

Sindy Kate

Gia Hunter

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

Contents

Chapter 1	6
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	18
Chapter 4	23
Chapter 5	30
Chapter 6	36
Chapter 7	43
Chapter 8	49
Chapter 9	55
Chapter 10	59
Chapter 11	62
Chapter 12	65
Chapter 13	69
Chapter 14	75
Chapter 15	81
Chapter 16	87
Chapter 17	92
Chapter 18	98
Chapter 19	102
Chapter 20	106
Chapter 21	109

Chapter 22	112
Chapter 23	118
Chapter 24	122
Chapter 25	126
Chapter 26	129
Chapter 27	133
Chapter 28	137
Chapter 29	141
Chapter 30	145
Chapter 31	149
Chapter 32	153
Chapter 33	156
Chapter 34	160
Chapter 35	164
Chapter 36	169
Chapter 37	173
Chapter 38	177
Chapter 39	182
Chapter 40	187
Chapter 41	192
Chapter 42	197
Chapter 43	201
Chapter 44	206

Chapter 45	211
Chapter 46	216
Chapter 47	220
Epilogue	226

About this edition

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Chapter 1

Sindy Kate

CLYVE

All I COULD think at this moment was how good it felt to hit my bed and snore under my sheet.

Alone.

Not with the blonde who talked a lot— Emily.

She kept batting her eyelashes as she told me about her first photoshoot experience. She was a boudoir model according to her profile on *HeartRated* owned by my brother Skipper. She was a bit of a dish, I must say, but too dishy to be my type.

Skipper and his girlfriend, Arella created an account on my behalf. What so funny there was the not-so-original username they could ever come up with.

BritBond69. *Seriously, who does that?* The number 69 made it sound dirtier and naughtier to my fine personality.

Back to the fake blonde. I could see the evidence right before my very eyes—D cup to be precise. They jiggled when she giggled. It rhymed, huh?

I didn't know if she did it on purpose to get attention from her date, or they just jiggled.

I wasn't a boobman, but I knew women's breasts if they were real or enhanced. I wondered if it felt uncomfortable when she ran on a treadmill. I thought they were pretty heavy, eh.

"Hey, you've been staring at my cleavage," she flirted, and oh, they jiggled again.

I cleared my throat and smiled politely. "My apology." *They're kinda distracting.* "So how long have you been modeling?"

Bloody hell! Just bent up, Clyve.

Truth to be told, I didn't date much back in college, and I barely able to graduate to even have time to fool around like my brother. I had one serious relationship since I was sober. Sadly, it didn't work out. Then I got into trouble over fraternizing my co-worker, and things got nasty between us until I got fired.

This was how my brother came up with this idea—in getting me into this thing. Now I chatted up with my first date.

She sighed. I suddenly remembered her mentioning it earlier. She'd been modeling for two years.

"So, you love photography?"

What? Oh, yeah, the profile.

"Yeah, I love photography, and I paint as well. Been doing it for years as part of my therapy. I'm planning on building my own studio—"

Her eyes slightly widened. "What kind of therapy? Wait, do you have PTSD sort of thing?" I didn't miss the shake in her voice.

"Um, nah." *Shouldn't I mention that on a first date?*

She checked her watch, and I knew what would happen next. I wouldn't be disappointed if she jilted, besides I didn't want to go out on a blind date if this wasn't for Arella and Skipper who didn't give me much of a choice.

I shouldn't be too ahead of myself, but dating apps like HeartRated were a site for people who were into one-night stands. I wasn't like those—I didn't want to end up in a hotel room or a woman's loft that I barely knew. *And God knows what will happen next.*

"Thanks for tonight, Clyve. I had fun." *Did she, really?* She took her clutch and slid off the barstool. Her exposed knee brushed up against mine. Then she finally stood up.

"Me too, Emily." I nodded and smiled. "At least let me send you to the parking lot."

"No, no. That won't be necessary." She forcefully smiled. "Bye!"

That was it. She was gone in a flash.

The music suddenly became too loud for my taste. The air thickened with a mix of perfumes and alcohol that could tempt me to order a drink. I gulped my lemon-lime drink, faced the bartender, and tossed him some bills.

Time to go to bed, Clyve. I sighed in dismay.

My brother forced me to come to New York with him. That asshole believed my destiny was here. I knew he loved me and might have promised Dad to take care of me. No doubt, he would do anything in a heartbeat if I'd ask anything.

Since our dad passed away, he'd been an argy-bargy and asked me to go on a vacation and have fun. By the meaning of having fun, to gallivant and shag around like he used to do.

I couldn't let him run the businesses alone, so I had to take some lessons and attend some training. I wanted to help him, and that was brother should do.

And that arse was with the love of his life that he'd been in love with for ages. Funny was, they had a kid. The cute little thing, Rynna just looked exactly like them.

I walked out of the bar, ignoring the tiny throb inside my chest.

I GROANED when my phone rang because I knew already who was it.

"Botha?"

"How's your date?" Brill! It was Arella, the love of my brother's life I mentioned earlier.

"She ran away before I could explain. Why do American are so frightened of someone who suffered from PTSD?"

"What? Why did you say that? You don't have PTSD, CC." CC, *she calls me by that*.

"Well, I mentioned I've been painting as part of my therapy. Then that's it, she just thanked me and left like her arse was on fire."

Her voice echoed through my ear as she laughed out loud. "Really? She thought you're violent? God, you could barely harm a fly. And so what if you're suffering from PTSD? People get through it without harming someone. I guess she watched too many psycho-thriller movies that affect her tiny brain. You deserve someone better."

"I won't go on a blind date again. That's terrible. It said on the app that we're 75% compatible, and guess what? She doesn't like me, and I can't tell that she's unattractive because she is, but she's too attractive to be my date, you know. This whole thing is rubbish."

"CC, that's not exactly a blind date. Don't give up too easily. You'll find a woman who can blow your mind." She laughed again.

"That's the thing. I don't want someone to blow my mind."

"You know what I meant, CC."

I scratched my head as I tried to make her understand my point. "I know, but dating doesn't have to work like that."

"Gah, you're such a man! Going out on a date can start as friends, you know. It doesn't have to be love at first sight. Love can start with friendship. Just be yourself and treat your date as if she's one of your friends. It makes it an easier way of getting to know each other. Unless you want to shag her."

The word shag made me grimace. I should be feeling comfortable talking about sex with Arella, but it felt awkward since I hadn't had fun in a long time.

"I'm really not comfortable doing this thing. I don't know. I'm not aloof, and I've been on a share of relationships without using a dating app to go out on a date with someone."

"A share of relationships? Do you mean only two girlfriends in your lifetime? One was cheating on you and the other was, what happened? When was that?" I heard Skip yelling from the other line, then he barked into laughter. "You need to get laid, brother. I'm a little bit worried about your biological clock!"

I rolled my eyes. Of course, he was listening throughout my conversation with his girlfriend.

"Go to hell, brother. Men don't have a biological clock, you daft!"

"I will go to hell as long as Arella will come with me!"

"I will deactivate my account. Your app is rubbish!"

"Try going out one more time. If it still doesn't work, then you can uninstall it for good," Arella agreed. I couldn't say no to her. She was too good for my brother that he almost didn't deserve someone like Arella. She was the reason why he stopped gallivanting around.

"Fine. Just one time."

"Clyve, put that charm to good use, mate. Trust me, it always works and—"

"Just bent up, Skip!" Arella must have hit him or something because he groaned loudly, then a faint sound of them snogging followed. Jesus! Couldn't they stop just for a sec while I was listening?

"Okay, guys. Cheers!"

I scratched my scalp in irritation. I was not desperate to be in a relationship. *Am I? I'm not a sex-starved bloke as well.* Well, I missed it if I was honest.

Since when the last time I had mind-blowing sex? Six months ago? And my hand was not really that useful. I grabbed my laptop on the nightstand that I used earlier to send some emails.

When the windows opened, I quickly searched for the history on the browser and clicked the link of the HeartRated.

I yawned.

I hated this site as it had plenty of ads. Skipper and his best friend were getting richer because of those though. I leaned myself comfortably on the pillow as I focused on the screen. I clicked on the log-in button.

Pop-up ads flashed on the screen with different videos of women, wearing insufficient dresses. Some were just talking, but there were no sounds. Some were—

Holy! The message popped out *Wanna talk to these girls and have your dreams come true?* Funny!

I snorted. “Nah! Thank you, mate.”

I found myself swallowing hard though. I would not get tricked by this shit again. I shifted on my seat as something reacted to what was on the video.

Poor bloke, it had languished in limbo for months now. And the very first time I put an effort into dating again was a spectacular failure.

I was about to click the close button when another ad appeared.

What was with this preview? It was narking.

Another group of women, this one was more daring than the previous one. One was pinching her nipple through the thin camisole she was wearing.

Cam girls. Huh!

One preview that caught my attention though. A cam girl was licking a chocolate spread from the cucumber. *Seriously, a cucumber?*

I burst into laughter. *Doesn't she own a spoon?* But I was not so daft not to know what cucumber represented.

Jesus!

Were there really men got horny out of these? Or some lonely bloke who couldn't find dates? *Like me.*

I could feel my pulse increasing as I was about to click the close button. Instead, I clicked enter. Shit!

I swallowed again. *What am I doing?* I scanned quickly for some options, then I hit the register button.

My brother would laugh his arse out when he found out about what I just did. He thought I was out of my goddamn mind. But he would not know, would he? I was just curious. *Who am I fooling?*

Okay, I was more than curious, and I thought this was way better than going out on a date that only gave me false hope.

I quickly signed up with a new username. Then I hit the preview of the Nutella girl. *Nutella girl? That's cute.*

Sindy Kate.

I read it aloud, making me laugh like a twit. It sounded like the word *syndicate*.

Then there she was, live in the flesh. She had a slim figure, almost skinny, but her arms were toned though. Her round face had a little hint of makeup, not too much—that was what I liked in a woman. Her full lips painted with glossy pink.

She's just a cam girl, Clyde, and you're not going to hook up with her, are you?

As if she's willing to meet you, mate. Since when did I think of hooking up? I pushed the thought out of my head.

Her creamy skin looked flawless, and there was no way it was from the lighting effect. My skin tingled to feel if it was soft and smooth against my fingertips.

She was fully dressed though. Her unruly blonde cascaded down her shoulders to her chest, but one thing I was sure of was, her voluptuous breasts were real, unlike my date earlier because they bounced naturally. Her nipples were poking against her white tiny dress when she changed her seat into Indian style—probably a request by one of her viewers.

I had to clench my jaw to stop from getting a hard-on, the longer I looked at her, but this was the main purpose, yeah?—to entertain.

She looked no older than twenty-five—younger than me.

Why did she choose this kind of job? That question somehow bugged me.

But those eyes—were big and hypnotizing. I didn't know if she was using contacts because it was a shade of forest green.

Beautiful.

Then she stopped talking and stared at the camera. My heart pounded in my chest when it felt like she was staring right back at me.

I felt my jaw was slowly falling.

Fuck!

Chapter 2

Good News

WESTLEY

THE OAK trees rising out on both sides of the driveway were like a gateway to paradise. Those were one of many things around here that I learned to appreciate and love. There was also something in this place that I didn't find in the city, perhaps its the serenity that the city couldn't offer.

This little paradise welcomed me with open arms.

When Keene brought me here, I thought I would regret that decision, but everything around here had grown quickly on me, and the only place I considered home.

I sauntered to the front porch, taking the swing from the right that I already claimed it mine. It gave me the perfect view of the sun-streaked leaves that created glittering shadows on the entrance.

I closed my eyes to the whining of bees on the flower pot in front of me. The earthy fresh smell and the blooming of the scents of the wild roses I planted on the flower bed had relaxed my mind.

Keene once said that I had a green thumb. I laughed at that idea, but when I saw them first thing in the morning, they just melted my heart and blew me away to see the fruit of the hours I spent cultivating those flowers. They worth my sweat.

"Harry!" I jolted awake, sitting straight to the sharp male voice—it was Keene's—my best friend, the strongest guy I knew.

We'd been friends since college, and he'd been my rock since then.

"Harry," he repeated, "guess what?" He was grinning with brown eyes glittering with excitement.

He was handsome in a classic actor kind of way. Finally, he let his light blond hair grow longer than he used to keep it skinhead, but he was still a little bit pale. I always loved to pinch his small straight nose that was now wrinkling on me as if he read my mind.

"Hey, I said I got something." His expression suddenly turned sour when I didn't pay attention to what he was about to say because lately, I wasn't lucky enough to receive any more good news.

"Jeez, Keene. Just say it already." I scowled at him. I hated the feeling when people interrupted my rest.

The fact that he surprised me, it made my heart rate accelerate, and it felt uncomfortable. He knew it because I'd been suffering from Paroxysmal Atrial Fibrillation when I was in college, and it came back when I was under stress.

"We got a guest. I received an email earlier, and I already replied that the cabin is ready for visitors. I thought you'd be thrilled to hear the good news. He'll be here as early as tomorrow morning. So, we still have a day to prepare the cabin. Isn't it great?" He grinned again.

Indeed it was good news. Keene was left with an almost empty bank account after his father's chemotherapy wasn't successful. He never gave up on his dad and sold everything until there was nothing left. Before they got the deal for their small house and two cabins, his father passed away.

"Okay."

"Just okay? Harry, it had been like a year since we had a guest. Not to mention, it was only half-paid. You have to admit that nothing works on our strategies. Plus, a small business like this needs a good advertisement, but we already knew that it was impossible for us right now."

"Do we really have strategies, Keene?" I chuckled bitterly. I understood his underlying frustrations in this situation because he couldn't work anymore. For many days, I wished my lifestyle was like before that I could easily help him, but things had changed since I chose to be on my own. "But you're right. This is good news. I'll go then, to clean the cabin." I hustled to stand when he grabbed my arm.

"Coming with you."

I widened my eyes to shut him up. "I need exercise, and you won't dare help me, Keene. Did you hear me?"

He shut his mouth tight. He may be my best friend, but I bothered him too much already that I could barely sleep at night. The least that I could do was to do the chores since he could barely stand on his own feet.

"Harry—"

"Just bring some clean towels and sheets, okay? And some toiletries, too." I stepped down the porch, then I paused to look at him. "Who's our guest?"

"It's Arella Rogue who booked the cabin. Our guest is a guy named Clyve—"

"Okay. I should start cleaning because we still have to go to town for groceries."

The cabin was made of finest woods from the foundation, walls, and floorboards. It was a little bit old that we had to make sure it was not infested by termites.

This one had only a small room, kitchenette with small cupboards, and a single Viking stove. A living room with enough space for a wooden rocking chair and an old black leather couch, which was Keene's father's favorite. There was a small fireplace with readied piles of wood.

I started clearing cobwebs on the windowsills, pulled the white sheets off that covered the furniture, then I started dusting them off, and then vacuumed the floor.

I was in the bedroom, pulling the sheet off from the bed when Keene came over, probably with the things I asked from him to bring.

"Just leave them on the couch. I'm done cleaning that area."

"You don't have to clean alone, you know."

"Just go and make a list of what we need from the grocery."

I ignored his heavy sighing. Not a few seconds later, he was sneezing and running out of the cabin that made me chuckle.

What I learned about this life was nothing came for free. You had to work hard to earn something. I guess the decision of my independence had taught me the hard way, and so far, I liked it.

I was beyond exhausted when I was done in the bathroom. I was sweating like a pig and sticky with dust. I could smell myself like an old house and soot. I laid back on the couch, trying to catch some rest for a few minutes before we headed to the town.

"Harry!"

"Dang it, Keene. Are you trying to give me an early heart attack?" I rubbed my eyes, lifting my gaze to him.

"Sorry." He gave me an apologetic look.

"How long did I pass out?"

He shrugged. "Three hours?"

"Three hours?" I asked incredulously. "And you did not wake me up?" I stood up quickly, grabbing his hand. "Let's go then. Did you have the list?"

"Yeah, and went there while you passed out. I know how grumpy you are when someone disturbs your sleep."

I paused, narrowing my eyes at him. "What the hell? Why did you go alone?"

"Because I can, and you're tired. I did come back safe and sound, so stop worrying about me like I'm gonna melt in front of you."

"Don't do that again, Keene." I walked past him, still scowling. "Close the door behind you."

"Wait! You've been tired lately, Harry. Do you have trouble sleeping?"

My throat suddenly thickened. "No."

"Then what have you been up to?"

"Nothing."

"If you're worried about—"

I turned to face him. "I'm fine, okay? I promise."

He had a lot on his plate right now, and I couldn't add another. I knew he tried his best to be strong when I was around, but deep inside, he was struggling. I guessed we deal with our pain in different ways.

I strode toward the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. And he was right—he did the grocery on his own. The fridge was full.

A small smile curved up my lips when I saw some cups of peach yogurt—my favorite. "Thank you."

"That's the least I can do after I left you alone cleaning the entire cabin." I didn't miss the guilt in his voice.

"And I can't let you die from sneezing." I rolled my eyes.

"Go ahead and hit the shower. I'll make us some sandwich." He grabbed the fresh lettuce and tomato from the fridge, then he stopped. "I can feel when you're watching me, Harry. I'm not that weak and won't collapse on your watch. Just take the freaking shower."

"Who said you're weak? Besides, you went to buy stuff on your own."

"You're not gonna drop it, are you?" He took a sandwich loaf, slicing it in half. "Which do you prefer halloumi or cheddar?"

"Upgraded, huh?" I chuckled.

"We've got a guest tomorrow, darling, and you can't just feed him with couscous salad every day."

"What's wrong with couscous? I can make something more than a salad out of it."

"I know, chef Westley." He rolled his eyes. "This will be done in a few minutes. Now get your ass ready because I'm starving. You'll sleep early tonight, Harry. No more stalking your dysfunctional family on the Internet."

My chest ached every time he mentioned my *perfect* family. "That was only one time. I just wanna see my sister, and I'm just curious if how they had been without the black sheep of the family."

He searched something on my face, then nodded slowly.

I walked away, releasing the breath I held for a while.

Thank, God! He didn't pry.

AFTER OUR lunch, I rechecked the email. Our guest hadn't yet arrived when he supposed to be here before twelve. And there was no way the flight had been canceled because of the weather. Unless he changed his mind.

Well, if he did, we wasted our time for that jerk.

"I'll bring some supply, Keene. Just lead him to his cabin if he arrives before I'm done, okay?" I could feel my increasing heartbeat. I had to take a few deep breaths to calm it down.

Yesterday I was completely drained to even put some bottled water in the cabin. I hoped this man would arrive today because I was going to curse him for the whole month if he would not show his ass up here.

I looked around when I was done. It looked spotless, and things seemed to be in the right places. I was ready to bail out when I caught a very distinctly male voice, and it was not Keene's.

Our guest had finally arrived.

Great!

There was something in his accent that seemed different. An Irish? Australian?

Thanks, mate. Oh, British! Our guest is a freaking Brit?

How in the hell did he find this place?

I scurried toward the living room when the sunlight entered the cabin, indicating that Keene or our guest just entered.

A tall shadow hovered.

His voice was deep, yet so calm as he got closer to me. He was still talking with Keene when he stopped in the middle of the living room, dropping his suitcase and cargo bag beside the couch. He then snapped his gaze at my direction when he perhaps, sensed they were not alone.

Then our gazes locked. Suddenly, his gunmetal blue eyes widened as if showing some recognition, and his jaw literally dropped.

Crap!

My lips instantly dried with dread. Just the pain forming in my chest due to the hammering of my heart almost made me feel dizzy.

Oh my, God! *What if?*

“Sindy?”

Chapter 3

Westley

CLYVE

“YOU CAN’T and won’t ever control my life anymore, Skip because Dad told you so. It’s plaguy! Can’t I at least make a choice on my own?” Rage rode me as I threw my hand in the air while yelling over the phone. I was so bloody sick of having someone dictating my life even if it was my own brother—as if I was a good for nothing bastard. This had to stop one way or another. I was so sick of this!

He just told me that he was going to send me somewhere I had not even heard of as if he owned me. Just like that, without asking what I wanted, or if I had a plan or something this weekend.

I promised him to get a vacation after my training, but I was still in the middle of it when he wanted me to continue in New York. Like a good brother, I did it. Then here we go again, I was almost twenty-seven, yet if he treated me as if I was like a bloody toddler.

I knew I cocked up once but didn’t we all were? I’d been doing my best, hell, I’d been on the wagon for a long time, and I never planned on taking off again. So, what was wrong with him? Did he even have a tiny trust and patience in me?

“I just want—”

“I fully understand what you’re trying to do to me. You want to control my life. What else is there? You are a control bloody freak! You want me to take your shoes when Dad was still alive, am I right? Just bugger off, brother!” I gritted my teeth. What he did was overstepping the boundary, and I wasn’t chuffed a bit.

He didn’t reply, but he was breathing heavily from the other line. I knew I made him mad. *Who the fuck cares?* He made me madder.

“Just hear me out.”

“I’m done listening! For bloody sake, this is the last time you will tell me what to do. Just leave me the fuck alone!” I threw the phone into the wall. The debris scattered around the flat. At that moment, I didn’t care if he couldn’t contact me anymore. *I’m done.*

He loved me, I got it. He wanted me to have a great life just like he had right now. But what he didn’t understand was—that I couldn’t force things to happen when it was not the right time.

