back. "I'm happy for you, mate."

"You should be. And you should definitely pursue Alys." I smiled wickedly. Never had I ever thought he had a serious thing towards Arella's best friend, but if us was possible, nothing was impossible for them as well.

"Nah. She's like my baby sister."

I laughed, and Arella might hear it because she was now looking at me with a query. I just winked at her—her cheeks blossomed red.

She's adorably sexy!

"Like a sister? Are you sure about that?" I looked at him. To my surprise, Brett was blushing. He rubbed his face, and it turned redder.

"You're blushing."

"I don't blush, Linton."

"You don't lie right into my face. Not now. Not ever. You like her, and I could tell by your reaction right now that you'd been in lust with her. What's stopping you? Because of your sister? Nothing's gonna stop a Rogue's persuasiveness, right, mate?"

Brett remained silent as if thinking twice about what I said.

"Arella once mentioned to me that if you like her best friend, she would be happy to see you two together. And I think she mentioned that Alys always asked about you," I added.

His eyes slightly widened. "Really? I mean did she ask about me?"

My smile widened. "Huh! Gotcha."

"Fuck you!"

"So, admit it already that you like Alys. What's wrong with that? Look at me, Rogue. Been there, done that. Did it work out? It definitely did. Am I happy? To the moon. Unless you only want to screw her. Then that's a different story."

Then his mouth hung open. That was when I found the person we were just talking about. She was wearing an off-shoulder white dress. The very own, Alys.

"Might wanna close your damn mouth, Rogue."

He looked smitten. Christ!

"Now move." I patted his back and walked towards my woman who was with Alys.

"Hey. What was that all about?" Arella asked. She was glowing. Her eyes sparkled, and I couldn't be much prouder of myself that it was definitely because of me.

"We're talking about her." I pointed to Alys. And her face instantly burned. With brow arched, she asked, "Me?"

"Positive. Now go and talk to Brett because I need to be out of here with Reigh. We have a long-hour ride."

I joined Reigh's video chat with Byrne, and that was my only chance to talk to my girl, Rynna. I loved her so much. No doubt it was our blood connection that was stronger than any other bond. She kept on asking when will be the Harry Styles Concert. Unfortunately, Anna's doctor advised her not to travel for a while, so we had to wait.

"Where are we going?" Arella asked as I dragged her away from Alys.

"Tell you later." I snaked my arm around her possessively and ignored Alys calling Arella's name from our back.

"Skipper, we can't just ditch the party," she warned.

"We're done here, love."

"Skip."

"Fine. If you're so persistent. To correct my mistake."

"To church?" Her answer made me chuckle.

"What made you think of that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. People go to church to confess and ask for forgiveness."

We reached the parking lot, and she didn't talk anymore. I looked at her after taking the car key from the valet. "All right, love?"

"Yeah."

"Good. You look gorgeous by the way." I strolled my eyes down to her body one more time that I couldn't get enough off.

We made love and fuck every night, but after the end of my busy work, I still craved her. And the best part was we had the same anticipation of synergy.

"Try saying you're damn sexy, Arella." She rolled her eyes, getting inside the car with a wicked smile on her face.

"You are beyond sexy, love."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot." I revved out of the parking lot to the road.

"Remember when we met at the supermarket?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Did you follow me there?"

I laughed softly. Guilty. "What made you ask that, love?"

She'd been asking many things lately. She asked me once if I went to a sex club. She didn't pry when I asked her if it showed on my skills. She just blushed like a tomato.

"Skip?" Arella slapped my thigh. "Answer me."

"Love, I'm driving."

"Is that a yes?"

"No?"

"No? Or just no."

"What will get from this, Reigh?"

"Fine. Don't answer."

I sighed. "Fine. I'll answer."

She shifted in her seat.

"Yes, I followed you. I stalked your social media accounts that had not been updated, so it wasn't that helpful. I couldn't just ask your brother about you, could I? I don't know your husband, and I didn't even open your wedding invitation."

"Why did you do that?"

"You know the answer."

"I want more than that."