The next morning I woke up early as I had a flight to catch. My brother came last night, but I refused to see him. He let his driver give me an envelope, and I didn't give a shit what was that for.

Before I went to the airport, I rechecked the email Eli, Skip's assistant had sent to me last night. It was the details of my flight and the place where I would be staying. Unfortunately, he was not able to arrange a driver to pick me up from the airport, so I had to hail a cab once I landed.

And there was a slight problem, I didn't get a chance to replace my phone to even hire an Uber. If there was even an Uber in this small town.

"THIS IS the place, man," the cab driver announced, turning left to the driveway of the small house.

I scratched my scalp in irritation to the thought that this was where I was going to stay for the whole fortnight. Bleeding great!

I might have brought some of my art tools and the new camera I bought last week, but I was going to be dead with boredom before the end of the day.

But the tall old oaks had made me standstill, and my jaw just dropped.

"Stop right here, matey," I told the cab driver, causing him to stop to a halt. I gave some bills to him.

"Are you sure, sir? You still have to walk from here with your things."

"I'm sure, mate. Thanks!" I climbed out of the cab. The driver already opened the trunk of his cab and pulled out my things.

"Enjoy your stay!" He then drove away.

I whirled around, leisurely admiring the tall trees above me. There was Spanish moss hanging loosely on each branch. The leaves were dancing along with the blow of wind. The smell of fresh air was far different from the city of New York and London. It was quite refreshing.

Holy! How did my brother find this place? A knot in my stomach suddenly twisted on how our call had ended last night. Any road, I took his bait.

This place was heaven. Aside from painting, I could probably spend a lot here longer. It was quite peaceful, and right now, my brain was already filled with so many concepts.

I grabbed my stroller and my cargo bag and walked through the pathways with a huge smile plastered on my face like a twit. Fuck me.

To my right were the two wood cabins with stone chimneys and small windows. The design and color blended perfectly to the environment and the serene atmosphere. The tall trees at the back added a perfect forest setting. Well, I was in the middle of nowhere in the first place, dumbarse.

The sense of being away from city life was already invigorating my mind, and I couldn't wait to capture this view as soon as I settled in.

"You must be Clyve Clifford." A male voice stopped me from admiring the place.

He descended from the stairs of the house, tossing me a friendly smile. He must be the owner of this place. There was something about him that was odd. He was taller but skinny and had an off-color as a white cloth. His short blond hair looked thin like it had been falling off. The shirt he was wearing was even baggy on him. He seemed to be a nice person though.

He held out a hand. "Keene Storm, nice to meet you. I thought you changed your mind."

I took it for a handshake. "Just Clyve. I'm sorry for not informing you that my flight schedule was changed. Thanks, and it's a pleasure to be here. This is truly a beautiful place."

"Glad you like it. You still about to see the rest."

"Can't wait for it, mate."

He was about to grab my things when I stopped him before he collapsed on my account. "It's alright. Just show me the place where I'll be staying."

"Har— Westley is inside your cabin, filling the fridge."

"I could really use some. I don't drink much when I travel. I don't want to use airline loo."

"You're not American."

"My mum is, but Dad was British."

"Um, I'm sorry." He offered me a sad smile.

"It's alright. So you own the place?"

"Yeah. Been passed from three generations now. We almost lost this though. It's been a rough year for me."

I looked at him, nodding in sympathy. "You'll do great, mate."

"I hope so."

My eyes landed on the rustically inspired deck with a fence connected to the cabin. It had four rickety wooden chairs, a small table, and a lantern that hung from the tree branch.

"This is brill!"

"My late father designed the cabins from the exterior, including the interior. You'll about to see what's inside," he replied proudly.

"I'm sorry about your dad."

He muttered thank you, then pushed the wooden door open. It squeaked a little bit, but that didn't kill my excitement.

The dark wood was dominating the interior from floorboards to the wall, and the furniture inside.

Then someone showed up from the kitchen. A woman. A gorgeous woman. And not just a gorgeous woman.

Is this some kind of a bloody joke?

My jaw literally dropped when I recognized her. There could be no way my eyes were fooling me. *It's her.* I was sure as hell I blinked twice or even more.

She was the Sindy Kate.

"Sindy?"

And I almost didn't catch her reaction when her posture turned rigid, and her glowing big eyes widened—even wider, then blinked away. Those big eyes—they were green when I felt like we stared at each other that night.

My heart leaped up to my throat.

But this woman had a pair of dark ocean blue. Nevertheless, I was relieved that she was beautiful in the flesh than on the screen.

"Clyve, this is Westley—" *Wait a minute, she's Westley?* I thought she was a guy. *What the fuck?*

She lifted her chin, smiling tightly, then forced her words out. "Hi, hope you like the cabin." Her voice was a little harder with a bitter in her tone.

"This seems fancy than from the outside," I praised as I looked around.

The simplicity and the gloss of the wood made it more grandiose in an old-fashioned way. It had a leather couch, a flat-screen TV, and a receiver below.

"Do you have Internet access here?" I asked specifically to *Westley*.

She swallowed. Her eyes slightly narrowed at me. "Yes."

I couldn't look away, and the longer I stared at her, the more she squinted right back at me as if asking me silently what the fuck was I doing.

"Clyve, let me show you the room and the kitchen. If it doesn't meet your taste, we can transfer you to the other cabin," Keene broke the silence and tension rising between us. He probably noticed something was off.

I didn't know how to react in front of the woman who cammed for a living and pretended as if she was not that girl. But I was sure they were the same person. I could feel it in my bone when our gazes locked. Something shifted between us that it was hard to shake away.

What a small bloody world?

I just watched her that night and barely fell asleep, thinking of how she mesmerized me with her eyes, and now she was right in front of me, she was shooting me a glare. What a twist of fate I had.

Does he know her night job? Were they together? I pushed those questions out of my head.

"Let me take your luggage." She grabbed the handle of my stroller before I could protest.

Keene opened a door from the right. "This is your room. Sometimes we lost electricity when there is a strong wind, but we have a generator as a reservoir at the back. Hopefully, we don't have to use it." He pointed to the other door. "That's your bathroom. There are some clean towels and toiletries Westley placed for you." Keene was talking fast, and I felt like I just hit my head and had a concussion.

I could not even appreciate the room, though it was simple with queen size bed and closet, I was more interested in getting to know Westley or Sindy Kate or whoever she was.

We moved to the kitchenette. A countertop and stools made from thick slab wood, but a kerosene lantern hung on a rusty hook had caught my attention.

I caught the kerosene lamp. "Thank you. I love this place already. I wasn't expecting something like—"

"What were you expecting then? An old cabin with rag dolls hidden underground."

My body suddenly froze to her cold and sarcastic comment.

Keene immediately cleared his throat. "Westley likes to throw unpleasant punchlines. Just don't take it seriously, Clyve."

I turned to face her. "Are you trying to scare me off?" I displayed a wide grin. "Try another more convincing because what you just did, didn't even rise a hair on my skin."

Chapter 4

Definition of Hot

WESTLEY

Oh, boy. I'm in big trouble.

I WAS SUCH a pig for treating the only guest we had so badly. My words just came out strong and wrong. Although, I must admit that I did it on purpose.

To be honest, Clyve was hot, yet you couldn't see an aura of a cocky playboy from the city who had only one goal in life—to get into your pants.

His classic short hairstyle was light brown—almost blond. His blue eyes surrounded by long lashes were mesmerizing that I could stare and fantasize at them all day. They were not a boring hue, in fact, when our gazes locked; it scorched me and captured my whole attention. And there was something else in there that urged me to grasp on.

What the hell was I thinking? *Maybe because he's the sexiest man I've ever met.* Okay, Westley, from hot to sexy, seriously?

What's wrong with me? And definitely the handsome Brit I'd ever seen. Not that I'd seen many. I might have, but that was ancient history ago.

He was tall like Keene that I had to crane my neck to meet his gaze. He didn't have huge muscles like those big guys, but he showed enough in those sinewy and well-defined arms. His skin almost flawless except for a few golden brown chest hairs that peeked out from the white shirt that he kept two buttons open. Yeah, in just a few minutes, I got all in my head, and I even got a chance to view his ass.

I gulped.

"What was that all about?" I almost jumped. Thankfully, Keene saved me from my lascivious thoughts.

"What was what?" I asked back, cutting the tip of asparagus for dinner.

"Your last comment before you left."

"What was he expecting then?"

"He's from London and used to see a castle, a Big Ben, and the queen of England, Westley."

"Yeah. You keep that Westley."

"I know what I am doing," he pointed out.

"And let me tell you, Keene. I am not so sure that all Londoners are rich. He wouldn't be here in this small town if he is privileged enough." I rolled my eyes. This conversation would not go anywhere. I knew it because it was my fault for giving Clyve a bad impression on us.

"Be nice to our guest, please. This is our chance, and if he likes this place and our hospitality, he can tell his friends, and we might have another guest coming over. Call it marketing strategies."

"Fine." I couldn't argue more. I snapped him out, but he called me Sindy. I was a hundred percent sure I heard him right.

"He'll be joining us over dinner tonight."

"Great. I'm almost done. I just have to roast this together with potatoes."

"I'll prepare the table," he suggested.

"It's done, and I also placed a bottle of wine in the fridge."

"Don't do this to me, Westley." His voice came soft and shaky.

"Do what?"

"You've been treating me like I'm fragile for two weeks now, and I feel like I'm useless if you will continue doing this to me."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When I opened them, Keene was already gone.

Great!

I SHOWERED and dressed to something satisfactory. I even curled my hair and put some makeup on. The doorbell rang when I was halfway downstairs. It was probably Clyve. He was just right on time.

"Please, come in."

"Thanks for having me tonight, Keene." Then he looked in my way, making me instantly freeze on the spot.

My heart skipped.

"Good evening, Westley!" He was wearing a dark blue slim shirt with sleeves rolled-up his elbows and a pair of dark jeans. It looked too perfect on him if it was even possible. His strong jawline was

shaven clean, which I preferred a day or two worth of stubble, but to his defense, clean-shaven looked good on him. And then, those dark pink full lips. *And since when did I care about someone's lips?* A few lines appeared at the corner of his eyes when he smiled genuinely. And he looked more handsome when he did that.

God, I should hit my head once and for all and stop whatever I was doing.

When I averted my gaze to Keene, he was already widening his eyes at me that got my attention.

Oh, yeah. What was he saying again?

"Evening, Clyve. Hope you don't mind me calling you—"

"I don't mind at all." This was something in his accent that sounded so appealing than American. The way he said *at all* was utterly sexy to me. Frack!

"Have you settled in alright?"

"Yeah, thank you."

"Please, have a seat for a while with Keene," I excused myself and made my way to the kitchen.

I could hear them talking about the property. He seemed to genuinely like this place, and that made my stomach twist for being rude earlier.

They appeared to the dining room as if they figured out it was ready. Clyve sat across the table, facing me while Keene was on my right side. I noticed him just took the roasted asparagus, potatoes, and the salad into his plate.

"You're vegan." My words just slipped from my mouth naturally, and it surprised me a little bit.

He offered a small smile and nodded. "Yeah. Since I'm, well..." He swallowed. "Sobered."

My mouth agape. Wow! I couldn't even imagine him being drunk because he was physically fit. Was this why there was something in those eyes that I couldn't pinpoint?

Now, he completely intrigued me. *Who is Clyve Clifford?* I felt like I wanted to peel those layers on him, to get to know him better.

Interesting!

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to push something."

"It's all right. It's not a secret anyway. I'm not ashamed of what I did in the past." *I wish I am as strong as you.* "I was not born vegan. My brother once asked me if I was satisfied with what I ate, but protein doesn't only come from lean meat alone. So yeah, I'm good." He bit the crunchy asparagus, then swallowed it. "This is really delicious."

“Thank you. I’m not a good cook, but I can try something from scratch.”

“Guys love good food.” Keene winked at me.

“And a lush,” Clyve agreed, feeling my face flush.

“I can make an awesome breakfast, man.”

Clyve looked at him. “Really? Well, all I can do is make a green smoothie.”

Keene crunched his nose. “You drink those?”

“Yeah, it’s actually good and refreshing.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t imagine drinking blended green leafy vegetables.”

Clyve burst into laughter, shaking his head. He actually laughed—a boisterous laugh. I noticed a barely noticeable crook on his nose. It must have been broken once. Crap! How the hell did I notice everything about him? Even his freaking nose.

“You really should try it. It’s not that bad, it doesn’t have to be kale alone, you know. You can add some banana, berries, and yogurt.” A slow smile built up my lips to the way he said the word banana.

Then he looked at my way and smiled as if he just read my thought.

“Steak for kale?” Keene raised an eyebrow, daring Clyve.

I hadn’t seen Keene so carefree like this for a long time. And it quite a sight for sore eyes.

“You won’t dare me, mate.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Keene held his hand out.

“Are you sure?” Clyve shook his hand to close the deal.

“You didn’t just do that.” My eyes widened in amusement.

Keene seemed to relax around him as they talked about current events as if they’d known each other for a long time. I’d never seen him like this, and I felt I loosened a few knots in me.

* * *

AFTER THE dinner, Clyve suggested sitting on the deck that adjoined the cabins.

I bought three blankets for us. The temperature dropped chilly during the night time.

Keene already lit the pit on the ground. The orange-yellow flame illuminated the place, making it more relaxing.

I blinked the thought out my head as I watched a few moths started gathering around the fire.

“You okay?” I offered a blanket to Keene when he started shivering.

He looked up at me with lit-up eyes. “Yeah, why?”

“Just asking. I’m just happy you two seemed to get along.”

“He seems genuinely kind. You should try it, too. For at least two weeks.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Scowling, I sat on a wooden rickety chair beside him.

“Sure. You have a definition of getting along on your own. You sure you never met him before? Maybe at your parties. I noticed him staring at you quite a lot.” He maintained eye contact.

My brow arched. “I haven’t developed amnesia, Keene. I would definitely remember someone—”

“As attractive as him?” His brow cocked up in amusement, smiling at me.

Okay, that was a poor choice of words. My face burned that he easily read my thought.

“I’ve seen more attractive than him.” I narrowed my eyes.

“Really, like Who? We’ve never been outside this town for two years other than going to appointments. Have you forgotten about that?”

“I guess, he’s okay.” I looked away, hoping he would drop the subject. Except, I knew Keene would not stop until I admitted that Clyve was well was hot.

“And he called you Cindy.” His words made my heartbeat race.

Before I could reply, Clyve appeared.

“Hey, I was searching for an opener. Didn’t find one.”

Holy cow! He walked in, carrying two cold beers and a bottle of water. How could a man walk so sexily?

The yellow light illuminating from the cabin created a light effect just like you’d seen in the movie—when an angel descended from the sky. And again he was smiling brightly directly at me. It was a miracle that my jaw was still attached to my face.

Maybe it was karma, beating my ass up for saying Clyve was okay because he was not definitely the definition of okay. *Clyve is well, incredibly hot.*

“Don’t you know we have a walking opener around here?” Keene joked.

“Really?” Clyve snickered.

I rolled my eyes when Keene was pointing his thumb at me.

"I did that a long time ago. Give it to me." I gestured for a bottle.

"Care to teach me your tricks?" Clyve asked with curiosity. Then he handed me the cold beer.

"I can't call it tricks." I took it from him, gesturing him to give me another bottle.

"Are you sure?" He hesitantly asked.

"Just watch and learn."

I held the bottle on the neck and placed the other on my lap. Then I turned the other upside down. I placed the tip of the lid of the second bottle to the edge of the first and held it tightly.

"Then flips it up. See? Easy peasy."

"Impressive!"

"I can also use my teeth."

His eyes widened. "No bleeding way!"

"Just kidding." I hid my smile when he looked so impressed after I gave him the beer.

He shook his head. "That's for you and Keene. I'll stick with water."

I listened to them talking about Clyve's brother who loved European football, and how he ended up here. Then they laughed when Clyve mentioned some ridiculous British lingo.

I missed being around with people. I used to be the center of attention as it gave me power and boosted my confidence before things happened unexpectedly—it was the worse part of my life—when I was humiliated for the thing that I never did. I could still remember the look on their faces. It still horrified me up to this moment.

The bark of laughter pulled me back out of those sick memories—it was Clyve.

"What did I miss?"

"I'm gettin' the messages," Keene said in a thick accent while holding his stomach as he rose from his seat. "Seriously, though. I need to go to the bathroom. Be right back."

"It's loo or khazi," Clyve corrected.

"I stick with the loo." Keene walked while I stared at his back in shock.

I turned to face Clyve. "What did you say to him?"

"Lingo?" He scratched his head, grinning at me.

“That’s all?”

“Yes, Bonnie.”

Chapter 5

CC

CLYVE

ONE THING I knew about Keene and Westley was they were not together. I meant they were not together like together. I could see how they looked at each other—no eye-fucking, Keene's eating her up with his eyes, or exchanging dirty looks between them. They were not romantically involved.

Okay, that was enough of snooping around, Clyve. Why did I even care? *And why in the hell do I feel like it's a relief?*

I watched them together while I was still in the cabin. Westley, Sindy, or if she was even that Sindy Kate. Although I was pretty sure she was the cam girl who was wrapping a blanket around Keene's thin body right now.

"Can you please stop staring at me?" I blinked to her annoyed voice.

"I-I'm sorry." I stammered. I met her gaze and her brows were still knitting together. "I was just thinking."

I developed a bad habit of staring at someone while I was in deep thoughts, and it was not impressive—it was cheeky.

"Is he okay?"

"How does it any of your business?" Her tone was sharp and not friendly. If she had annoyed voice earlier, now she was pissed off as what American would say.

"I was just asking. I may not be a medical doctor, but my mum is. I thought I could pull some strings if he needs a—"

"No thank you. He's gonna be fine."

"So, I am right then that he's not doing well?"

"Will you please stop asking as if you care. You don't even know anything about us."

"I'm just trying to—"

"Help? Why do people like you keep assuming that people like us need help? Well, we don't need one. Just be a guest, and stop digging into our personal business. Can you do that?" Stubborn woman. I understood her though because I was a stranger.

"Why do I feel that you hate me?" That was the truth, and I preferred to be honest. She didn't welcome me like the way Keene did. Was this because I mistakenly called her Sindy?

"That's a strong word, Mr. Clifford."

"It's my middle name." I smiled but her eyes were blazing with hatred that it could burn two holes right through my soul if it was even possible. "What do you do for a living, *Miss Westley*?" I kept my eyes glued to her, making her uneasily shift from her chair.

She roughly wrapped the blanket around her body. "What's with the *just be a guest* did you not understand?"

"I'm just making a conversation while your boyfriend is not here, you know. People do that." Bloody hell! That was so low and foolish.

She snorted bitterly and stood up. "I'll go check *my boyfriend* then, Clyve Clifford."

"I told you—"

She waved her hand to stop me. "Don't care!" Then she stomped away, leaving me cold and alone. Well, my snooping around didn't end well, did it?

"He doesn't know, does he?" I yelled and watched her entire body seize up.

She quickly spun around and scurried towards me that had my heart stilled for a moment. "What do you want?" Each word was bitten off through clenched teeth. Her face was flaming with anger, and so as her ocean-blue eyes tightened as she glared at me.

"So, he doesn't have any idea then." Instinct told me that I should pry even though it wasn't a good idea. I just wanted to understand her. That was all.

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Are you sure about that, Sindy Kate?" I took the risk, letting go of the question that I'd been dying to ask.

Her breath hitched, eyes slightly widened, the pain and sadness were so deep. Now I wanted to wipe away the pain I saw in her eyes before it was gone in an instant. Her complexion turned pallid. She was quite an expert in concealing her emotions, but it didn't go unnoticed. She was that woman, indeed. Taking a risk was not bad after all.

There was something about her that piqued my interest though, other than the fact that she was beautiful. I'd seen plenty, and I could have brought them to my bed in no time. That was complete bollocks! That was not how it worked for me. In her case, I'd rather get to know her better than shag her until she admitted that she was Sindy Kate. Besides, she didn't even like me.

"Stop snooping around if you still want to stay longer, or should I call a hotel in the morning?"

"If you say so. My apology for my rude behavior, Miss Westley." I watched her walk away.

People didn't do drastic measures when not necessary. She must have reasons, and if it involved Keene, she was then one of the best people I'd ever met.

* * *

I WOKE earlier than I usually did. It normally happened on my first night in a new place. It was always troublesome.

After wearing my running clothes, I walked outside the cabin. It was a little bit chilly, but I always loved being outside than doing an indoor exercise.

I could still see the morning dew in the grass. I closed my eyes as I breathed in, feeling the fresh air blowing my face.

I went straight ahead to the driveway towards the empty road. I plugged my headset, played my playlist, and reset the timer on my watch then I was good to go.

My stomach twisted when I remembered I had not talked to my bother since his last call. I was sure he was worried about me. I knew him. If I was not going to call back, he would contact the cabin owner or worse flew here to check if I was okay.

I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my body, making me feel more alive. I lowered my pace when I noticed I've run far.

A few houses came to view with almost similar structures. A few cars parked in front, mostly old models, kid bicycles, and trucks.

I pulled my hood down as I watched an old couple go to their car. I felt a tiny pang inside my chest as it reminded me of mum and dad.

I had a hard time accepting their divorce. I stayed with dad in London while my brother chose to study in the States with mum. It felt like I lost them both simultaneously. I'd been into a lot of troubles while dad was busy running the business, and he hardly got home.

I was barely an adult at that time, and I had a huge opportunity ahead of me. Enrolling at one of the Russell Group universities was easy because I had quite impressive grades, but instead, I chose the wrong track.

I saw the sadness in my brother's eyes when he came back from the States. What he did to me was an eye-opener to my twisted mind that gave me light in my darkest world.

Now my dad was gone, but I couldn't help and wish my family was still intact before he passed away.

Shit!

I turned around and sprinted back to the cabin. My heart pounded in my chest. I could feel my muscles tightened everywhere, and I was sticky with sweat.

It felt good. It always was.

"Clyve!" I stopped my track when I heard a faint voice calling my name. I pulled the headset off of my ears.

"Got an email from Arella Rogue, said it was urgent!" Keene was standing on his porch, crossing his arms over her chest.

"Is my brother okay?" I felt like my gut had been kicked straight out of my body. I felt the chilly wind wrapping around my body, making me almost shiver in dread. Still catching my breath, I ran towards the house. My chest ached to the pounding of my heart.

"Yeah, I guess so."

I stared at him. Then Westley emerged from the door with a steaming cup in her hand that diverted my attention from Keene. I looked at her—really looked at her. She was still wearing a thin robe. Her hair was up in a messy bun that I thought she looked cute. It was official that I had a huge crush on her.

She rolled her eyes when she caught me that I was literally ogling at her. I deserved that.

I blinked and focused back to Keene because what I just did was shameless. "What do you mean you guess so?"

"Breakfast will be ready in less than an hour, CC." She snorted and entered the house.

"Keene, can you tell me what's exactly in the email, please? I haven't checked mine." I stepped inside their house. The smell of brewed coffee made my stomach grumble loudly.

"I'll print you a copy."

"That won't be necessary."

"Arella mentioned that your brother was worried if you got here safe. She said to reply to her email, and if you won't that she and Skip will travel here and kick your sorry arse herself for making them worry."

"Thanks." Guilt. Terrible guilt. It was right here coiling in the pit of my stomach. I was right. He was worried about me, yet here I was being a stupid and stubborn arse. "I was planning on checking my email after my run. Where can I buy a phone?" I followed Keene to the kitchen where Westley was pouring a pancake batter on the pan.

"How a city boy doesn't own a phone?" Westley reacted. Her sarcasm put a smile on my face.

I shrugged. "Mine's broken before my flight."

"On purpose?" Keene's brows arched.

"Something like that."

"Use my phone and call your brother, man. Unless you want him to come and kick your arse." Keene laughed with a cough, tossing his phone to me.

I caught it and dialed my brother's number. I readied myself if he ever busted my ear with his berate.

"Linton." My chest expanded to hear the familiar voice of my brother. I couldn't believe my anger towards him had completely vanished into thin air.

I missed this arse.

"Damn right you are, brotha." A smile curved up my lips that he was all right.

"Jesus Christ, Clyve! Eli is about to cancel my schedules and book a flight for me and Arella." He released a long and deep sigh.

"Oh, come on, mate, I'm good. Thanks for worrying though. Now I know how much you love me."

"That's not funny. You better call Arella because she was so damn worried about you since yesterday. She suggested surprising this trip for you. And you know her, she won't stop blaming herself until she hears from you that you're okay."

"Fine. I'll talk to her, but first, I need to buy a phone."

"What the fuck, Clyve? Where is your goddamn phone?"

"Um, broken?"

"You broke your goddamn phone and traveled without one?"

"I was mad, okay, and have no plan on getting one until I get back, but then—"

"But then what?" he jeered.

"When I saw houses while I was on my run, I remembered our parents, you, and..."

"Clyve, I'm sorry for being pushy."

"You mean being a pussy," I whispered as I didn't want Keene and Westley to think I was lewd.

"That, you should find some. Anyway, I just want you to chill out. I really appreciate all your effort, but you are my brother, and you can't cut it off not to let me worry about you. This is the burden I should carry until I die. So suck it off." He laughed. "Have fun and forget the pressure for a while."

"I know."

"Do you?" Shit!

"Look, Skip."

"It's alright, Clyve. We good, yeah?"

"Yup." I nodded as relief washed over me.

"Just talk to Arella, okay? Thanks for calling, and I love you, brother. We'll talk about pussies once you get a phone. I'll purchase online, and let it send it to your address. Have fun."

"Thank you, brotha."

"Well, it seems to me that CC misses his big brother, isn't he?"

Chapter 6

Westley & Clyve

WESTLEY

This is not a good idea.

I TOOK a deep breath before knocking on his cabin. Then a few moments later, the wooden floor squeaked, and the door swung open.

Holy! Why in the hell was this man so hot? I mean like off that chart freaking hot. My breathing held in my lungs for a moment and my wide eyes landed down below his face. Unconsciously.

Groaning, I turned around because my face was probably red. I could feel the blood rushing up my neck. Clyve was half-naked, and only on his running tight pants. His wreathed forearms were like carved by Renaissance sculptor.

With just a quick look, I was sure I saw the still sweaty broad chest and washboard abs that you could only see in the Men's fitness magazines.

"Are you ready?" Thank, God my voice didn't stutter while my heart rate tripled.

"Ready for what?"

I fought to roll my eyes. "Didn't Keene tell you about your activities for today?"

"Do we have those?" he asked innocently. "Can we just skip?"

"You have those. It's part of the package." That was not true. "Just take a shower and wear something comfortable. I'll be waiting here." I was already crossing my arms over my chest, sighing in annoyance.

"Aren't—" The warm breathing at the back of my ear made me jump.

With my heart still in my throat, I spun around and squinted at him. "Seriously, that was not funny!" My face heated, even more. This time with anger to see the smug he wore on his face.

"Don't tell me you haven't seen a half-naked bloke in your entire life, Westley. How about Keene?"

"I've seen a lot, asshole! And stop counting Keene on whatever you have planned in your stupid brain!" I shot back. Then I realized I just called him a name.

In my defense, he was being disrespectful, and I would never allow him to do that to Keene. My best friend was nothing but kind to him. He should keep that in his thick skull.

Clyve swallowed, his smug smile disappeared and eyes flashed with guilt.

“One more word from you about my best friend, trust me you won’t like what I’m gonna do to you, Brit. I won’t tolerate your disrespectfulness while you are our guest. Now go get a shower or get dressed. We’re leaving in twenty.” I walked down the narrow stone paths. “Don’t forget to take your camera with you!”

My heart was still racing until I reached the house. I sat on the swing to calm my nerves down. Clyve just got under my skin, and I didn’t like how nosy he was. Was he trying to be friendly or wanted to pry?

I closed my eyes for a while, sucking some fresh air to wash my anger. I could treat him like a guest if he could’ve just kept his mouth shut.

His fine broad chest though, his abs and those tiny hairs trailing down to his perfect V were those things that made my eyes grow big. His ripped torso and not to mention the bulge on his tight pants.

Oh, my God!

Nothing on this earth was sexier than a half-naked, barefooted, and sweaty man, opening a damn door for you. Jesus! I sounded like cheap.

My eyes flew open, sucking a sharp breath. My face turned beet-red when I noticed I wasn’t alone anymore.

Clyve.

“How long have you been staring at me?” It was an accusing tone, and that made him flinch.

Shooting daggers while I literally mind-fucking him was not the best idea, but I still did it though. I couldn’t help it.

I sighed in defeat. “Look, I’m sorry for snapping at you earlier, okay? It’s just, I have trust issues, and you came here as our guest then asking something about personal matters made me feel on edge.”

“I’m sorry if I made you feel that way. I guess we both set on a wrong foot, aren’t we? So, can we start over?” His apology sounded sincere. “I promise I won’t pry again.”

I gripped the hand he held out. His grip was strong, yet his hand was warm and unbelievably soft for a man.

“I’m Clyve Clifford Linton.” *Of course, you are.*

“Audene Westley.” I couldn’t help but smile back when he smiled at me. It just his smile was so contagious.

“Shall we go where ever you’re planning to end my terrible life?”

“Huh! I won’t spill my plan.” I stood up. “Let’s go.”

We followed the small trail with half-buried pebbles, fallen leaves, and twigs towards the lake through the back of the other cabin—they crunched under our shoes. The birds chirping, the dancing of tree leaves above us, and the smell of decaying woods and specks of dirt always gave me a soothing effect. In my twenty-four years, never had I ever imagined I would love the life here.

I used to come over here with Keene until last year. We used to ride through his Launch to the town. It saved time, and we loved the view of the lake, too.

“How long are we hiking?” he interrupted my thoughts.

I chuckled. “We’re not gonna go hiking, city boy.”

“Fond of me already, yeah?” He laughed softly.

“Don’t get that through your thick skull, CC?” I didn’t know why it sounded odd calling him his initials, but I couldn’t help it.

“You know, even my brother I won’t allow him to call me CC because it sounds girly coming from him.”

“Fine. I’ll stop.”

“You’re a girl. That would be fine, and I let his girlfriend call me that as well.”

A girl? Jeez, a woman would be fine.

“It’s okay, Clyve suits you well. Very British.”

He snorted. “And how about Westley? Doesn’t it sound so Wild Wild West to you?”

“Yeah. Very American, but I like my name, and I embraced it.” I stopped when we reached the deck.

“Bloody hell!”

I laughed. “Now that was very British.”

“Does that work?” His eyes widened in excitement as he pointed to the Launch.

“The last time I checked, yup.”

“Cool. Wait.” He set his camera, angling directly to the lake. “Let me just take some photographs.”

“Take your time, brit. But we need to be in town at lunch. I wanna show you around.”

He looked like a happy-go-lucky guy who didn’t care about tomorrow. He clicked and clicked until I lost track counting of how many shots he did. Clyve surely loved photography, or maybe the mother nature itself.

I took a breath upon remembering what happened last year. I could still feel the pain squeezing my chest while processing the news.

This tree bowing over and shadowing the lake had never been old and served the best memories. The familiar peaty scent around the area seemed like it was just yesterday. Everything was still fresh to me.

“Beautiful,” Clyve muttered, already standing beside me.

“What?”

“The view.”

“You’ve only seen this part.” I walked past him to the deck. “Follow me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ma’am me again, and you’ll find yourself in the lake.”

“I can swim, Bonnie.”

I stopped, turning around. “Yeah, that one. I know what it is, and it’s not British lingo.”

“Sorry.” He laughed. His voice echoed in the entire lake. “You got me there.”

I wished my life was as easy as his, but I already accepted the fact that I was born to carry my own burdens on my shoulder.

I ignored the knot in my stomach and hopped down to the launch owned by Keene’s late father.

A slipper type made from fine wood that could only carry five passengers. He loved Serena and named it after his late wife. He used to go out fishing when Keene came for summer vacation.

I cranked the engine, and it quickly roared. When I looked at Clyve, he was taking pictures, and now the camera was pointing directly at me.

“Delete those pictures I have in there, CC.”

“Nah.”

I stood straight, warning him. "I mean it."

"I know you mean it, Westley. What I'm trying to say is, I didn't take any shots with you in there without asking your permission. Just chill out."

"Hop in, or I'll leave you behind."

"You won't dare." He stopped, slightly alarm.

I arched a brow. "Oh, try me."

He quickly jumped in and sat at the back. I pulled a life jacket and threw it to him. He caught it, snapping his head at me with a query look. "Are you always this serious? I can literally see the list in your head right now that you wish to accomplish today." *You don't know what I've done, Clyde.*

"Uh-huh. Now wear that thing."

"Didn't I just say I can swim, Westley? And I don't want to look like an idiot with this thing on." He raised the life jacket and dropped it down dramatically. He then rolled his eyes.

Clyde rolled his eyes at me.

I smiled, shaking my head subtly. I steered and pulled the steering wheel, and the boat started to move slowly and smoothly away from the deck to the center of the lake.

I was caught with the view that I missed. I wore the sunglasses as the wind started blowing my face. I knew my hair would be messy, but who cared?

I did not notice Clyde was already sitting beside me until he spoke.

"Tell me about yourself, Westley." It was not inquisitive, and I started to feel relaxed around him.

"You won't drop it, will you? Let me guess. You're a type of guy who likes to talk with a stranger because you think you won't see that stranger again."

"Just your hobbies, Westley. What did you take in uni, the club you joined in secondary? That sort of thing."

I sucked the fresh air. "I'm twenty-four. When I was a kid I used to snatch my sister's lip gloss and dig it to cayenne powder. Then one time I soaked her mascara into the mouthwash."

Clyde hissed that made me smile. "I see. Westley likes to prank. I keep that in mind. You're a dangerous little thing back then, yeah?"

I glanced at him. "Until now. So don't try to make me mad again because you'll see a different version of me in front of you."

"Aw, I'm so scared, lady." He faked a frightened look.

We passed by the houses with docks. Clyve didn't miss to capture the kids playing, swinging their legs into the water.

"How about you? Other than your full name, your brother Skip is the CEO of the Linton Empire, and his girlfriend has recently launched a new fragrance."

"Not bad, Westley. You googled me, and I'm so touched."

"You can't fool me with your accent, *mate*. Italian and Spanish are way sexier than British. So drop it, and tell me about yourself, Clyve Clifford Linton of the United Kingdom."

"You know my full name because I told you."

"Hmm, and one thing I'm sure of is that you don't have a girlfriend otherwise you won't be here in this beautiful place. Alone." *You just want to confirm your doubt, Westley.*

"That's quite true."

"So, love to paint, huh?"

"You checked my Facebook. How about my Instagram and Twitter? Did you follow me?"

I hit him on his arm causing him to grimace in pain.

"That hurts, woman."

"I didn't follow you. I might have checked your Facebook though, but I didn't see anything. You need to accept me to access your photos." I rolled my eyes as I sounded more defensive.

"Might?" He cocked his brow, amused than ever.

"Okay, it sounds stalkerish, but yeah. Kinda." My admission made him smile, and that smile alone could melt someone's icy heart.

"I checked your Facebook account, but I couldn't find any by Westley who lives here."

"I don't have an FB account. I used Keene's," I lied.

He didn't have to know the reason. He was not also going to stay here permanently, so why even bother?

"Okay. I'm twenty-seven. You already know my brother. I'm not violent, that's the first thing you should know about me. Before I came, I went on a date using the dating app my brother owned. Let me tell you, it was a terrible experience. She ran out of the pub like her arse was on fire when she found out I went to the therapy."

“She was not Cindy, was she?”

Chapter 7

Her Voice

CLYVE

This woman is something.

ONE MOMENT she was fiery, then became friendly all of a sudden. It was not that I was complaining, but she was like having a switch—transforming into a beast when the clock ticked midnight—a stunning beast though.

“What?” She snapped her head at me, scowling.

I didn't say it out loud, did I? “What?”

“You chuckled.”

“Oh. I was just thinking about the bloke back at the diner.” I was not thinking about that dickwad at all.

That skinhead bloke kept glaring at me throughout our time at the Deer's Diner. He was huge, around two hundred and sixty pounds of muscles in his plaid shirt. The moment I saw him, I knew his middle name was trouble or it suited him better if it was a wanker.

“Donnie's a jerk. That's all you have to know. He's the sheriff's son. So you don't wanna be mixed up with someone like him. You're maybe rich, but you're in uncharted territory—not the right place for you to show off.”

“Thanks for the heads up. But I'm not the kind of person who likes to show off? Are you sure he's not your ex?”

“Dop it. I'm not interested in any guys.” She pushed the old glass door with an open signposted.

“Not imposing.” I was glad she cleared the air.

The crisp paper and musty smell of carpet and an ozone-like tang air condition welcomed us.

“Old-fashioned bookstores. Nice.” A few selections of magazines and greeting cards on the racks behind the glass window. Sturdy old bookshelves of different books lining the walls and marching across the floor in rows. A small round table at the corner was holding a book in the display, and posters displaying popular books and discounts posted on the wall.

“Not every day you'll find a place like this,” she said. “What's the headline today, Pete?”

"Old man Bart's has a new calf, Dear," An old man on the vintage chair with a newspaper in hand replied.

A woman wearing a huge smile on her face, probably older than Westley stood up.

"Audene, I thought you're busy." The thick southern accent in her tongue was palpable. She bounced her eyes from me, then back to Westley.

"Hello, I'm Clyve." I held out my hand.

"You must be new here, darlin'. I'm Xena." She shook my hand, then looked at Westley who looked at her with disinterest. It was her way of telling her to shut up because I was not her type.

"That obvious, huh?"

"Clyve is our guest at the cabin."

"Yeah, that's right. I'm their *guest*."

"She never brought someone around. Except for Keene. So, Clyve, how's your stay so far, honey?"

"Great. Looking forward to exploring more of the secrets of this town." I left them when they started babbling something I could not quite grab on.

"You work here, Westley?" I sauntered to the fiction section, pulling out a book by a famous mystery/thriller author from the shelf.

"No. I work over there." She pointed to what was behind the glass wall that separated the other store.

My eyes literally widened. "No bloody way you work there!"

"And why the hell not?" She narrowed her eyes at me, amused.

"Because of...um."

"It doesn't suit me?"

"Maybe. Can we go there after this?"

"Not so fast, darling. Buy at least one book," Xena said.

"Sure, I'll take this." I returned the mystery-thriller and grabbed the romance book instead, causing Westley to chuckle.

"What? Can't a man read a romance novel?"

"Did you hear me say anything?" she asked, amused.

Xena punched on the cash register. "Audene thought it would bruise men's ego when someone caught them reading romance books. Thanks, honey!"

"Stereotyping, eh."

"Have a little patient on her. She's like a marshmallow."

"I happen to have a lot of it." I grinned at Xena, taking the paper bag she offered.

"I'm not!" Westley yelled before she walked out of the bookstore.

"See you tomorrow, Audene. Say hello to Keene for me," Xena yelled back, laughing.

A vintage welcome sign made the shop more of an antique vibe. Westley hugged the sixty or something-year-old man. He had thick glasses hung at the tip of his nose while he was inspecting me.

"How's Keene, dear?" he asked while pinning his gaze on me.

"He's doing fine, Stan. Thanks for asking. I'm here to tour the guest. This is Clyve. Clyve this is Stan, the shop owner."

"Hello, sir. Howdy?"

Westley looked at me with amusement on her face as I addressed the man with respect.

"Still old, Clyve. How did you find this town so far?"

"To be honest, it's quite different from where I came from, but this is refreshing. I love nature, and I can't wait to look around."

"You're a British, lad?"

"Yes, sir. Born and raise."

"I loved to travel when I was still young. Collecting antiques was one of my hobbies. That's how I got this place."

"These quite a collection you have here, sir."

"I found that piece in an old city in Italy. Owned by an old couple." He pointed at the old oil painting with elaborated carved frames hung on the wall. "That mermaid figurines were older than me in a decade."

"Do you have a plan to open a shop in the city?" I looked around.

An antique wood cabinet at the corner, china plates, collectible cups, glittering crystal chandeliers, and lamps dangling overhead, but a black and white framed portrait caught my attention.

“Too old for that, Clyve.”

I was mesmerized by the picture. It was an Asian young boy squinting his eyes to the camera with a missing tooth smile. “How much is this?”

“Interested?”

“Yeah.”

“That one is the last portrait taken by an Antoine Le Veir before he died in a plane crash.”

“This is priceless, Stan.”

“You love photography, son?”

I snapped my head at him. “What made you say that?”

“No one ever gave attention to that portrait since I hung it in there. The way you concentrated your eyes on, I knew you have insights about photography.”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Take that as a gift.”

My mouth agape, shaking my head.

Westley took off the photograph from the wall and wiped it clean.

“I can’t take it. At least let me pay you.”

“A souvenir, Clyve. And it’s rude to decline a gift, ain’t it?”

“At least let me pay for something I will choose.” I wandered around. I found a sewing machine, old musical instruments, stacks of comic books, folding knives, and an old necklace with a blue teardrop pendant. That reminded me of her eyes.

Classy.

I gave it to the old man and paid for it. I looked at Westley who was still busy dusting an old ukulele. I hoped she wouldn’t notice me, and I didn’t want her to comment on the item I chose.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Stan.” She hugged the old man one more time before leaving.

“Spend some time with the lad, Audene!”

* * *

“THANK YOU for today, Westley. I had fun.” I placed the things I bought on top of the wooden coffee table.

“So, are we on a surname basis now, Linton? Or is this your excuse for me not to call you CC?” She grinned, and for the first time since I met her, she seemed to loosen up a bit around me.

“It’s not that I don’t like to be being called as CC, but...”

She laughed. “But it sounds macho if you call me Westley.”

“But Westley is way more macho, don’t you think?” I sat on the couch beside her. “Do you have a middle name?”

“Why would I tell you?”

I grinned and ignored the sharp tone in her voice. “Because I will definitely find it out, Audene Westley.”

She abruptly stood up. “I should go. Keene must have been wondering if we came back or not.”

I followed her to the door. “You can just tell me if you don’t trust me, you know.”