"Why?"

"I just wanna know."

“Love, I know you, and I know you have something on your sleeves. Now tell me, and I will tell you honestly.”

“I just like our love story, Skip.” She giggled, but I wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Ah. There’s something more than that.”

“Ugh. You told me you love me for seven years. Don’t you think I should know how did you love me from thousands of miles away?”

I glanced at her, then focused back on the road. “Arella, love doesn’t measure distance, it just grows. It gives us a reason to love harder. So, if I stay in London, and you stay here, you won’t love me anymore?”

“When two person meant for each other, no distance is too far, no time too long, and no other love can break them apart.”

“Exactly. When your brother sent me an invitation to your marriage, I thought I’d died. Then the day of your wedding, I called your brother that I’m heartbroken. I actually just broke up with my ex a week earlier, but my heart was broken because of you.”

Arella sniffed, making my head snapped to her side.

“You asked me, I answered, and now you cry?” I held her hand, squeezing it.

“It’s just, thank you for loving me.” She pressed my hand into her lips.

“I’d loved you more no matter what.”

* * *

ARELLA must be damn tired during the launching party. I understood, all eyes focused on the new perfumer. She was the center of attention tonight, but she did a great job answering the questions from the media and entertained the guests.

She slept throughout the ride. I played her playlist on our way that put her on slumber.

I parked the car in front of our destination. Nothing changed to this place even after seven years.

Chapter Epilogue

Fixed

Arella

I GROANED upon stretching my limbs. The first thing that came to my senses was the smell—it wasn’t the smell of Skip’s car. It smelled fresh laundry. And I was lying flat and able to stretch my

limbs. The soft humming came next—it was the air conditioning. I spread my arms, the softness of the sheet under my palm confirmed something. I was in bed—it was a queen size to be precise, and I was sleeping comfortably.

My eyes flew open wide. I met the teardrop small chandelier hanging at the cream-colored ceiling. A tendril of fear crawled down my spine when it hit me—this was not our bedroom.

I checked myself—I was still wearing the same dress. My shoes were taken off of my feet.

I wasn't feeling dizzy though. Then the event of the party sprang into my mind, and I was talking with Skip in his car.

Where's Skip?

Oh, my God! No no no! My blood froze in my veins.

"Skip!" Panic quaked on my senses. My heartbeat thrashed against my ears as I crawled out of bed.

Oh, my God!

I found my purse on the nightstand. *The nightstand.*

Still shocked, I stared down at the red dark wood for a good minute.

"Oh, my God!" Tears burned my eyes. My hands flew to my gaping mouth.

"Figured something already?" A squeal slipped my lips to the voice at my back.

I spun around quickly, only to see a stunning man in front of me. His lips curved up a smile.

My brows furrowed to see the T-shirt he was wearing—The Fifth Death.

"Why are we here?"

"I want to fix my mistake for leaving you that morning, Reigh."

My shoulders sagged in dismay. "Skip, I don't want to change a thing in our lives. I have you back. That's all that matters."

Skip stepped closer, holding my arms. "I know. And we couldn't change a thing from our past even we wanted, could we? But your words at the lab shook my heart, and it hurt like hell when you said that to me."

"So, you want to start over?"

"Not exactly. I brought you to the place where we first met because this is where we started. I couldn't bring you to the stadium because it's under renovation. I just want you to know how much this place means to me."

God, Skip! The man that I love will do everything for me.

"You didn't buy this hotel, did you?"

Skip beamed, shaking his head. "No. Do you want me?"

"No."

He held my hand. "Come here. We didn't get a chance to explore this place as we were busy exploring something else that night."

Skip pulled the curtain open. Wow!

"We're back to Ravenhill. And this is where I grew up, yet I'd never been to this room that showcases the perfect view of this place."

"See? There's much more you missed to see in your town."

"You're right." The hotel was the tallest amongst the hotels in town. The lights outside the glass window were like fireflies in the majestic tree—it was stunning and captivating.

"This is beautiful, Skip."