She turned around. “You’re right. I don’t know you to trust you. What I did today was just a part of your two weeks package.”

Two weeks package, my arse. I was not so dumb not to notice if she fancied being around me or not. So, what was the deal with her denial?

“Tomorrow, we—”

“I want to stay tomorrow.” I cut her off.

She didn’t have to tour me around because I could definitely find my way without her help, and besides, she had to work tomorrow.

“Okay, then. Bye.”

I locked the door behind me with a knot of disappointment in my stomach. Preposterous!

After taking a shower, I checked my email and skyped my brother.

The clock on my laptop showed it was ten in the evening. I quickly logged in to the website, then bang! Sindy Kate was online.

My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at her on the screen. She was definitely like having a dual personality. One was an angel, and the other was the evil twin.

She just finished dancing. Her denim ripped short pulled up, showing the viewers of her long shaped legs and a piece of gorgeous round arse. She sat back in front of the screen, making her warm and seductive eyes shone on the camera.

I was one hundred percent it was Westley. Her hair right now was a wig. It didn't look lively on the screen. She was using contact lenses, and this time, it was gray.

Sindy Kate was typing an answer to her viewers.

I scrolled down the menu after buying coins. I scanned through the lists of pricing for the girls to do the act according to the viewers' requests. My lips dried instantly to see the price for the private chat.

My heart started to pumped wildly in my chest to the thought of talking to Sindy Kate. *What if she recognizes my voice?*

The voice! *Her voice.*

Oh, shit!

Then I clicked the speaker on. *Why the fuck I didn't I think about it before?*

My jaw dropped.

Now, she sounded exactly like a mix of Sindy and Westley.

Chapter 8

Jack, My Mate

CLYVE

I STROLLED around the property, taking pictures after the breakfast we had together.

I looked at Westley every now and then when Keene was not looking at us. The bloke seemed so gormless. They were friends for a few years, and it was impossible he didn't have any idea what his roommate was doing at night, or he chose not to question her choices in life.

I was still wondering why she had to be a camgirl at night if she had a day job in the antique shop. I knew it didn't pay much, but that would do the bills.

I burrowed Keene's car to drive to the town for my lunch. I remembered she was working today. I passed by her shop, and she was busy talking to the customers. I just drove back home disappointed.

Neither was I in a mood to paint. I uploaded the pictures from the memory card to my laptop. I scanned the pictures of her that I captured secretly. It was taken from the deck before we went to town. I memorized every angle of her face. She could wear any contacts or colorful wigs, but I would bet anything, she was definitely the camgirl, Sindy Kate.

At the same time, I went to the site. I knew she was online. Indeed, she was. She was giving advice to one of the viewers on how to keep their sex life more interesting.

Funny how people ask her loads of trash.

I type my questions, but it buried with a bunch of questions from the viewers. She was definitely getting a lot of coins out of this.

I forgot I purchased coins—all I had to do was tip her to get her attention.

DangerouslyAddictive10: Would you rather tell the truth to someone that could hurt her feelings in the process? Or better to just keep it to yourself?

Then I tipped her.

She glanced over the screen, probably reading my message. She then looked at the camera—again my heart pounded wildly. My face heated up when she smiled. My subconscious thought that she knew me, and she was just right in front of me. *This is so bollocks!*

“Hi, DangerouslyAddictive10, to answer your question.” She caught her lip between her teeth as if thinking of what she would answer. “I’d rather tell the truth. Jim Davis once said—the truth will set you free. But first, it will make you miserable. If it’s for the better, then there is nothing wrong, unless you have a valid reason. Nevertheless, it will always prevail.” Then she smiled.

She’s smart. I give her credit for that.

My body stirred, making me swallow hard. It was weird if she looked at the screen right through me with warmth in those eyes while treating me the opposite when she was in front of me. But of course, she bloody did that for money.

She moved to answer some questions. Another viewer gave her a bigger tip. She pulled her top off. My eyes popped out from each socket as I stared at her in shock. *More of a warning would have been nice next time, Westley.*

It was like she did it a thousand times. There was no hesitation showed on her face. Her beautiful tits bounced naturally. Her dark pink nipples peaked for attention. She was undeniably gorgeous.

Then something caught my eyes. Her right nipple was pierced. Wow! That, I didn’t see coming. The diamond-like stud shone upon the lights in her cream-colored room.

For a moment, I struggled to wrap my head around this scene if I was seeing the same woman I knew.

My cock instantly swelled as her hands journeyed to cup her tits. My hands tightened around the edge of my laptop with a suck of a breath.

I closed my gaping mouth and swallowed hard as I felt her sweet bite of pain on her nipples had caused my body to clench.

My fingertips were itching to feel them in my hand. My arousal was growing. The anticipation was killing me. At the same time, I thought it was wrong to gawk at her in her room—it felt like I was invading her privacy.

I realized I felt like I was a peeping tom.

She massaged her breasts, and I found myself licking my dried lips. She was maddeningly torturing me. She bit her lip, bucked up as she continued rubbing her tits and twisting her nipples.

My blood rushed through my neck up to my face. I ignored the stiffy todger poking against my knickers as I kept my eyes glued to the beautiful and seductress Sindy Kate on the screen. I wouldn’t even want to blink to miss out on this glorious moment.

I felt the sensation flowed through my veins, radiating all over my skin.

Then she sat back pulling down her shirt again. A mix of relief and disappointment hit me, and I was going to sleep with a raging hard-on. Fucking great!

I fixed my knickers as she moved on to entertain her viewers. A tone chimed indicating for another viewer throwing her a bigger tip. Then she apologized and excused herself.

I collapsed on my pillow after placing my laptop aside. I closed my eyes, still succumbing to my disappointment. I couldn't help but wonder what they had been doing privately.

My muscles tightened to the thought of what I'd been doing. This was probably why my brother had been telling me to go out and have some fun.

Seeing someone on the camera, unable to touch her, yet I was having a hard-on—it was frustrating. This was an act of desperation.

I was a hot-blooded human who had needs, desires, and wants, yet, here I was trying to block those things out instead of facing reality.

My mind went back to Sindy Kate—she smiled, laughed, and entertained people behind the screen. The woman I talked to yesterday was the real person with agony hooded in those big eyes, but I was more mesmerized with the masterpiece she created.

But there was something in both of them that drew me to them.

I retreated to the shower after shedding my clothes off. The blast of cold water didn't help my raging hard-on.

Damn it, Westley! What am I doing?

I squeezed a good amount of shampoo into my hand and grabbed my aching cock from the root to tip. Resting my forearm above my head, I closed my eyes, keeping up slow strokes, at first.

Hiya, Jack, my mate!

Westley appeared with her dark ocean-blue eyes, glittering with lust as she stared back at me. She then knelt while biting her bottom lip as she swatted my hand away from my grip. She grabbed cock, shoving all in her mouth in one thrust that had me nearly come apart.

"Fuck, Westley. A little warning would be nice." She sucked me and then released me again.

My erection was wet with her saliva, and she even licked the slit of my tip, tasting the bead of my pleasure she had caused. She continued to lick my tip, then slowly swirling her tongue around my head.

I watched my cock sunk into the rim of lips as she swallowed me inch by inch.

“Take me. All of me.” I sucked an unsteady breath, feeling my cock swelled in her hot mouth. She cupped my balls, massaging them, and I almost lost my bearing with the sensation she gave me.

Fuck! This woman could suck. I could feel her hum radiating from my cock.

I imagined how she could blow my mind if my cock was buried deep inside her.

My heart was racing, eyes watering, skin tingling everywhere. My muscles contracted as I gripped her hair to quicken the thrust.

She submitted.

I stroke faster. Faster. Faster.

In my mind, I came in her throat.

“Fuck!” My vision blurred.

I opened my eyes, only to watch my come spurt out from my spasming cock, hitting the cream wall in the shower.

What the fuck had I done?

* * *

“HEY,” I greeted. Guilt clogged in my throat to what I did last night.

I suggested cleaning the dishes after breakfast. At first, she and Keene declined, but they finally gave up when they saw me doing it in the right way.

“Hi.” Westley was sitting on the swing, still had a coffee mug in her hand.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Can I say no?” Here she was, smartarse and sarcastic.

“Are you not going to work today?”

She shook her head. “My work is only Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.” That said on why she had to work at night. She stared at me. “Why’d you ask?”

“Just having a conversation I guess since you seem relaxed and not preparing for work. Can’t you find any other job?”

“Regular job in this town is very limited, Linton. My degree is not useful around here, and I don’t have experience working on a farm, too. So, I can’t be choosy, can I?”

"Don't you have a plan for advertising the cabins? Even just on social media. The holiday is approaching."

She looked at me and stared. "I don't even know how did you find this place. We have only two cabins, and this is way far from the town. The visitors won't be able to reach this place even during festivals."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, it does."

"Can I ask you another question?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine."

"I thought if you can be my model?"

She looked at me with wide eyes, pointing at herself. "Me?"

"What? Do you prefer me to ask Keene as my model or Mr. Stan instead?"

She burst into laughter, then wrinkled her nose. "That's probably a good idea."

"A good idea? So, you agree then?"

Westley stood up, sauntering towards the flower pots. She felt the delicate petal of the flower with her fingers. Somewhere in my brain wanting to feel her skin instead.

"I'll pay you." I stood beside her, hoping my plan would work.

She squinted at me. "I don't need your money, city boy. Just leave me alone."

I had thought about my plan carefully this morning, and could not give up that easily. So I made sure my voice seemingly hopeless. "I just need a model."

"What kind of modeling? Does it involve nudity?" *Oh, it certainly does, Westley.*

My eyes widened in innocence, though the plan was to paint her nude. I wanted to figure something out as well. I knew it was drastic and not a great idea, but did I have any choice? I just didn't have any other way I could pull her shirt off of her body because there was no way I could take her willingly into bed with me.

So she preferred to pull her clothes off, and God knew what else they asked her to do than be my model?

"I shouldn't have asked you that. I'm sorry. Thanks for breakfast." I was stepping down the porch and ready to go back to my cabin when she called my name. *There you go, Clyde!*

I stopped to a halt and turned around, trying to hide my smile but heart could not deny the anticipation. "Yeah?"

"Does it involve nudity?" she asked again.

Bloody hell! Yes, Westley. I'm a fucking man. Who doesn't like to see you naked?

"No, Westley. You'll just have to pose in front of the camera and change some clothes."

Shit! That was totally out of my plan, but it was too late to take it back, wasn't it?

"Oh?"

"So, interested? The offer ends in ten seconds."

She smiled—a genuine one. "You don't have to pay me. Just give me copies of the shots I like."

"I'll pay you, Westley. And in frames."

"That won't be necessary."

"Just take it as a talent fee."

"Fine, when do we start?"

"How about tonight?" I walked back to the front of her porch, smiling like a complete fool.

"Tonight? What time?"

"Ten?"

There was a hesitation on her face, but she subtly nodded. "What should I wear?"

"Nothing fancy. You might need only to wear a blanket."

"What?" Her eyes widened in shock.

"Look, Westley. You can always say no if you're uncomfortable."

"Okay, see you tonight then."

"Tonight."

Brilliant! My plan is utterly useless.

Chapter 9

Sell to the Devil

WESTLEY

Crap!

What was I thinking? I knew something didn't add up. Did he really want me to be his model or he was up to something? My head snapped to the footsteps behind me. Keene showed off his cocky smile.

"Good job." He raised his mug.

"I'm doing all of these for you, dumbass." I got back to my swing. "Any news?"

"Nope. Not yet." I could feel the dismay and sadness in his voice.

I couldn't let him give up—not until what we'd already sacrificed over a year for him to be still with me. "Your new friend's mom might be able to pull some strings."

Keene moved to stand in front of me. "You okay with that?"

I met his gaze. "I'll do everything for you, Keene. I will sell my soul if someone is willing to buy it."

"Then sell it to the devil himself." He chuckled. I knew exactly who he was referring to. Was he the devil though?

"Not funny." I scowled. Given our situation and the opportunity, this was maybe our best chance.

"You don't have to do that, Westley. You've done so much for me already that paying you till the hereafter isn't enough."

"No talking of shit, Keene Wendall Storm!" I bolted inside the house.

I hated myself for being so useless to him. If I chose the other option I might be able to help him or I might not. I hated things that happened for reasons. Until now, I couldn't find any good reason why Keene had to suffer from his illness.

Of all the people, why it had to be him? He'd been a great son, a thoughtful friend, and a God-fearing individual. Why not just some assholes like my family?

I reached my room. A typical one with cream painted walls with a small chandelier that dangled when fly passed by. Literally. An old rusty queen-sized bed, a small reach-in closet, and a

nightstand with an expired condom box inside the drawer—Keene’s Christmas gift for me—he thought it was fun.

* * *

THE ONLY thing I loved about this room was the princess window that gave me the complete view of the tall trees from the backyard. The sounds of night crickets and singing of birds were just comforting when I had a rough night. Weird, huh?

I slid the window open. The chilly fresh air pricked my face. I breathed in and out for a couple of times to wash away my worries, but instead, it just worsened further.

God helped me.

I stormed out of the house toward Clyve’s cabin and banged the door until I heard him yelling from the inside.

“What took you so long?” I met the ever-gorgeous Clyve in just a pair of sweatpants and a black T-shirt wearing a confused look on his face.

“Took me so long? Do we have archery training today?” He grinned—a grin that could make girls swoon for.

“To open your damn door. What are you up in there?” I tipped my head to the slightly opened door.

His brows met together. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“You what’s wrong. Since you came into our lives, you make things complicated.” I regretted right away before I could finish my words—they just shot like a loaded gun in my mind.

“I honestly don’t know how I came into that wrong, Westley. Care to elaborate?” God, I wanted to punch the innocent look on his face.

“Can we talk inside, please? I mean if you have time.” I shrugged. I didn’t want to impose though I already was.

“Come in.” He stepped aside, widely opening the door for me.

I took a deep breath, gathering all my strength, and setting aside my pride. I needed this. I was willing to do everything for Keene who did everything he could for me without a second thought. He sheltered me from the storm when my life was so miserable.

The cabin smelled pine. My eyes landed on a muted and paused football game on TV, a cup of steaming tea on the coffee table, and the rest it was almost spotless. Wow! Clyve was a neat freak.

"Don't say a word." He walked past me, sitting down on the couch. Then he patted a space beside him.

"I'm not here to say a word."

His brow cocked. "Then why are you here? I don't entertain service in the morning."

I squinted at him, snorting defensive laughter. "What service?"

"Jeez, lady! Chill out. I'm just messing with you. Audene Westley doesn't just come over here without something important on her sleeves. So, please, have a seat, and I'm all ears."

I sat beside him. I could smell the cologne he was using—masculine and spicy. Could be his aftershave, but it was damn sexy. Damn it! Focused.

"I'll get a cup for you."

I blinked. "No, thanks."

"A coffee?"

"No thank you."

"Okay. Start because I'm a busy man," he joked.

"I need help."

He seemed to stiffen. "What kind of help?"

I faced Clyve and thought of Keene before I took all the strength not to burst out all my emotions in front of him. No matter how worst the situation was, he was still a stranger, and he could say no.

The last time I shed tears was when Keene and I received terrible news. Crying didn't make someone weak, it didn't also help solve the problem.

"I know, I've been nothing but an ass to you, and we barely know each other. I shouldn't be doing this, but I'll take all the chances I get." I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. Keene was known to be decisive—he rarely asked for help in making a decision. "We did our best, spent a lot of money. I know Keene well—he doesn't mention anything, but I know the guilt is eating him up from the inside when we used my savings for his latest medical bills, even it was my choice. We have nothing left other than this property. I wish I could tell him to sell this, but I also knew that this is the only thing he had left from the Storm." I couldn't let Clyve pretend to understand our situations. I looked down, pressing my lips into a tight line when I realized I was desperate.

Clyve was quiet for a moment, and I couldn't help but think that I made a terrible mistake in coming over. But the satisfaction hit me straight when he nodded.

“Go on.”

“I promise I’ll do everything you’ll ask me to if you can ask your mom to pull some strings just for Keene’s complete diagnostic tests. I kind of Googled your mom—she’s the head of the Pediatrics Department at Central Hospital in New York. I researched that they had the best specialists and consultants that can give us some options for Keene’s case.”

Clyve kept staring at me. One thing I knew about him for a short time was he kept staring when he was in-depth thoughts.

“Say something, please?”

Chapter 10

Changes

WESTLEY

The silence stretched between us. Bad idea. Now I completely regretted coming over, asking for his help because he must be damn mocking at me right now.

When the tingles swept at the back of my neck toward my face, I stood up. My shaky legs numbly stepped away from the still silent Clyve.

Fear of humiliation had already gotten into me. I swallowed hard as I gathered myself, ready to bolt out of this cabin. I was hoping not to see him again, but I knew it was impossible.

My eyes blurred with unshed tears, and my heart ached for Keene. I let him down one more time.

"Where are you going?" he asked, clearly confused.

My body stiffened for a moment. I couldn't face him, afraid he would see the tears that were about to roll down my face.

"I will do everything to help him," he said softly.

But I could feel there was a but. Even so, I turned around quickly. My facial muscles tightened as I was already grinning like a fool. "Anything!"

"Good. Now come back here, Westley."

In a millisecond I was already wrapping my arms around Clyve, hugging him tightly. Clyve's body stiffened for a few seconds, then he patted my back gently.

"Thank you." Closing my eyes, I inhaled his scents.

"Don't thank me yet because you might not be able to give me what I want from you in return." *Of course, there's a but.*

My mouth fell open as I pulled away from him, staring at him for a good minute. His jaw was locked as he shifted and stared straight ahead—at the tv on the wall, but I was sure his mind was not focusing on that screen. It went beyond that thick wall.

"I said, I'll do anything for Keene." The wariness in my voice made him look at me.

"Are you two romantically involved?"

What the—? His question shocked me. That was way out of line. There was something special between me and Keene that he didn't have to know. I didn't want him to know.

My brows met together with a confused look. "No. God, no! I can't even think of kissing my best friend, what more intimate."

"I need your honest answer when I ask you questions. Even if I leave this place, I won't cut anything that we have started. Do you understand me?" *What's that supposed to mean?*

"Yes, I do," I answered quickly. I was so stupid, or maybe I was too overwhelmed that he agreed to help Keene.

"There was something about you and Keene that I love about. You are something, as well, Westley. I don't trust and befriend with anyone that easy besides my brother's girlfriend, but with you and Keene, it was easy than you showing me how to open a beer. Maybe because we all have something in common. I don't know." He shrugged. "I felt that our pasts brought us all here together to this place."

I nodded subtly as if I understood what he said. There was something shifted inside me, and I would be a fool if I denied that my chest didn't warm for him.

And here I thought that I would not remember him once he left this place. Now, I realized it was all but bullcrap.

"My life is complicated, Linton."

"Aren't we all? Life is complicated, Westley. I started using drugs at sixteen, pissed my arse off until I couldn't stand at my own feet, and could barely remember what I did upon waking up in the morning. I had awful friends who only wanted my family name, had terrible relationships. I had intimacy with a woman who I thought had the same feelings I had for her. Then I found out what she truly wanted—to scratch the itch the other man couldn't give. Call me arse, but that's the truth."

I blinked up as he continued talking, but my tears didn't hold anymore. For a happy-go-lucky-guy like Clyve had actually been through a lot, had shocked me to the core. I could feel the goosebumps spreading all over my skin as I stared at him in shock.

"My dad died just a few months ago, and I felt the world was pulled off under my feet. I realized that the only thing that mattered to me was not the wealth he left for us despite all his sacrifices—it was what he taught me—that life was too short to hold on to your past. Dad chose his business over my mother. Mum made mistakes as well, for choosing her job over her family, which they both regretted it in the end. I have my brother who's always here for me. I appreciate him so much

more than the vile words I throw at him, because at the end of the day, I know I can't find any Skip in this life. So I appreciate everything you do for Keene."

I could say I was still lucky that I had Keene I considered my family, and that was why I was here—to do everything for him even I might not be able to hold at the end of the bargain. Anyhow, there was no turning back for as long as he would not ask me to kill someone.

"I'm sorry about your dad." My voice rasped, trying had to ignore the emotional turmoil inside me. I knew there was a sheen of tears in my eyes that told me that Clyve just got through my walls.

"Thank you."

"No. Thank you for telling me. I don't deserve to know, but I really appreciate it."

"I would be a blathering idiot if I won't help you and Keene, Westley." He looked to my wet face, his expressive blue eyes bored mine as he reluctantly raised his hand to wipe my tears with his thumb.

Something shifted in the air between us. Since I met him, I would be the stupidest woman in the world not to see the shaking volume of desires every time we stared at each other.

Then my heart raced as soon as I met his gaze again. The same thing I felt for a while now had just surpassed. God, my life had taken a wrong turn because I knew what he was going to ask next. It would complicate my life to a whole new level.

Chapter 11

The Black Sheep

CLYVE

That's a blast! No. Shocking!

She must have thought about it a lot knowing someone like Westley who was completely the opposite of Sindy Kate. She would not just come to me asking for help. So, what changed? Or I must have misjudged her. One thing I knew for sure—she would sell her soul to the devil just to treat whatever disease Keene had—that was what she had been doing.

“I need his latest medical report.”

Her face lit up, wiping the tears with the back of her hands. “I will have it on Monday.”

“Brill. You better talk to his doctor to refer his patient to the hospital where my mum is working. I need to talk to her first as a heads up. We can get through this.” I reached out for her hand, squeezing it. Surprisingly, she didn't retreat, instead, she squeezed it back.

“What else?”

“What else what?” I asked back, confused.

“You might wanna know who I am?”

I chuckled. “Do you really expect that you're the only one who knows how to use Google? I have more access than you, so I know who you really are.” It was a half-truth, but bait for her to open up.

Westley was as mysterious as Sindy Kate to me.

Her face suddenly turned pale. I didn't have any idea if it was because I might have found out that she came from a prominent family or the reason behind how she ended up here.

Sometimes she had this twang in her accent like Arella. Or it was the thought that crossed her mind about her being the Sindy Kate in the cam world. Who knew?

“At first, it was a part of my rebellion to get my father's attention, but then I realized how would they ever find it out,” she confirmed bitterly, averting her gaze away. “Then when I moved here, I started again.”

Okay.

"I bet your family would not be happy about it." I roamed my gaze around her face, catching the truth. She seemed ashamed, but there was pride in her voice as well.

She stood up. "My father was clueless, maybe up to this very moment. My family disowned me for something I didn't do, or I didn't have any idea how it happened. They treated me as if I just committed a heinous crime. They called me names. My own father didn't give me a chance to explain my side because I had a history. He was humiliated. No one could stop the rumor from spreading once it was out. Unlike what my father used to do with media people, he threatened them to shut up. In my case, he didn't even give a shit."

"I'm sorry, Westley."

"Please, don't." She raised her hand as her plea. "The last thing I want from you is your pity."

"God, I don't pity you, woman. And neither I have the right to judge you. You have more admirable qualities, and pitying you was not one of them. We all made mistakes and learned from them." I locked my jaw and formed my hands into fists as I tried to control myself from pulling her into my arms, which I badly wanted to feel her—to let her know that she wasn't alone anymore. *God knows how much.* But she was Westley right now—not Sindy Kate.

"The only person who listened to me was my step-sister. When my father and my step-mom disowned me for ruining their good names, she cut some cash from her trust fund since my family took everything away from me."

"Hey, come here." Jesus! I couldn't hold any longer.

I hated it when I saw women cried. When my brother did something to Arella, I'd gone ballistic. Thankfully, he pulled his shits together because If he did not, I would bust his face in a bloody heartbeat for treating that woman ineptly.

I pulled Westley into a hug, rubbed her back, and ran my fingers on her soft lacks. *I need it too.*

She smelled roses. Wild roses to be exact. She shook in my arms, sobbed in my chest, and I couldn't help to not hug her tightly.

Despite my lust over her that made my skin burn, that made me wanted more... further, but there was a part in my brain that wanted to uncork the passion that I'd kept bottled up for months, but I wouldn't go that far. She was too vulnerable, and I couldn't break the little trust she gambled for the sake of her friend, then I ended ruining everything.

My heart ached for her though. Whatever happened in her past, I knew it was terrible, and it did a twist of a knife in my heart. I didn't have to dig to know her because the first time our eyes met, I knew she'd been through a lot—just like me.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Her eyes somehow lit up when I caught her looking at me, and that made me feel hopeful that her family didn’t completely break her. What kind of parents did this to their daughter because of a mistake?

She had great chances to get her life back once this storm was over. I knew she was a strong woman. For me, she was already a survivor.

But the real question was when?

“You’ll be fine, Westley.”

“I hope you’re right, but as long as Keene is sick, I won’t ever be okay. Our applications were rejected by many hospitals. Either they said we could not afford the treatment, or he was hopeless. I blamed myself and thought that was probably because of me. I knew my father did this to punish me. And I knew that he’s barely started.”

“Don’t worry, if they grab the hospital’s head by the throat, we will fly to London or Asia to get him the treatment he deserves.”

She pulled herself away. I suddenly lost the warmth of her body against mine, but her smell had still lingered in my senses, and nothing she was doing made me see things clearly.

I shut my eyes closed and took a deep breath.

When I opened them, her skeptical gaze locked into me. “Are you really willing to help him? Why?”

Chapter 12

The Terms

CLYVE

“DO YOU really have to question my sincerity and intentions? Of course, I wanted to help him since the first time I saw him. I couldn’t watch people die if I could do something, Westley. Don’t ever doubt it.” I looked at her in the eye. “I have money, plenty, and I don’t spend them just for luxury. I can buy a yacht, do a party, or sleep with different women every night, but that’s not me. I prefer serenity. I love sex, but I choose to sleep with my girlfriend or someone I like other than sleeping with a woman I barely know.”

After saying my side, she just stared at me as if I transformed into an alien.

“What?” I asked when she hadn’t said a word.

Westley kept staring at me, her eyes enormous. This time, there was a minuscule of admiration glittering in them.

I spoke again. “I was planning on opening an art gallery once I get back. I already asked someone to look for a place big enough to separate the studio from the gallery. I thought I would like to help people who suffered from trauma. My case isn’t really traumatic, more likely I walked down the wrong path, but I experienced it myself, how it helped me a lot when I was in the process of healing. I wasn’t even good at painting, drawing, or anything of some sort, but it somehow made me more focused, and I was able to express my emotions through those colors.”

“I completely misjudged you, Linton. I feel terrible about that. I’m sorry.”

A smile curved across my lips. “I know you are.”

“Oh, shoot me in the face with your ego.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’m just happy you reach out to me, Westley. It means a lot. I was just waiting for you to make a move since you warned me before, but trust me I won’t stop bugging you even if I already left this place. Honestly, Keene is a good lad.”

“Couldn’t agree more.”

“Pull yourself together on Monday. I’ll come with you and Keene if that’s okay. I mean if I won’t be too intrusive. I want to hear it myself of whatever his doctor is about to say.”

“Sure. His dad died in cancer. Before that, he’s been suffering from asthma. Thank you, Clyve.” *Now she’s back to Clyve.* She moved her face closer, and that made my body stiffen.

The blood rushed so fast all over my body. I felt lightheaded when her soft and wet lips touched the skin of my face. It was a quick kiss, and not act of lasciviousness, yet my body reacted as if we did it intimately.

Shit! Pull yourself together, Linton. This woman is just kissing you out of gratefulness.

Being in a terrible life at a young age hadn’t given me much a chance to experience a good relationship, no-strings-attached-sex-because-it-feels-amazing to have different pussies every night. That was why my sexual exploitation had not been far way near to my brother and his best friend, Brett. But I could still differentiate the sexual tension, lust, and what I had been feeling towards Westley. And that scared the living shit out of me. The fact that she didn’t like me the way I liked her made me feel more like a loser.

She stood up and stepped back. “Keene might not gonna like this, but I can be tenacious. He doesn’t like someone planning for him behind his back.”

“Trust me, no man does, but I can convince him.”

“Have dinner with us tonight.”

“That I won’t say no.” I chuckled.

“I should go and prepare for lunch. I’ll bring some over.” She smiled, and that smile alone had warmed my heart.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Oh, please, we’re friends now, aren’t we?”

Bloody friends! I almost snorted with absurdity.

“Join us, please?” she insisted.

“That would be too much. I have to wander around the town and might eat at the diner. So don’t worry too much about your guest.”

She rolled her eyes again. “I’ve already apologized, haven’t I?”

“Apology accepted.” I stood up and followed her to the door.

“Call the house if you need anything. The car keys are in the flower pot.”

“Yeah, I could use that one. I’ll fill the tank. Thank you.”

"Don't let those ladies get into your pants so easy, city boy," she said as she walked out of the door.

"They're not my type."

"I'm not surprised town girls don't pass your taste." She laughed.

"Nah. It's just I'm fancy of a girl named Sindy Kate these past few nights. So I just stick with her for a while." I watched how she stop to a halt and how her body shudder. It was another proof that she was the same girl.

Believe it now, mate.

She turned around slowly. When she opened her mouth, she clamped it shut again. Her face turned paler as she met my gaze.

"Please..." She swallowed and looked away.

"This stays between us, Westley."

The walk back to me took so long like a thousand steps. "Please, don't tell Keene about this. He's gonna hate me."

Watching her chin trembled made me feel like a daft for letting her know I'd been her viewer. But she needed to know that otherwise. And I just killed her fine smile.

"I won't, and that's a promise." I wiped a tear that rolled down her cheek.

"Thank you."

"If you'll stop it starting tonight," I quickly added before I changed my mind. I thought plan B did just fine.

Her blue eyes widened. "What? I-I can't."

"Why the hell not?"

"I need money."

"I'll pay you twice how much you earned every night."

"You can't do this to me." She huffed.

"Try me." I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned on the doorjamb. If she was stubborn, so did I.

"Don't do this." She hissed.

"Right now, you only have two choices, haven't you, Westley? My money or Keene's treatment."

“Don’t be an ass, Linton!”

“Then be my guest.” I stood straight, readied to retrieve inside.

She swallowed. “But...”

I knew she wanted to argue with me, but I was a selfish bastard if I let her viewers watch her and do whatever indecorous acts they asked her every night. I could blackmail her in different ways if I ever saw her online again.

She could be stubborn as she was, and I could be as determined as I wanted to be. Her choice, but I knew exactly who would win this game. *This time, I have the Ace.*

“No more but, Westley, because I can’t fucking watch you every night showing off that—” I gestured my finger to her body. “To all the males out there while they pleasure themselves when you should only be doing that to someone who cares and respects you. Don’t get me wrong my respect for you doesn’t change a bit because you definitely have valid reasons on why are you doing what you’re doing behind Keene’s back.” I made sure she knew what she agreed upon—in my own terms.

“I need the damn money!”

“Are you even listening?” I almost growled as I narrowed my eyes at her, determined to shut this argument for good. “I said, I will pay you twice or even ten times. I don’t give a fuck!”

“I can’t just take your money for free.”

“Who said it’s free, darling?”

Chapter 13

Deactivated

WESTLEY

He tricks me. This asshole tricks me!

Did he now? Or he was just trying to help you, idiot?

“Hmm. This is delicious.” He shoved another forkful to his mouth.

There was something in his aura tonight—his eyes glittered, and he seemed to smile most of his conversation with Keene since he came for dinner. What was with this man?

“Don’t get tricked with Westley. She probably took this recipe from Martha’s website,” Keene replied.

“Can I hire her as my chef?” Clyve had a playful smile crossing his lips.

“Go ahead, man. Just be careful not to annoy her because we don’t wanna end up in the body bag, do we?” Keene laughed softly, throwing me another glance.

They pinned their gazes at me when I didn’t say anything.

“Don’t you like the food, Westley?” Why did he keep calling me by Westley?

“I’m not really hungry.” I placed down the fork that I’d been toying with snap pea and carrot soba noodles.

“Are you feeling sick?” Keene asked, wearing a worry on his face.

“I’m fine, really. You two just dig up and enjoy your meal.” I stood up and carried my plate to the kitchen.

I eavesdropped their conversation when Clyve asked Keene, which was not what I used to do. I couldn’t help it. It was just that everything he did was frying my brain.

I sucked a deep breath upon placing the dirty dishes into the sink.

He didn’t have any idea how huge he changed my life since he came. I didn’t know if I should thank him or despise him for barging as easily as that. But if he would be true to his words, I would be able to help Keene, but people would not just help others for free. I knew this from my experience. My father was a shark and always hungered for power and money. And I grew up into that kind of environment.

So, what was he after? Clyve didn't look like to be someone who was paid by my family. *He is a Linton.*

"All right?" Clyve's low voice startled me.

I turned to face him. "Are you always this nosy?" My words came out through gritted my teeth.

"No. You seem off tonight? You barely ate." He seemed worried. He then let out a sigh.

"I'm fine, and stop asking because I'm barely holding on a fine thread not to punch your nose."

"Go ahead. If that makes you feel better." He placed the plate on the counter.

"That was a figure of speech, Linton. Jeez!"

"Do you think I'm that wad?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't know. You tell me."

"Is this about—"

"Don't, or I swear to God I might plan on poisoning you."

"Feisty." A smile slowly curved on his lips as he looked at me.

Oh, my God! I wanted to punch him so bad. I had to fist my hands to control my irritation, but my stupid heart raced to see that smile on his face. It was almost contagious.

I didn't want to end up sleeping on the grass. Keene would definitely kick me out of his house or worse out of his property if I laid a hand on Clyve.

"I'll go back to Keene. We'll talk later."

"No."

"It's about him, Westley."

My scowl deepened. This would never have happened if I didn't run into Keene that day. I was so lost that day. I fell to pieces, and I had nowhere to go. All my so-called-friends were there. I saw the horrible reactions in their eyes. I was the bad guy—the homewrecker—the black sheep—the prodigal. That was how they could judge someone so quickly. Except for Keene—the only person who wasn't like them. After I told him everything, he remained the same.

"Just so you know. I would do the same thing if the situation is reversed. So, please? Erase that scowl. You are too beautiful to scowl." He then pinched my cheeks. "Smile, Westley."

* * *

I peeped into Keene's room to check if he was doing fine. The nasal cannula still looped around the flow meter of the oxygen tank beside his bed. I'd learned a few tricks when we received the news. At least I knew what to do in case of an emergency.

"Good night." I slowly closed the door behind me.

I rubbed my hands on my way to Clyve's cabin. I was not a nervous type. I just didn't know why I felt like this when I was with him.

For God's sake, Westley! He saw me vulnerable when he should not, and that changed the game.

The door swung open before I could knock. He was still wearing the same smile, and that annoyed me to the next level. "Thought you changed your mind."

"You know I didn't have a choice. You didn't give me much of a choice. You blackmailed me, remember?" I snarled, instead of being grateful. It just, he played me out well.

"Come on in before you get colds. Is Keene sleeping?" Of course, the kind-hearted Clyve had his way with words.

"Yeah." I walked in straight to the couch. It whooshed when I slumped myself down.

"I talked to mum this morning after you left. I couldn't tell her the details because I didn't know yet what Keene has." He occupied the space beside me.

I looked away, feeling my tears well in my eyes.

"You don't have to tell me. We'll just email it on Monday," he said softly. "I'm so sorry, Westley."

My head snapped to his side. "Are you? Or are you mocking me right now?"

He looked taken aback, eyes slightly widened. "You thought I'm taking advantage of you? I'm just trying to help. You can call me an arsehole, fine, but don't you think this is for his own good?"

"You don't know what we'd been through, and then you just came here to control me, manipulate me, tell me what to do, and blackmail me because you know you're holding the right card and that I would do anything for him."

"Jesus Christ, Westley!" He jerked to be on his feet, pacing. When he stopped, he narrowed his eyes at me. "Stop being a brat, and look at the brighter side. This is not about you, Westley. I'm not asking you to do something that you can't. I just want to help, especially Keene. I saw something in him that." He paused, scratching his head as if he was searching for the right.

I could also see his frustration. I didn't know why I had to question his motives. Perhaps, no one had laid a hand to help us without a catch.

"I feel like I could trust him. I never had a real friend, I already told you that. Call it preposterous, but I like that guy, and I care about him. You just have to see it, Westley. And stop judging me instead."

"I hate rich people. They just took advantage of people like him. I saw it with my own eyes. I hate my father, my mom, my step-mom. They neither do something for free, Clyve. Just like you."

"So, is this how you wanna play it? You choose to question everything I do? Because I am a rich bloke! I don't give a damn about money." He laughed sarcastically.

"What is it that you want from me?" I asked with frustration. I wanted to hear that truth. I was sure as hell there was something more beyond all this.

"So you better show off your tits and pussy to men that you might have known? Have you ever thought that maybe your friends or your family are probably one of your viewers? And don't you dare tell me that this is part of you being a rebellious kid because that's bloody bullshit!"

I managed not to flinch. I knew the consequences before I joined that site.

"I don't care about them. Why do you even care if that's what I choose to do for a living?" I stood up, meeting his blazing stare. I didn't give a damn on how I earned my income. It was none of his business.

"I thought we're done talking about it." He gestured his hand to the door. "You can come back if you have your final decisions. I thought you'd do anything for your best friend. Obviously, there was something more than that you're not telling me."

My stomach did a nosedive. "Why is it so important to you?"

His eyes softened as he continued staring at me that I had to look away. I could see the sincerity and concern in there, so deeply that I didn't even want to believe.

"It was something that you wouldn't even believe. When I first saw you in that video, I felt something." That caught my attention. I looked back at him.

"It was just an accident on how I got into that site. Maybe that was fate, I don't know. When you looked at the camera, for the first time, I felt the connection." He chuckled sadly. "Go ahead, mock me, but that's the truth. I felt like I just entered into your soul. Even if I didn't meet you here, I can assure you that I will still find a way to look for you, Westley, because, ever since that night, I barely got to sleep without thinking about you. I only logged in because I knew you would be there. I feel satisfied just to have a little piece of you even I couldn't hold you." He pressed a fist to his lips. I could feel the truth in his words, in his action, and through his eyes.

I just stood there with opened-mouth in shock and awe at the same time as everything had come to pieces and now it to my senses. *Clyve Linton likes me? Is this what is he trying to make me understand all this time?* How could he like someone like when he was aware of what I'd been doing on that site?

Now, what, Westley?

"Y-you." Damn it! "You know this is impossible."

"What's impossible? Me liking you?"

"Everything. We can't—"

"We can't be together because your bloody family is probably wealthier than me, and they disowned you? Or because you're a cam girl?"

"There is more that—"

"I don't give a shit. Is there someone in your life right now?"

I nodded. "No, but—"

"Then again, I don't give a shit."

"You— But— For God's sake, can you please stop cutting me off?"

"Is it because I live in London or New York? Well, Westley, you're probably a New Yorker as well."

"Clyve!" I groaned. God! This man was stubborn as hell. He was not giving me a chance to talk.

"No more argument. You are going to deactivate your account. Right now!" He made a point on how seriously we were talking here.

I frowned. "Wait a minute. You didn't log in tonight?"

"Why would I when we were done discussing it? I just believed that you would do what I told you."

Oh, he was serious when said he logged in because of me. My stomach just fluttered. Great. Calm down, Westley. "I deactivated my account."

"Really?" His brows met, seemingly surprised.

"Is this face looks like I am kidding?" I pointed to my face. "What's your username?"

"Don't ask." He grimaced.

I sat back to the couch, Clyve followed. "I just want to save money for him. Keene dreamed of visiting a certain place, but I can't afford to buy tickets even if I want to take him there. If his

diagnosis is terminal, and the treatment won't be successful, at least, I can see a smile on his face before..." I swallowed hard, my throat tightened painfully.

"I'm here now, Westley. You don't have to shoulder all of it alone."

I looked at him. "Until when?"

"For as long as you need me."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Never been so sure in my entire life."

God, I hoped he would not run away once he found out something about me and Keene.

Keene was the only reason why I was still alive and surviving, and why I did some drastic measures and swallowed all my pride. I never regretted it, and I was willing to do it again when the time came.

"DangerouslyAddictive10."

"What?"

"My username."

I stared at him incredulously before my voice echoed in the entire cabin as I burst out laughing.

"That's so not you."

"What? Don't I look *addictive* to you?" Smirk marked on his face.

You really have no idea, have you, Linton?

Chapter 14

Keene

CLYVE

“JUST TELL me already if I’m dying or not. That’s all I wanted to know, doc. Trust me, I can handle it,” Keene said, trying his best to be calm, but I didn’t miss the slight trembling of his voice and the pain in his eyes as he looked at the old doctor.

The wrinkles on the Pulmonologist’s forehead deepened. “I’m sorry, Keene—”

At that exact moment, Keene gasped and his body stiffened. I thought my eyes were tricking me as I watched his face became paler and yellowish.

I couldn’t anymore watch this—how he sagged to the chair across his doctor. Westley hugged her best friend tightly, saying that they could do it. It was a heartbreaking moment.

“How?” he choked. “How long do I have left?”

“Don’t, Keene,” I said firmly. “You’re not gonna die. Men traveled to the moon, invented a technology that almost impossible, experts develop advanced medicines, and you, Westley, and I will go to New York and find the best treatment for you. That’s what we gonna do.”

“You don’t have cancer,” Dr. Marlee cut in.

“I just wanna—”

“Not a word, Keene, please.” My voice almost shook. I grabbed the file from the table.

“Wait! What?” My voice and Keene’s rose in vocal pitch, staring at the doctor incredulously.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment. *Oh, thank, God.*

“But—”

Fuck me! Of course, there was a but.

“Keene, what you are suffering from is a lifetime illness. It runs in your family,” he explained why Keene was experiencing fatigue, shortness of breath, and weight loss. You’d been suffering from a genetic disorder called Alpha-1 Antitrypsin Deficiency and Asthma for years. And it had something to do with his parents’ faulty gene.”

You’re not gonna die, mate.

I hated talking about dying in any way. It was unavoidable though because death was apparently a pain in the arse.

I could barely process as Dr. Marlee explained about Keene's case. There was no doubt Keene had inherited it from his father who died with Lung cancer that made them worry about the worse possible diagnosis.

Now, it scared the living shit out of me of how my father died?

"Is there a treatment?" I asked.