He held me to face him. "You're beautiful than what's outside this window, love. I brought you here to celebrate. No matter how long I was gone, I still came back to you. And if there was one thing I could ask is I hope I didn't leave you that night, but it happened for a reason."

I lifted my hand to touch his face, gliding to his hair. I pulled the band that tied it. I lifted a thick strand to my face, smelling it. "If there was one thing I would ever do, I wished I had patience in me. I could still wait for you, Skip. If I only knew we ended up together in the same place right now."

"I love you, Reigh." Skip cupped my face. He never failed to show me how much he loved me. He completely accepted me with all his heart—my mistakes and my flawed life.

I may fall, lose hope, but here I was, stronger than ever, facing the life in my present and hopefully a greater life ahead of us. I was grateful that I took a leap that I feared.

SKIP sank his fingers into my hair and looked deeply into my eyes before slamming his lips into mine. He kissed me as if I haunted him and burned him with desires. Tightening my fists on his hair, I kissed him back.

He let out a groan as he delved his tongue, taking his command. I always loved about him, taking control as if he possessed me yet, he'd been always generous, kind, and loving.

My heartbeat filled my ears as he pressed his hard erection against my lower abdomen. A thud against the glass window didn't bother us to break apart. It was utterly overwhelming with the pleasure we both caused at each other.

We barely broke apart to shrug off our clothes separating our skin. Despite having those, I could still feel my skin melting with him. Skip's hands cupped my breasts, thumbs squeezing my hardening nipples. I dragged a stuttering breath, bucking my head against the glass window.

"Skip!"

His mouth captured my tout peak. A jolt of sensation shot right between my legs.

"Skip, please?"

I felt the coldness seeped through my skin when his mouth suddenly gone.

"Love, do you really need to do that?" His voice became husky and deep.

Looking amused, he lifted me effortlessly in his arms and carried me to bed. He placed me down gently as if I was fragile, then loomed above me. He kissed me again—this time, it was slow with pure passion.

Our mouth moved in sync. His lips were gentler as we explore each other. I always melted to his kiss, to his musky and minty smell. We kissed leisurely and slowly as if we had the time in the world. I shuddered at the pleasurable sensation.

I realized what he was doing. Everything had happened that night at this very room brought back to me like it was just yesterday.

Skip was going to make love with me.

His mouth and tongue wondered on my flesh with such worship. I couldn't stay still—it felt incredibly good. Tears just ran down at the corner of my eyes.

"Skip?"

He froze to my voice, then met my gaze.

Smiling with all my love, I cupped his face and kissed his lips. "If my memory serves right, I think you should be inside me now."

He wiped my tears then grinned. "You're right. I might lose track a little bit."

He glided his length way down on my wet sex.

I closed my eyes as he started to thrust his crown inside me. God! A surge of heat ran through my body.

“Feel this moment, love. Not seven years ago. I know this is real. You and me. This is all real.” He slowly sank all in inside of me, making me writhe for more. Blood rushed all through my body with more love and desire.

Skip felt it too as he sank his face on my neck.

I could smell him—his spiciness. The very same smell years ago. He began moving, thrusting slowly with so much passion, yet full of intensity. I could feel his hardness dragging in and out of my inner walls.

The sensation gathered, converged, and made me feel euphoric. My fingers dug against his flesh, trying to hold the unpredictable.

Skip rugged breathing tingles my every living cells, and it craved me more. I gripped his waist with my legs, meeting his thrust.

The pleasure became stronger. My entire body tightens as I climbed higher and higher. The liquid of ecstasy surged in my veins as my inner muscles started pulsing.

“Oh, Skipper!”

Perspiration dampened our skin. Only our breathing created a sound in the room.

“Reigh,” Skip dragged out. “Let go, my love.” It was a beg. Skip couldn’t hold it anymore—I felt him pulsing inside me.

He raised his head, bracing himself as he looked at me with a smile on his face, yet he was struggling. The vein on his forehead was bulging.

“I love you—” Languid euphoria rolled over my senses as my orgasm exploded, and Skip followed.

“I love you, Arella.”

The End