"I advise that he should do a liver biopsy, or MRI just to ratify my initial diagnosis first. Although there's an Augmentation therapy or so-called replacement therapy."

"Great. We'll do it there."

"I would agree with Mr. Linton since we have limited resources of diagnostic tests in our hospital. I already prepare a medical report as requested by Miss Westley via email."

"I attached the latest report of your latest X-ray, including the CAT scan and the blood test we did," he added. "I don't wanna scare you, Keene, but I want to be honest with you. For some people like you with ATT, it can cause you to have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease without proper treatment, which is a serious condition. You need to keep your liver healthy, too. Avoid alcohol, smoke, dust, exercise daily, and practice a healthy diet. You need to be vaccinated. So you better get the treatment. The sooner, the better. Hopefully, you'll be able to work again. In the main time, you continue with your bronchodilator."

I stood up from the chair while Dr. Marlee was still explaining to Keene. I faced the white wall with a poster of Lung's anatomy and frames of his academic achievements. He seemed to know what he was doing, but New York-Presbyterian had a lung transplant program for advanced and end-stage lung disease. Just in case.

I ran my fingers against the lungs anatomy model placed on top of the display table as I thought of Keene.

The travel for almost three hours to get into this hospital was just a waste of time. And I fucking hated it, when in the end, they still couldn't help Keene.

A soft knock interrupted us. Then a middle-aged female nurse emerged. "Sorry for the interruption. Dr. Marlee, you have a phone call from line two." The nurse quickly left, closing the door behind her.

Dr. Marlee hooked his eyeglasses and ran his fingers through his graying hair. He then grabbed the phone and answered.

I averted my gaze to Keene and Westley. I wasn't aware she was already looking at me. Then as if her cue, she nodded.

I fished out my phone and type a message to my mum.

CC: We'll proceed with the plan.

Mum: No good morning?

I smiled despite the bad news we just received. I missed her so much, but she was busy with her job and managing the charity she founded for my dad'. I was grateful that she finally stopped drinking. The last thing I wanted her to be was to ruin the reason why she left dad.

CC: Can't say well when it's not. Can you help us?

Mum: Anything for my baby.

CC: Mum, I'm too old to be a baby.

Mum: You lack a sense of humor.

I chuckled because I knew she was true.

Mum: She must be something special.

CC: Who?

Mum: I may be old, but I'm not dumb. So, see you soon? You're coming with them, right?

CC: Yeah, I have to. And I missed my arse of a brother. Love you, mum.

Mum: Love you, honey.

When I turned back, Keene was shaking hands with Dr. Marlee. "Thank you, doc."

"Don't thank me, son. I hardly even helped you. Go home and take a rest. You need your energy to travel to New York."

* * *

I HONESTLY didn't know how to make someone feel better when he just figured he had a potentially life-threatening disease. I felt weak that I couldn't do anything to help him. I just met Keene a few days ago, but I felt in my gut that I wanted to shoulder his burden with him. He was a good person, and he didn't deserve to suffer.

Westley neither said a word. I knew it was hard for her as well. I could feel that she was holding on tight not to burst into cry. She wanted to be strong in front of her best friend, but deep inside, she was scared of losing Keene or traveling outside this town.

I parked the car in front of the house. I was damn tired of clumping my mouth shut not to say how sorry I was for Keene. I was not yet ready to say those two words to him; we still had a bigger chance. I turned off the engine. Westley hopped down before I could help her out.

"A minute, Clyve?" Keene's low voice stopped me from the door handle.

"Of course, mate." I watched Westley look at us in confusion, then she smiled tightly as if she understood. She stepped up to the porch and sat on her swing. The sadness in those eyes made me want to scream and blame whoever should be blamed.

"You know once Westley travels back to New York can possibly put her life at risk, right?" A New Yorker, indeed, and that scared her.

I faced him. "And you wanted to die without a fight just to keep her safe? Is that what she really wants? Because by the look of her right now, she's willing to give her life to you."

His expression tightened as he glared at me. "You don't know—"

"Yes, I don't or I might know something, Keene." I shrugged. "Her father might be an influential dickbag, I get it, but he doesn't own the entire New York City or the United Kingdom. Don't you think if he wanted her dead, he couldn't find you both? This place exists in the Google map, you existed in the database once you admitted to the hospital. Her family doesn't care about her because she's just a brat who wants to humiliate her family."

Keene's eyes widened. "How the hell did you know about that?"

"Don't worry, it's not in the local news." I opened the door. "Her secret is safe with me."

"Wait."

"What?"

"If—"

"You're not gonna die."

"Clyve, I've been suffering from this freaking disease for years, and she knows it. What happened earlier was just the same diagnosis I heard over and over again, and I'm not getting better, man."

I hopped down and ignored him. "Then get out of this fucking car."

He shook his head in amusement. "Being a control freak doesn't suit you. I need some rest."

"Call me if you need anything."

"I'm good. Thank you."

"Move your arse." I gestured to Westley to give me space on her swing once Keene was inside the house.

"This won't hold for both of us." The sadness in her voice almost gave me shiver.

"It will." I sat beside her as soon as I had my space. I gripped her knee, hoping it was enough to tell her that she was not alone in her battle. "I like it here. So peaceful. I was angry at my brother when he threw me somewhere I hadn't even heard of a town called Jasmine Springs. It changed everything the moment I set foot and saw those trees for the first time. I thought this place was a little paradise. I can stay here for a long time, you know."

"So do I. I love it being here. The tall trees, fresh air, the smell of wildflowers, and those folks, they never judged me. I have the freedom to explore without them watching and scrutinizing every move I make and every word I say. And that lake means something to me."

"That must be hard..." I looked at her beautiful face. "Being judged."

"You have no idea, especially when you're already branded as the black sheep."

"I am also a black sheep."

"It's not because you want attention, Linton. I always felt jealous of my sister. She's the perfect one; stunning, tall, and the perfect daughter in the eye of the public." She looked down. "Quite my opposite."

I held her chin up. "Hey, look at me." Then she met my gaze. "The woman you described is pretty boring. You're perfect because you have flaws. You don't try hard because you're just being you. You don't have to please those idiots to see how perfect you are. And that makes you perfect in my eyes."

Jesus, her eyes—so expressive. And she didn't seem to care anymore to show what she felt.

I saw her vulnerability more than once, but now I saw the real her; the dilation of her pupils, the darkening of her deep ocean-blue irises the longer she stared at me, and I could lose in those orbs forever and never wanted to return. *And she feels something towards me as well.*

She enveloped her hand over mine, kissing my palm. The softness of her lips electrified my body, sent a zing of sensation that I always felt while watching her in front of the camera, but this time she was here with me.

She's real.

With tentative movement, I feathered my thumb over the bottom of her lip that I always tempted to feel against my lips. My breathing trapped in my lungs when she parted her lips.

“Kiss me like how you mean it, like how your desires urged you while you were watching me through the screen, Dangerouslyaddictive10,” she said between rasps breathing.

“Don’t test me, Westley.”

“Then show me.”

Bloody fuck!

Chapter 15

Kisses

WESTLEY

MY HEART raced with anticipation of what he was about to do. I could not deny that I dreamed of kissing Clyve, and it was happening.

Clyve lowered his head and pressed his lips against mine. They were incredibly soft than any man I'd kissed before. I parted my lips as an invitation. I could feel Clyve was trying hard to take it slow as he was expecting that I would push him away.

But I would never damn try even I knew this was wrong.

I let him brush his lips against mine, teasing me, then I coaxed to kiss him, parting more to beckon.

A guttural groan slipped from his throat. His hand cupped the back of my head. He then thrust his tongue inside my mouth, swallowing the gasp from me as I was surprised to his bold move.

Heat erupted my skin, summoning the sensations that I had not been feeling for a long time.

I found myself gripping his strong arms, sliding up to the back of his head, pulling him as if I wanted more. I pressed my thighs together as his tongue sought with mine, stroking, causing it to send an intensity of sensation down my spine.

The undeniable hunger consumed us both until a loud slammed from inside the house causing us to abruptly stop.

With wide clouded-lust eyes, Clyve stared at me in wonder. We were both breathing heavily, and none of us started to talk, but there was no awkwardness from both of us.

His breathing was still tickling my face as I pulled my thoughts back together. It didn't help much when he stared at me as if I was his favorite ice cream in summer.

Clyve kissed me once again—it was quick and sweet peck before he said, "You should go and check Keene. He might need something." His voice was raspier and deeper. I knew he was turned on.

Standing up, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. He was already standing when I faced him.

"Don't say it was a mistake. You know for a fact it feels right, and I know you feel something for me, too, Westley."

I rubbed my face when reality slapped me on my face. “You are our guest and my client now. T-that shouldn’t have happened.”

Clyve frowned. “Yeah, I thought you would say that. But why didn’t you stop me?”

Because I don’t want to.

I swallowed hard, breaking eye contact. It was not that I bruised his ego, but Clyve was sensitive when talking about rejection.

“Because I can’t. We both know that there is something between us that it’s hard for me to deny it, to ignore you, and—” God! “But we can’t. I’m keeping my word in return of you helping Keene with his treatment.”

He snorted. “So, this is all but a business arrangement, huh?”

Despite the hurt in his voice did a twinge in my chest, I managed to nod just to prove my point. Absentmindedly.

“Sure thing.” That was it, Clyve stormed away.

I sauntered inside the house with not exactly in my best mind. I could still taste his kisses on my lips. The kiss was far better than I expected—it was real, amazing, and it felt like I’d known him—as if I could trust him.

“You okay?” Keene’s voice from my back startled me.

My stomach knotted, afraid to turn around that he might see the look on my face. My voice wouldn’t lie otherwise. “I’m good.”

“Where is Clyve?”

“Back to his cabin.” I walked to the kitchen.

“I’ll call him later for dinner.” And that made me freeze.

This was going to be awkward, but I was a good actress until Clyve appeared in our lives.

“I’ll just go and bring him food. He mentioned something that he has something to do tonight.” I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

When I turned to face Keene, he knew something happened back at the porch. He was trying to hide his smile, but not so hard. “What?”

“Glad to know that there is progress.” He walked away, then stopped. “And Westley.”

"What?" I asked. I'm already annoyed. Wiping my lips had slipped off my mind. Now Keene was making fun of me.

God, this was embarrassing.

"Don't ruin this one."

I squinted. "I'm afraid I don't get what you mean."

He laughed. His laugh might have triggered his lungs. He was coughing when I rushed to him.

"Are you okay?"

He did a deep breathing exercise for a few seconds. Then he raised his hand. "I-I'm okay."

I held his arm and rubbed his back. "Let me help you to your room."

"No. I want to sit in the living room, and I'm fine, Westley." He smiled despite his discomfort.

"Don't change the topic. I've seen him a lot lately, staring at you."

My face felt impossibly hot. "Can we not talk about it, please? Should I remind you that whatever between me and Clyve is impossible?"

"You know we have a choice, right?"

"Just stop."

"So, are you gonna wait till I'm dead?"

I nudged him. My eyes widened with my impetuosity. "You're not dying."

Keene looked surprised too. I was not ready to talk about dying. Now that we had a chance, I couldn't give up on him. I wanted him to have his life back—to have a job, to have a girlfriend, and to beat his illness, and not the other way around.

"You will get your treatment. What do you think we are doing, Keene? We're leaving tomorrow, did you forget about that?"

He became unnaturally quiet for a moment before he spoke. "What I did was a mistake, Westley. I shouldn't have—"

"That was my choice, too. So drop the subject, and I will do it again without a second thought. Have a seat, and let me cook something so that you can take a rest."

"I love you, Westley. I did it because if your family won't take you back, at least you can start with something away from them. I didn't want my relatives to get a penny from me."

“No one is dying!” I sucked a deep breath before I stomped away. I chose to be silent. His diagnosis and the topic of Clyve were not a good combination to talk about.

Keene followed me to the kitchen, kissing the side of my head. “Don’t hold back what you feel because of what ties between us. Follow your heart, Westley.”

“My heart says—”

“Not a word, Harry!”

* * *

I STOOD at his front door with a thunderous heartbeat. Before I could knock, it swung open as if Clyve was waiting for me behind it. He was looking hotter on his shirt and sweatpants.

“Hi.”

“Hi, yourself. Come on in. Is that my food?” He grabbed the plastic bag from my hand eagerly and smelled it.

“Yeah.” I went inside like I usually did. I could feel his heated gaze at my back as I walked toward the kitchenette. It made me feel self-conscious despite the undeniable attraction between us.

When I turned around, our gazes locked. He didn’t even try to hide the desire burning in his eyes. I was utterly losing my mind, and I felt helpless at this moment to look away as my heartbeat went wild the longer we stared at each other.

When he looked down at my lips with hooded eyes, I swallowed. We couldn’t do it again.

“Can I now prepare for your dinner?”

He didn’t respond until the silence stretched between us became awkward.

I tried hard to focus on something. I grabbed a plate from the cupboard when a shadow hovered over me. I stilled, bit my bottom lip, and shut my eyes close. My body was in a heat with needs. My heart hadn’t been in a normal beat, and it only became worse.

The last thing I knew was the feeling of his hands on my hips, his lips on my exposed shoulder, planting a kiss. “For how long are you gonna drive me insane, Westley? I have to break some rules to keep my sanity intact every time I think of you. I hope you’ll do the same.”

“Clyve.”

“Hmm.” He took the plate from my hand. A light brush made my heart seize. “I invited you in. Mum would be so proud of me if my manner towards women would impress you as well. Sit down, Westley, and let me prepare the dinner.”

"I ate."

"So, you'll just gonna watch me while I eat? You'll get bored. Nothing fascinating about watching me shoving my food into my mouth." I could feel the hint of a smile in his tone. He then forced me to face him.

"Actually, I'm not staying longer," I said truthfully because I couldn't. I already kissed him once. The second time we did it, it might go beyond just a kiss.

He let out a groan. "You're driving me crazy." *So do I, dumbass.*

"I just wanna ask when can we start?" I couldn't look at him, afraid he would see the effect all over my face even though he'd already seen it the first time I stepped inside.

He sighed. "You don't have to do it, but for the short amount of time I get to know you, you're a stubborn woman who hates to take charity in any form."

"Thanks for understanding."

Maybe it wouldn't be awkward if—

My God! For a moment, my heart seized. I cupped his face causing him to freeze, and I trapped him into a kiss.

"Good choice," he murmured against our lips that still connected. His words sliced through my heart that we felt the same. He slid his hands down my waist, fingers pressing against my curves. He raised the edge of my shirt while he kissed me with sweet, soft, and innocent smooches.

I slid my hands down to his chest. His heartbeat was faster as mine. The moment I opened my mouth, Clyve slipped his eager tongue inside causing a moan to escape from me. I knew the very second I initiated it, that was a sound of surrender—I gave in, no turning back, and no regrets.

Our kisses heated—hungrier and wilder, and we clung at each other. He pressed his hips into mine in a desperate move, letting me feel his huge bulge trapped in his sweatpants.

Oh, God!

His hands slid up to my back, making me arch as his touch ignited the fire inside me, ready to burst into flame. I pressed my breasts against his chest, my nipples painfully hard and aching as I desperately ground myself into him. I couldn't go another single night thinking how good it might feel to have him.

He ripped his mouth from me, traveling his damp lips to my jaw down to my neck. I arched it, giving him full access to explore further.

"Tell me this is too much, and I'll stop."

“D-don’t.” What was the point of denying when my body right now was telling exactly the whole truth?

He yanked my shirt off. His look alone was melting me inside, quavering every muscle I had.

“Beautiful.” His eyes were glittering with amazement despite that I was only wearing a simple skin-toned bra—nothing that he had not seen from other women, yet the excitement made his pupils dilate.

I tentatively raised his shirt and looked at him in the eyes, waiting for his consent.

“Please.” He raised his hands. “We’re on this together, right? Because once I’m inside you, there’s no turning back, Westley. You’re mine and I’m yours.”

I pushed the thought out of my head. Lust was consuming me, and I allowed my body to decide. Even I was in the rightful mind, Clyve was harder to resist—I tried it once, twice, yet, I still failed in that task. For now, all I wanted was to give in, and maybe what I felt for him would cease once it was over. I would face the consequences of my action later—once I got what I wanted.

I traced the contour and the tiny hair sprinkled on his chest. His breathing quickened as I traveled my fingers down to his abs. Clyve was beautiful in many ways— a piece of art, and touching him was like touching one of the Renaissance.

I looked down. My mouth watered to see the tip of his unbelievably hard length poking out against the waistband of his sweatpants. *He goes commando.*

“Westley?”

With wide eyes, I snapped my head up. “Yeah?”

“I don’t do one-night stand or a quick fuck. Once we—”

“I know.” *Oh, boy.*

Chapter 16

Merged

CLYVE

I COULDN'T take my eyes off of her—she was just beautiful now that she was completely naked in my bed, not ashamed to show me the anticipation in her eyes.

And then the piercing. It was on her dark pink nipple that shone against the yellow light—it was so hot on her. I already spent quite a time sucking it, yet I still wanted to do it again when those hard buds pebbled as if it was an invitation.

The trimmed golden curls between her thighs already soaked with her wetness. I couldn't help myself not to salivate. I wanted to taste every inch of her, if not tonight, then sooner.

I tore the foil pack and sheathed my length, keeping my eyes glued to her, and her breathing quickened, her legs voluntarily parted as she noticed my arousal was already seeping from the head.

Westley bit her bottom lip as I rolled up the rubber to the base of my cock.

I crawled down to the bed, and she spread her thighs wider for me, welcoming me with open arms—or rather opened legs. I settled on top of her and kissed her again. It turned out quite hungry than the last time our lips locked that I could feel my heart pounding against hers.

The heat we caused was burning us both with such intensity of desires. I loved how she never hid what she wanted as she eagerly grabbed my cock, pressing it against her soaking entrance, then rubbed it up and down.

Jesus!

"Just so you know, I've never been with a man in three years. I'm clean and on a pill," she informed between pants.

With my brain plaguing with lust, I couldn't even speak right. "I didn't sheath my cock because I wanted to protect myself, Westley. I did it for you. I want you to trust me."

"I trust you."

I leaned down to press my lips and kiss her as I simultaneously sunk into her tight sweet pussy.

God! The pleasure jagged me again.

Her fingers erotically dug into my skin. She was hurt. A soft whine erupted from her, and I sucked into my mouth as if telling her the pain would be over soon.

And it was a promise.

I could feel my crown welcomed by her soaking hotness flesh. I thrust again, and the sensation was overpowering my head that I could feel the blood pulsing through it in a rush. I'd been desperate to feel this way again and to see a woman underneath me with such a beautiful reaction all over herself.

I pulled my lips and opened my eyes. "Look at me, Westley."

She opened those heavy-lidded and gorgeous eyes, staring right into me. It was darker than I'd ever seen them—her pupils were dilated, the flush of red blossoming her cheek—I was proud to myself that I caused it.

"You alright?"

"Yes. Don't be gentle on me, please?" She snaked her legs around my waist and pushed herself against me, and I was throbbing, desperate to feel her tightness. Her impatience sent vicious electric tingles through me.

"Easy." A guttural roar erupted from my throat. She was so tight.

My cock buried deep into her. My hips pressed in against hers. With pure excitement and bliss, Westley screamed my name—that beautiful sound would never be forgotten.

"You're always stubborn, aren't you? Why so in a hurry, Westley? Let's have this moment to ourselves," I said between groans, my veins bulging everywhere.

"You know why," she replied as she ran her fingernails at the skin on my back—it felt so good—it sent a crush of sensations shot right to my balls.

"Why? You're gonna leave me once we're done here?"

She stilled, glaring at me. I knew exactly why. We both desperate for it. It was sexy as hell though. "Really?"

With my heart sunk to my stomach, I pulled all my length out. I felt suddenly cold and empty. Westley tried to push back against me that made her scowl when I kept a short distance.

So cute and young, and she could manage to make me appreciate every single action she did.

"Do you want me to take charge?"

It would be an insult if I had not known her of being feisty. I shook my head with a smile.

I pecked her pouty and swollen lips. "I always wanted to be in charge in bed, but I'm not a selfish bastard, Westley. I'll make sure you're satisfied and think about what we've done all over again."

"Then why are you so lazy?"

A lazy?

I barked into a laugh, which never happened when I was in the midst of being hard as a rock and badly desperate for a release. With her, I was having a lot of fun, and at the same time, enjoying the feelings we shared. And it bloody turned me on, on how eager she was for me to be inside her.

"It's been six months, love since I had sex, and one more clamping of your sweet and tight pussy around me, I'm gonna come, and I want you to come first or at least join me. That's how much this something between us so important to me that I think of you before my needs."

Pink tinged her cheeks. "I think you should lie down beside me and talk about this. Then we'll continue later."

"Are you trying to give me blue balls?" I grinned at her.

She smiled. "No. It's just that you have so much self-control in you, Linton, and I'm so damn admiring it."

"Believe me, I like what we have, and I'm not gonna ruin it by coming before you."

"Me too. I mean *this* between us."

I slammed fully inside her that, it plastered against hers. Watching her mouth formed an O shape and her eyes widened, it was the best view I'd ever seen on her. I'd been dreaming to see it on her face, and it was so damn fulfilling.

I couldn't last. She felt so damn good. I thrust into her over and over again, encircled my hips, and sought for the right spot. She went wild beneath me—her body shuddered, her back arched, and her head fell back against the pillow.

"Oh, God!"

"You okay, love?"

"Hmm. Don't stop."

I quickened the thrust in short shallow moves. My muscles contracted. My balls drew up. My jaw locked harder as I tried not to come before her.

The sensation inside was overwhelming, gobsmacking, and astonishing as the thick vassal of pleasure almost sent me soaring high to the realm of euphoria.

Using my weight, I forced my cock to be deeper inside her, feeling my balls slap against her arse. The slaps of our skin and our mingled moans echoed in the entire small room. Her pussy spasmed around me, and her fingers dug into my back. Her hips were canted as she fully connected with me.

We merged.

It was beautiful and euphoric.

I kissed her again, sucking the tiny breaths she let out. I ground into her, and she moaned as I hit the right places.

“I can’t hold back any longer, Westley,” I grunted, our sweat dampening our skin. My veins bulged everywhere. I dove my head to her neck and sucked the sensitive skin, not caring to leave my mark on her.

Her body tightened, her digs deepened, and her breathing turned into pants and raspy. I supported my weight with my elbows. I wanted to see the most beautiful thing when she came around me. Then that was it, she clamped me tightly that I almost lost my sanity.

Before she completely lost in pleasure, she rolled her eyes back, then her gaze locked into mine. She shook, her legs quivered—she surrendered herself completely and convulsed as she reached the peak of ecstasy we both shared.

I slammed my mouth into her, kissing the hell out of the wonderful thing we shared before I lost my mind and shuttered on top of her.

My cock was in primal throb, my moan filled the room as I felt the strong building of orgasm wanting to erupt. And it was so unbearable as she continued pulsating her release with her wetness polling around me.

She released a satisfied sigh.

I ground and whined my release as the blast jetted through me with a mindless rapture. I remembered calling her name before I felt the release and the pounding of my heart went out of control until I was empty.

* * *

WESTLEY was still sleeping in a ball. She sprawled sideways in my bed, her hair was sticking all over the pillow. She took all the sheets and wrapped around her body. She snored as well, but it was a turn on as I started to get to know her.

She was beautiful like an angel when she was sleeping, but she was a beautiful sight to look at when her magnificent body was not covered.

Jesus, I was instantly hard. I was fighting hard the temptation of licking the curve of her arse cheeks and plunging my tongue inside her swollen slits as soon as I spread her thighs wide, and get lost of her sweet taste.

I walked out of the room with a raging hard-on. The heater stopped working. I started a fire on the fireplace, creating an orange glow to the entire place.

I sat on the chair after I received the confirmation of our flight tomorrow at noon. I was rubbing my chin when I heard a sweet voice coming from my back.

A smile quickly spread across my face as I turned my head to her. She cupped my face from the back, planting a soft kiss on my lips.

“What are you doing here?”

“The heater didn’t work so I started a fire.” I grabbed her hand and patted my lap. She obeyed and straddled me with only a sheet covering her body.

“Why’d you wake up?” I ran my nose on her exposed arm.

“I thought I scared you with my snore.” With the only light coming from the fireplace, I could still see the blush blossomed on her face.

I chuckled. “So you knew you snore.”

“When I’m exhausted.”

“So, did I somehow contributed to... your exhaustion?” I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her closer.

“What do you think?”

“I think I can give relief to that.”

She unhooked my arms around her and stood up. She unwrapped the sheet and spread it down on the floor. Westley was completely naked as I imagined.

She then took the two cushions and said, “Lay down with me.”

“Just lying down?” I teased and started pulling off my shirt and shoved down my sweatpants. My cock was already on full alert and jerked with excitement when she licked her lips.

I knelt, holding her ankles and spread her legs apart as I positioned myself between her thighs. The smelled of her arousal alone already made me dizzy with lust and anticipation of tasting her sweet ripe pussy.

Chapter 17

Nostalgia

WESTLEY

STEPPING Back to the city I left years ago was a bold move on my part, and seeing a lot of changes made me feel like I came from a different planet. My teeth almost tattered, and goosebumps erupted all over my skin in dread. The smell of the city and the noises alone made me quickly nostalgic.

I hugged myself as I watched the city blur with a thousand colors as we drove by in the black sedan.

After our mind-blowing sex last night, I fell back to slumber. Until now, I could still feel the aftermath—my skin was still buzzing and my muscles were sore. Clyve took the opportunity to explore my body to the most sensitive and responsive part I'd never known it existed. He was a beast in the bed but took care of me and my needs at the same time.

He woke me up when he found me screaming with the nightmare of my past. It was more of a flashback because it was more realistic than a dream. I felt those raw emotions, my physical pain, my humiliation. What I liked about him was, he didn't poke, instead, he cuddled me into his arms until I fell asleep.

"Are you feeling okay?" Keene caught my hand, squeezing it. He knew how I exactly felt coming back. The city didn't throw me away, it was my family, but I couldn't forget the fact that it played a huge part in my past that I wanted to forget.

"I'm good."

"Good you mean you're about to faint? Your hand is so cold as ice."

I didn't tell him that I had a bad dream. What for? We came to hopefully treat him, and this was our best chance.

"I am not," I whispered. I didn't want Clyve to think of something was off. He didn't know that I was born and grew up in this city other than his wild guesses. Hopefully, he wouldn't figure out until we finished what we came for and wished we wouldn't bump into someone I knew from the past.

I looked at Keene. There was a worry plastered on his face. I smiled even though my stomach was twisting in a knot from the guilt of what I did behind his back.

I looked away to the outside of the tinted window when my chest tightened. I couldn't help but sigh with a shaky breath in both relief and disappointment that I chose to fall into the pit of lust when I should have kept myself apart from Clyve.

"What's going on with you?" Keene poked. "Should I tell Klash to drive us back to the airport?"

I met the mid-forties, military built with dark eyes through the rearview mirror.

"You alright, Westley?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine."

Relief washed through me. Clyve was not a PDA and clingy type, but he couldn't hide the dreamy looked and the sparkling of his eyes. I threw him a warning looked when he wore this huge smile on his face if Keene wasn't looking at both of us.

"Should we stop to grab a bite, Keene?" He shifted his body to face us.

"Thank you, man, but I rather hit the bed," Keene answered.

"You tired or something?"

"No. You probably want to meet your brother. I'd rather call the room service if you don't mind." Keene glanced at me. "How about you?"

"Don't have a plan." *I want to spend some time with Clyve. That's my plan.* Inwardly, I rolled my eyes and hit myself in the head. God, I felt like a horny bitch. *What's wrong with me?* This wasn't some kind of a vacay.

"What's going on with you?" he asked with furrowed brows.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Something is going on in that head of yours, Westley."

I chuckled. "Yeah. A lot."

"Besides that..." He side-glanced Clyve which already focused back to the road. "Thing."

"I'm just overwhelmed and worried about you than myself. I can only breathe freely once we have you treated."

"I'll be fine. Stop beating yourself up."

"I hope it's that easy to say."

"He's a strong bloke, Westley. Trust me, I can feel the tension in yourself until here. Just relax. Keene will be fine. Starting tomorrow he will be in the right hands."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot because this woman will make me sicker if she keeps acting weird like this."

"Anything, Keene."

"We're here," Klash, the driver announced.

"This isn't far from the hospital where we'll going to visit tomorrow. That's why I choose this hotel." Surprisingly, Clyve chose a high-end hotel in the city.

After Clyve chatted with the receptionist regarding our rooms, we headed to the elevator. The soft ding and the small humming made me uneasy as we lifted to the right floor.

A warm soft hand wrapped around mine with a light squeeze. I couldn't help but squeezed that hand back. His thumb drew small circles around my knuckles that made me bite my bottom lip—the sensation ignited again. I felt the instant fire racing through my veins, melting me like a magma.

"Relax. You'll be fine," he muttered.

I released a shaky breath, wishing my stay would be as peaceful as this elevator.

"I booked a hotel room across your room and Keene's. Hope they suit to your liking."

"They?" I snapped my head at him with my voice a little louder. Thankfully, there were just three of us.

"Yeah, but I don't have problems with you sharing with me." There you were—the playful smirk curved across his lips.

I widened my eyes to warn him, but instead of him shutting up, he ended up laughing at me.

"What? I thought you'd like some privacy."

Keene chuckled beside me. "We don't have that privacy in a long time. No offense, Westley, but I'd like to have some peace for a while without plugging my ears from your snores."

I pulled my hand out of Clyve's grip and faced my best friend with narrowed eyes. "Really? So you're fed up with me, huh? Why haven't you say so?"

"Don't fight in the elevator, Westley. He's just messing with you." He grabbed my wrist.

"You know me well. What you need is a good drink, right, Clyve?"

"I agree with that."

"I'm not gonna drink."

"You coming with us, Keene?"

"I'm good, thank you. Alcohol is one thing that I shouldn't be consuming. I appreciate the offer though, but you better take this woman for a drink because she needs to loosen up and get laid."

"Oh, my god!" My eyes widened in shock. "You didn't just say that out loud." I could feel my face burning while Clyde was laughing at my side as if we didn't just do that many times last night. Keene joined him. My anger rose, and so as my embarrassment. I bolted out as soon as the elevator opened.

HIS EYES shone as soon as he spotted me. He stood up from the barstool and met me halfway with a full-blown smile.

I quickly wrapped my arms around his neck with a searing kiss just like how I meant to kiss him since we parted in the morning. The old me had escaped from the prison where I kept held for years.

He kissed me back just the way I kissed him. When we broke apart we were both breathless.

"If that's how you welcome me, I make sure you missed me every day." He kissed my forehead, then rested his hand on my waist, guiding me to where he seated.

I couldn't help but scanned around out of my paranoia. "So, you missed me, too?"

"You have no idea. And the tiny thing you are wearing just caught me off guard. In a good way though."

"Does that mean you like it?" I teased him. I looked down at my dark blue cocktail dress. It was the opposite of me from the small town. The dress showed some skin. Actually, a lot of skin from my cleavage to the three inches cut above my knees. I was like the character I created, Sindy Kate. Only this time, I showed it to one man, and I tended to keep it that way.

"I love it, Westley."

We seated on the stools, Clyde had already his soda.

"What would you like to drink, love?" He smiled as he kept strolling his gaze from my head to my crossed exposed knees.

"A dry martini, please?" I ordered the bartender.

"I thought you don't wanna drink," Clyde reminded me with a joke.

"You're with me. Spank me if I'll do something inappropriate." I grabbed his hand, and he quickly entwined with mine.

“Oh, I’m such a wad. I’m honestly not good at dating, but I wouldn’t let this night go without telling you that you look stunning.” He planted his lips on my knuckles.

I couldn’t help but smile. “You looked pretty well cleaned up yourself, Linton.”

He had a gray shirt with two buttons opened and paired with dark pants. He looked gorgeous tonight that I could not wait to lick the smile off his lips.

“Don’t look at me like that, love.”

I used to flirt, but it had been ages. “How do I look at you exactly?”

“That you’re ready to eat me.” Clyve moved closer to me. Our knees brushed off. The sensation started to heat up.

I grabbed my drink and took a sip of it. Licking my lip, I tasted the bitter taste I’d missed. I could feel the heated gaze of Clyve on my lips. When I placed down the glass, I let my unshielded gaze of lust locked with his.

His eyes flooded with heated anticipation, too. “God, I wanna kiss you, but not here.”

“To a man who is not expert in dating, you wanna score now, huh?”

He grabbed his soda, gulping the content. He placed it down and said, “Can’t stay here longer with a stiffy. We are leaving.” Then he told the bartender, “Another Martini and soda to room 866, please.” He threw a few bills and stood up.

“Coming right up, sir.”

“And you, Westley, you better get on your feet before I throw you on my shoulder and carry you like a sack of potato.”

The way he said potato made me giggle like a schoolgirl. I thought it was sexy.

I quickly gripped the hand he offered. We headed back to the elevator. Clyve looked relax as he shoved his free hand on his pocket while I kept on fidgeting beside him because I knew exactly how it ended before this night is over—either in his bed or mine. Either way, we would be both enjoying this night with hot, sweaty, panting, or screaming our names as we flew higher reaching our nirvana.

“You could just text me to come to your room, instead you made me wear this and prepared myself for two hours just to look good in your eyes, Clyve Linton,” I teased him.

He looked down at me. “You look gorgeous even on your baggy, and you look more stunning when you wear nothing.” He leaned closer to kiss me, but the door opened, making us both groaned.

“Bloody.”

We were about to step in when my eyes landed on the person inside. I froze, rooted in my spot. My heart raced and nearly exploded when our gazes met. He was wearing the same shock on my face—confused and shock.

I wanted to run and hide. But before I could do that...

Chapter 18

The Wanker

CLYVE

SHOCK, Westley rooted in her spot wearing a horror look on her face, and those blue eyes were enormous.

I shifted my gaze to where her eyes pinned at—a bloke with a well-tailored gray suit and slick back dark hair. They were wearing the same look on their faces.

Don't tell me this is the wanker ex of hers?

His look seemingly fancy to be with Westley, but she could have better men at her disposal than this wanker. I was a little bit taller than him, but he must have spent a lot of his hours in the gym, lifting a weight based on his biceps.

He repeatedly blinked his dark eyes as if he couldn't believe what he saw right in front of him. Then he stepped forward.

A lot of scenarios popped into my mind that I couldn't even begin to imagine, but one thing that scared the living shit out of me that he could possibly be one of her clients.

My blood turned to ice. *God, hell, no!*

"Harry?"

My brows met together. *Harry?* "Mate, you must have mistaken her with someone else." I wrapped my arm around Westley's tiny waist, possessively.

I was not a type of bloke who turned Neanderthal in front of his girlfriend or at any male population just to prove that this woman belonged to me. And thank, God! He heard my prayer.

Westley was still on her rigid posture for a minute and hadn't moved a muscle or spoke a word.

"Love, let's get inside the lift."

"Harry, Jesus. I've been looking for you for years. I thought you were dead," he said in a painful and worried tone.

It annoyed me that he kept on calling her Harry.

"Mate, she's not—"

"I know her, and she's Harry. Harry Bloom." He grabbed her wrist.

I swallowed the overpowering rage not to punch this idiot in front of Westley, but when he didn't let go of her hand, I couldn't keep it any longer.

"Hey, fuck off!" I gripped his hand and ripped it off from Westley's. "You don't get to touch her like that because she looks like someone you know, mate. Don't be a douche!"

"Harry, please?" he begged. "I know you still remember me. I need to talk to you. It's very important."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not Harry. My name is Westley." Westley dashed inside the lift, leaving me puzzled.

"Don't even try again." I raised my hand to warn the wanker off.

"Yes, you're Harriet Audene Bloom. And I know you still remember me, Harry. It's me, Trace. I've been searching for you and wanted to apologize, but your sister made sure that I couldn't get near you." He stood at the door to stop the lift from sliding close.

With a strong posture, her eyes narrowed into slits. "I don't care, and I'm not the person you're looking for. So stay away from the elevator, and we need to go up."

"Just give me a minute and let me apologize—"

"Are you not even listening? I said I don't care. So back off and leave me and my boyfriend alone. You're wasting too much of our time already. Don't let me call the security for disturbing us."

"Fine. I'm so sorry about what happened before. Just so you know, it was not our fault—none of it. You were the victim, and so was I. Your sister did this to us, Westley. Just be careful with her and don't ever trust her. She's willing to ruin a life if someone who comes in her way, and you are not an exception. Trust me she's not the woman everyone thinks she is."

With the rage still flushing through me, I glared at him, my gaze was vicious. "Are you done?"

He nodded subtly with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry for the trouble." He looked back at Westley who was still shooting him a hostile glare. "Take care of yourself."

I let go of a shuddering breath when he walked away. I got in the lift and pressed the button to our floor. Before the door completely slid close the bartender from the lounge appeared in front of us.

Great!

"Wait!" Westley held the door and grabbed her drink then gulped it in one shot.

"Easy there, love."

She gave back the empty glass to the bartender and muttered thank you. "I'm sorry about earlier," she muttered when the door finally closed in front of us.

"You knew him, don't you?" I moved closer, wrapped my arms around her, and kissed the side of her head. "I wished you told me who he was because all I wanted the moment he grabbed your wrist was to punch him for treating you like that."

"I'm sorry if I ruined our date. I wouldn't be surprised if you don't want to see me again," she said, gripping the back of my shirt as if she was seeking comfort.

"That won't happen, Westley. We're on this together. Before something happened between us, I knew for a fact that you had a lot of skeletons in your closet. I could've denied whatever we had, but I couldn't, and I wouldn't. I had a thing to my tenant, you know." I kissed the top of her head when she chuckled.

"Thanks."

"I hope you'll open up to me now after what happened." I pulled away, looking at her in the eye.

"I-I—"

"You don't trust me."

"It's not that. I'm afraid you might not be able to handle it, Linton. I like you a lot, and I'm not ready to let you go just yet."

I cupped her face, running my thumbs on her cheeks. "No one is letting go. Trust me I've had worse, and the moment I kissed you, I already accepted everything about you—from your past that I haven't known, to the person I am with right now. I don't care if you are Audene Westley, Harry Potter, or Harry Styles. I don't give bollocks. I'm with you, and we're on this together."

I leaned down to close the distance between us. I was an inch to capture her trembling lips, and I could feel her warm breath when the lift door slid open, making me groan in annoyance.

An old couple was waiting in front of us, and I had to apologize before we stepped outside.

"Young love," the old woman sang.

We walked in silence towards my room. Our moments ruined, the anticipation and excitement dried off. I readied myself for her retreat when I inserted the key card of my room, but I didn't hear a thing. The silence was filled with dread, yet she stayed by my side.

"Do you want to come in?" I asked hesitantly. "We don't have to do anything tonight. We'll just talk if you feel like to, and I want to spend a few minutes with you before we doss."

She smiled, but that didn't reach her eyes. The sadness was so deep. I couldn't blame her though, there must be some nasty happened with her life back then. One thing that confirmed my suspicion that she was from this city, and by the look on that wanker's face, Westley came from a wealthy family. And she had an evil witch sister.

Chapter 19

Venomous Sister

CLYVE

SHE TOSSED her clutch, kicked off her high-heels, threw herself to my bed, and rubbed her temples.

“Did your drinks kick in?” I unbuttoned my shirt, zipped down my trousers. Her eyes widened in a bit when I was already in my knickers.

“We’ll just talk.” I grinned. I didn’t think she had the desire to sleep with me right now, so I lied down beside her and slipped my arm under her head.

She moved closer to me, tangling her bare legs with mine. She placed her palm against my chest as if to feel my heartbeat, which had been racing with anticipation since I saw the glittering of admiration in her eyes.

I liked this side of her, she’d never been ashamed to show me her needs. She shifted on her tummy, propping on her elbows.

Leaning down, she pressed her lips against mine. I quickly opened my mouth for her. As if on cue, she deepened the kiss, grazing her tongue against my own. My body vibrated with the enticing pleasure of her kiss. Hurriedly, she moved on top of me. Her warmth enveloped my body as she pressed her hips, moved, and ground into my already hard erection. The process was maddening.

“Love, are you sure this is a good idea?” I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned, tracing my fingers against her bare thighs. Her dress rose, giving me full access to her round firm arse.

“I want you.”

“Fuck!” My fingers found the tiny strip of her thong.

She moaned loudly and smiled against our lips as I slipped my finger and pushed down her tiny strip. Then I traced down to the center of her arse cheeks, down to her already slick slits.

In one quick shift, she lifted her hips. I rubbed her tit through the fabric of her dress—the hard bud was poking against her lacy bra, begging for attention. With my thumb and forefinger, I twisted it, causing her back to arch. A cry tore out of her throat.

“You’ll be the death of me.”

“Inside me now, please?” She mewled and shuddered.

“I need a condom.”

“No. I need to feel you.”

“Westley.” My gaze flew up to meet hers if she was drunk—she seemed sober, but she was definitely drowning with lust.

“I’m not drunk. Please?”

The moment she pleaded as if this earth would explode if I wouldn’t be inside her, I slammed my mouth into hers, and kissed her hungrily, passionately, and poured all my devotion of giving her what she wanted.

With one hand, I freed my throbbing hard cock out of my knickers. It was already pulsing and blazing with hot blood in my veins, ready to sink into her.

I plunged inside her, she reached my root, and we both screamed with shock—a shock of the sensation of how good it felt to be connected with someone you cared about. Unsheathed was euphoric, mind-boggling, and earth-shaking. I thought I passed out, feeling my head start to spin around.

She clamped my length around her warm and slick walls.

“God, Linton. It feels amazing. I knew this would feel incredible.”

“Fuck, love.” I closed my eyes, feeling how good it felt inside her. It melted my heart knowing she thought the feeling of being with me unprotected. She trusted me.

Westley cupped my face. “Open your eyes, Linton.”

And I did as she asked.

“I need you. Please don’t leave me. I want you. I need you.” There was something in her words that created a hole in my heart. I hoped it was not what I thought it was.

I kissed her. “I promise.”

* * *

I WOKE up to the frequent ringing of the phone—I was sure that was not mine. That call could be urgent though.

“Westley? Your phone.” When I patted my side. Sadly, it was empty.

She probably went to check Keene. It was four in the morning.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I put my trousers on, a shirt, and the hotel slippers.

I grabbed her clutch and walked out of my room. Their rooms were just across mine. I knocked on her door and waited.

“You must be *the boyfriend*.” A female sophisticated voice behind me made me turn around. I didn’t miss the vile in her tone as she emphasized the words the boyfriend.

“Do I know you?”

She looked like she just came from a political party, wearing a straight fit black dress. Her blonde hair looked like she spent hours on the salon. She was beautiful in her own way and she must have spent thousands of dollars on her face alone. But there was something in her eyes that I didn’t fancy in a bit.

“You’re not Keene. So you must be the boy toy.”

My eyes narrowed. “Pardon?”

“Well, look at what she has here.” She inspected me from head to toe, then crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her finger on chin. “I know my sister. She used to have men in her life all at one time, and I admire how she easily lures men into her bed, just like what she did to my fiancé.”

Oh, the evil sister.

My expression turned into a stone at how she thought of Westley so low. I already crossed my arms over my chest, towered her, and clenched my jaw hard not to give her the satisfaction she wanted.

“What have you seen in her? She has nothing other than her what? Her body?”

“Look, woman. You don’t have to say shit because I don’t know you, and I don’t know what you will get with this nonsensical conversation.” I was about to turn my back when I remember something. “Wait. Yeah, you’re right. She doesn’t have anything. She lost everything because her evil sister took everything away from her. I heard that she has these poisonous claws and venomous bites that she is willing to destroy anyone who comes her way, am I right?”

“You don’t know anything about me!” she spat, anger boiling up.

Ah, did I just poke a bear?

“Then why did you have to come all the way here—” I waved my hand. “Just to insult her, babe? Unless what I heard is true.”

“You don’t know me.” She glared. And yes, she was evil in disguise and about to show off her true color. “What is it with you British people with your chivalry over a woman like her?”

“Well, you clearly don’t know me, and you don’t know anything about Harry, as well. I like her just the way she is. She might not have money, family, or something that you have right now, but she definitely has us. I and Keene are her family. So listen to me very carefully, woman. While the London bridge still stands, you don’t get a chance to lay a finger or dig your claws on her again, do you understand me? You already got what you wanted, so stay the bloody hell off!”

“Of course, she’s not satisfied with one man in her life.” She chuckled evilly. “She has to have at least another man to fuck her knowing that her husband is about to die. Poor Keene.”

“What did you just say?” With a shock, the question slipped from my mouth before my brain could process.

“Harlow!”

Chapter 20

The Truth

WESTLEY

I WAS pacing back and forth while Keene's eyes were following my moves from his bed. He didn't pry, but apparently, he knew what was bothering me.

The door swung opened before my knuckles reached the wooden door. Trace seemingly so sure that I would show up after he left a note for me at the reception.

He didn't change a bit other than the matured expression on his face. He was a famous college boy—a quarterback of their football team. Harlow loved attention, and she got what she wanted from Trace.

When he got engaged with Harlow, he was still foolish back then, not that I knew him well because I really didn't give a crap about him and my step-sister.

"Just tell me why am I here." I straightened my spine as I entered his room and expelled all my thoughts.

The smell of his perfume hung thickly in the entire room. He was still wearing the same brand he used three years ago, and it just brought a painful memory on my part. I still remembered the same scent over the hotel bed that night.

"You need to see your dad, Harry." His words directly hit my chest.

"Why? He didn't care about me. He never was. What does he want from me now? Should I remind you that my father chose to trust them than his own daughter?" I resented that thought, but I truly missed him regardless of what he did to me.

Trace looked down and sat on a chair. "He was brainwashed."

I folded my arms over my chest. "Why I'm not even surprised? So, do you think he would believe in me now or listen to what I say? I'm not gonna step in his home while those bitches are still living with him. Not in this lifetime."

"Then you must see your dad because he threw them out of the house and out of his life weeks ago."

What he just said caught me off guard. "Why? What happened?"

"Them spending Lyndon's money is not an issue, but when he figured out what they've been doing behind his back is another story. As crazy as it sounds, his wife is sleeping with one of his security team members. He found out what happened to us was a setup. Since you got your last warning from your father, they used it

against you, and it was easier for them to convince Lyndon since you were already branded as the black sheep of the family."

"Jeez. Thanks for pointing it out." I grimaced—that was what Dad knew about me. Since he married that bitch and Harlow was the only good girl in his eyes, I faded in the background, and he didn't give much attention to me anymore.

"Look, Harry, I knew I am the last person you want to talk to right now, but you have to believe me. I ended up our engagement because I was no use to her since I wasn't able to play anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. It's not that you care, but she's been fooling me and making me believe that we meant for each other. If it's not for your dad, I might still be suffering from the injuries I had from my last game. I owe him big time, and finding you here and telling you all of these was the right thing to do. I hope one day you can still forgive me."

"I didn't come here to meet you or my dad, Trace. I came—"

"I know. And Harlow knew about it, too. Trust me, she will do everything to get into you. She even believes that you don't deserve everything you have."

My brow perked up. I huffed to the absurdity. "What do I have left, Trace? I have nothing because they took everything I had even my own father!"

"They were there when your dad changed his will. I think he did it on purpose—he wanted to know how they would react. Of course, they'd gone batshit crazy. They said your father was losing his mind, risking everything, and putting his wealth to someone who didn't exist anymore. He cut everything that ties between him and your step-mom just a day after that. Every asset Lyndon has would be yours once he died."

I loved Dad, and he was still my father no matter how terrible he was to me. He didn't deserve to be treated the way they did to him. He was nothing but good especially to Harlow, yet they still treated him like trash. If I was being honest, they got what they deserved.

Not a single night I never thought of him even though he was a horrible person.

"The hell I want what he has."

"I know, but Harlow knew the time of your arrival and your hotel room. She knew about you and Keene, and your relationship with Clyde Linton. Does he know about you and Keene?"

"How does she even know?"

"Your dad found it out. If Clyde doesn't know what's going on between you and Keene, I think it will be better if you will tell him before she will, Harry."

"I've been away for so long, and I left my life because of what they did to me. Why can't she just leave me alone? They ruined my family and my relationship with Dad. They ruined my life. Isn't it enough for them? They also have to ruin my relationship?" I promised myself not to cry because of it, but I couldn't help it, and strangely, the more I talked, the freer I felt.

"He'd been asking someone to look for you. The first PI he hired, apparently was your stepmom's recommendation. So you might have already an idea of what happened. They let your father believed that you're probably dead. That was why he cut your fund until recently when everything came to his senses. You have to understand him, Harry. He'd been through a lot—since your mom."

"Of course." I chuckled bitterly. "It's not my problem if he trusted the wrong people."

"You're right, and it's time for you to pay him a little visit. Your father will be at the summer house tomorrow. He would be glad to see you, Harry. Believe me, he missed you so much."

"Westley, you're giving me a headache. Can you please stop pacing?" Keene's irritated tone made me stop.

I looked at him and blurted out, "I need to see my dad."

He leaned against the headboard with furrowed brows. "Was there something terrible happened during your date?"

My throat clogged, unable to meet his gaze anymore.

"Oh, come on. I know what's going on between you and Clyve, and you know that it's okay with me. We should get divorced, and I will just rewrite my will."

Chapter 21

Infidelity

WESTLEY

HIS SMILE seemed sincere, but I was still not buying his idea.

“I’m not gonna marry Linton tomorrow. We’re just having a good time. That’s it.” I shrugged, though deep inside, I liked Clyve, and we both knew it was more than just a good time.

At the back of my brain, it was telling me the other thing—I couldn’t rush things no matter how good we were together. I had a lot of things going on in my life right now—with my father, my family, and Keene’s condition—he remained my top priority. Then here came my complicated relationship with Clyve.

God, this is getting more complicated than I’d ever predicted.

Clyve was still in the dark of my real relationship Keene, convenience, or not. He might not see me the same person again and would choose to run away once he figured out the truth. He would hate me once he found out that I was still married to Keene while I was having a relationship with him at the same time. And I literally cheated on both of them.

I’m such a horrible person I’d be damned.

Maybe what happened with my life right now was a part of my punishments. And everything was out of my control anymore. This time, I had to make every effort to make amends to Clyve.

“Hey, you’re making me worried. Everything will be okay, Westley.” Keene’s cooing voice didn’t even bring a smile on my face. It made me feel worse.

“I don’t think so, Keene.” I wiped my tears dry and walked toward his bed, but it stopped me mid-way when I heard faint of a voice outside the room, and without a doubt, I knew exactly who was that.

Crap!

My heart thundered in my chest. I could feel the rushing of my blood through my head with the guilt I’d been harboring and the anger surging inside me. I strode outside the room to see Clyve in front of the door with my worse enemy in a heated argument.

My chest heaved. My world spun around me the moment our gazes met. All the terrible things she did came flashing back to me in a rush—how she humiliated me, how she manipulated my dad to

turn against me. What they did to me was unforgivable—they shattered my life, my confidence, and my future.

Now, she did again, ruining my life and my relationship with the two persons I cared about.

Clyve seemed to disappear as I stormed toward Harlow and slapped her. Hard. The sickening sound of my palm hitting her cheek echoed throughout the hallway.

Harlow didn't see it coming. She shrieked, her hand simultaneously flew to her red cheek.

"That's for what you did to my father!" I slapped her left cheek. "And that's for coming over unannounced. If you ever come near to any of us again, I will make sure all of the cosmetic surgeons won't be able to fix your freaking face again!" My anger never dissipated despite what I'd done.

I still wanted more—I wanted to ruin their lives just like the way they did to me for years, but I was a better person than them, and I would never step down to their horrible lives just to get the satisfaction I wanted by hurting them.

"You will pay for this." She sobbed, trying to get Clyve's sympathy.

"Get out of here before I will call the security, Harlow." I turned my head to see Trace walking toward us.

"I can't believe you. You're turning your side against me to this self-righteous whore's side now," she said while still holding her cheek.

"I'm on no one's side, but what you did was wrong. You deserve more than just slaps, Harlow. You are a horrible person, and I am thankful I figured out before I make a terrible mistake of marrying you. You can't manipulate everyone anymore, and you better leave them, or would you rather Lyndon throws you both to the pit of hell? If he knows you came here to see Harry, you know what will happen. He warned you, but you don't seem to understand the consequences if you defy him, do you?"

"I will ruin your life!" she cried at Trace.

"Not if I will ruin yours first. You're nothing without Lyndon, you, and your pathetic mother! Get out of here before I will dial Harry's father, and let his security drag you out of this hotel. Your choice."

"This isn't over!" Harlow ran out of our sight toward the nearest elevator.

When she was gone, I rooted in my place and unable to think about what to do next. I could feel the color draining from my face. My chest tightened at what Harlow told Clyve. I didn't know how

would I face him right now. I didn't know what should I tell him first—to ask for his forgiveness, to admit the truth, or deny it instead.

Trace was right. I should have told him sooner before he figured it out from someone else. And it was too late.

I felt like a cheap—a whore. I was humiliated for allegedly sleeping with Trace. I earned money for giving pleasure—I was a cam girl. Rationally, what I did was for Keene. I would do it again in a heartbeat if I had to. What I had with him was just an agreement, but still, in the eyes of God it was infidelity—I slept with Clyve while I was married to him.

What worse could I have done?

I humiliated myself over and over again. This time, it was my fault. I was torn between good and lust, and I chose the latter.

The hallway went so dead silent, and I braced myself for what about to come.

“So it is true then.” Clyve's cold words made me shiver. By the tone of his voice, he fully knew my deepest dark secret.

And here I thought I was ready—it was bullshit. I was pretty sure I almost collapsed, and I couldn't do anything other than took every hurtful word he threw to me.

“Hear her out, Clyve. Hear us out, please?” It was Keene.

“Harry, I should go back to my room. Call me if you need anything.” Trace looked at Keene, then he faced Clyve who was still stiffed, wearing a flat look on his face. “Good to see you again, man.”

“I'll send someone to accompany you both to the hospital tomorrow. I need some air,” that was all he said.

“Clyve, wait!” I held his arm, but he let himself loose.

“I can't talk to you right now, Audene Westley, Harry, or who-the- fuck-ever you are.” Each word was like a knife to my heart. It hurt a lot, but I deserved every painful feeling I felt right now.

“You promised me.” My voice finally broke.

He turned to face me. I could not see any emotions on his face other than anger and disgust. “I promise to a single Audene Westley. To someone I already accepted her past, but not to Harry who is married to my only friend, and never after what I have just heard. The last thing I would ever break a rule was to sleep with a married person. I am not that desperate to be in a relationship or to get laid. I would rather sleep with a prostitute than allowing someone to commit infidelity for me.”

Chapter 22

Nark and Jealousy

CLYVE

I HAD been staring at the white wall for God knew how long until I was interrupted.

“See anything fancy other than a white paint?” Startled, my head snapped to the voice from my right—it was Skip.

Funny why he kept his hair long. He looked like a bloody biker, but I could not say he didn’t look good because I was his younger version.

Now, I wondered how he found me here, but of course, he was my brother, and sometimes I thought he implanted a micro tracker in my body.

“Fancy seeing you, brother.” I hugged him and forced a smile.

“Good to see you, too. Aren’t you supposed to meet Mum at the hospital?”

My throat choked up. I was still on the verge of processing the fact of what I found out yesterday. How in the hell did I miss something? A clue. How did I become so desperate in getting into a relationship? The last thing I wanted was to let someone commit infidelity for my own sake. And I just slept with a married woman.

She’s married. Bloody married.

I promised not to leave her, yet here I am running away like a complete idiot.

“I am here, ain’t I?”

Skip stared at me, eyes narrowing. He then stuffed his hands in his pockets and let out a deep sigh. Now, he would not let me go without throwing me a bunch of questions.

“Don’t ask. Aren’t you supposed to be in your high castle?”

“Can you stop being sarcastic for a while? What’s going on, Clyve?” The tone of his concerned voice formed a knot in my stomach.

He had nothing to do with my awful life than being a thoughtful brother, while I felt pathetic. I could be just like any bachelors who lived in luxury lives with no-strings-attached sex at their disposal. It just, it was not me, and I didn’t think I would be satisfied in that kind of living like the way they had.

“Apologies. I didn’t get a good sleep last night.” *Literally*. That encounter was keeping me awake the entire time, recalling that it might change the fact just a little bit. “I like this place though. I was thinking earlier that I’m done with *cheapcation* and I could use some help from a layout designer you can recommend to make this place possible within a month top.” Maybe changing the topic would help get rid of the awful feeling brewing inside me.

“How about a dinner with Arella tonight? Then we can discuss your ideas about this place. I actually have a surprise for you, brother.” Skip smiled—a smile that showed me he was the luckiest man on earth.

I rolled my eyes. “I bloody hate surprises. The last one I got was awful.”

“Fine. Rynna is in town.” His smile turned into a grin. “She stays with us for a while until her parents will come back from their honeymoon.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. Despite my circumstances, I needed to see Rynna in person.

“Thought her mum is pregnant.”

“Yeah, but Ferry just came back from the Middle East, and the OB allowed Anna to travel. So, Arella is thrilled to hear the news.”

“I would love to meet Ry, Skip. I’ll be there, thank you.”

“I know you would be that’s why I came over here since your phone is *off*. Don’t worry about this place. Eli will handle the interior designers. He’ll let you know.”

This place was big enough for an art gallery and half for a studio—it reminded me of my deal with Westley. Whatever her deal with Keene was not my business, and whatever we had didn’t matter anymore. *Did it?*

It fucking hurts. There was no way I would continue whatever she thought we had. *Or I thought* we had something until that something was ruined in a bloody heartbeat.

A let out a sigh and Skip did not miss it.

“Is something wrong?” Skip remained eerily calm.

“Tosh. Stop psycho-analyzing me.”

“I am not, but I can feel and sense whatever trouble you have right now. Is it about the woman with your landlord?”

I shrugged and let out a shaky breath. “Will you stop it? I am happy to see you. Can you keep it like that?”

“You are my brother—”

“Bollocks!” I spat, rage started to boil up. “Just naff it off! There’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I just want to help.”

“Well, I don’t need your bloody help, and when I do, I’ll let you know. I always did, didn’t I?”

“Clyve—”

“Enough! I am not so imbecile who can’t handle my own trouble if I ever have. How could I ever stand on my own feet if you keep interfering with my personal business? I am just two years younger than you for bloody sake!”

Skip looked taken aback, and it made me feel like someone just punched me in my gut. “I don’t mean it like that.”

“You mean exactly like that because you thought I am a pathetic arse and might want to piss or fall off the wagon again. I am still sober, ain’t I?”

“I just wanna—”

“Check me out because that was Dad told you before his last breath. Well, let me remind you, brother, he’s dead. Bloody dead! I am old enough to stand for my own goddamn awful life. I am trying to build something here that’s why I don’t want you coming and checking up on me every now and then. Let me prove it to you that I am a responsible bloke and not the old Clyve you knew. So, please stop whatever you’re doing right now because it fucking annoys me, and throwing me to the pit of that cabin didn’t do any good for me as well.”

“I am sorry.”

“You are not. I couldn’t even feel the sincerity coming from you.” I walked out before I said something that I might regret later.

A gust of cool air drifted towards me, and I was startled with the noises of the city—my reminders that I was not in that town anymore. And here I was, alone again.

I loved that arse but sometimes he made me a less capable human being. I couldn’t blame him for being himself, because he’d seen me in my darkest days, but I would never intentionally visit that hell again.

* * *

I DECIDED to show up despite my unpleasant encounter with my brother. I wanted to meet his daughter in person, and maybe this would be a better idea to disregard my problem for a while.

Westley and Keene sent messages, telling me the diagnostics went well. I was in the middle of typing her a reply, but I deleted it and turned off my phone instead.

She lied to me, and it bloody hurt. I didn't think I could forgive her for what she did, and I was such an idiot to fall for all her lies.

All I could do was to keep my words, and I even arranged a driver for them. I made my promise, and that was what I did.

"My God! I thought Skip was joking." Arella's eyes widened in surprise, and she was more beautiful than the last time I saw her. When was that? A few months ago. She was wearing a red dress and let her blonde hair down.

"Blonde, eh?" I smiled, and she kissed me on my cheek.

"Yeah. Skip said it looks good on me." *It is, indeed.*

"And you believe him?"

Before she could answer the shadow of my brother appeared.

"Good to see you again, brother." Skip sauntered towards us as I closed their apartment door behind me.

I gave him a brotherly hug. "Sorry for snapping at you this morning. I was just a little bit narky."

"No worries. Sometimes I forget how old we are right now." He chuckled. "Come here, and I want you to meet Ry."

Then a beautiful girl walked in wearing a pink corsage dress. There was no question she was not Skip and Arella's. She was a mix of them. Her hair, the shape of her face, and of course, those eyes.

I'd talked to her over the video cam and had seen her pictures, but her being in front of me was a justification and a living proof that she truly existed.

I knelt in front of her and took a closer look. Rynna felt shy all of a sudden, but able to smile at me.

"Hello, Ry. Do you still remember me?"

"Yes. You're Skip's brother, CC." She called me CC, and as much as I wanted to tell her to call me Clyve, but this was my first niece, and I was going to spoil her.

"Can I get a real hug and not a virtual one anymore." I held her hands, and she wrapped her arms around my neck, and I pulled her into my arms. "It's fancy and truly an honour to finally meet you, Ry."

She smelled sweet, and I remembered her showing me the scent her mother created only for her.

"Me too, CC," she mumbled.

* * *

The nosh was good, and I had a good appetite, or was it because I missed being with them? Nevertheless, I was stuffed. We wrapped up our dinner with their favorite homemade ice cream—strawberry cheesecake. And I couldn't say no when Ry already stuffed my mouth that I had to swallow it.

Rynna took a seat in between me and her father. My brother was quite contented of not letting his child know who he was to her, and they seemed closer and probably because they shared the same DNA.

Rynna's hand was tapping at Skip's knee as they shared something on the iPad.

"You're quite good at this, Ry. Nice one," Skip praised his daughter.

"Really?" Ry giggled and leaned against Skip.

"Yeah. I'm proud of you." He kissed the top of her head and wrapped his arm around her to pull her into a hug.

"Thank you, Skip."

"You're welcome, my heart."

My heart felt as if it ripped off piece by piece from my chest, and I had to stand up and walk away. I couldn't watch it anymore. I was jealous.

My brother had a perfect life, and I, on the other hand, had a terrible one.

"Leaving already?" Arella's voice came from my back.

I turned around. "Nope. They look perfect together as a father and daughter," I said honestly. "And she's lovelier in person, Are."

Her eyes glittered with pride. "I was worried Skip would take her away from them. I don't wanna break her heart, CC, and I couldn't ask for more because they love her as their own."

"He wasn't there and watched her grow up, but he could love her without hurting them and Ry. And trust me, Are, my brother would never hurt you again by doing such a thing." I followed her to their minibar.

Arella poured herself a red wine, gave me an empty glass, and carbonated bottled water. "I know, and I'm so relieved that Anna and Ferry gave us a chance to be with her. I am happy just to be with her for a few days."

"I'm ecstatic to both you." I squeezed her hand. "You make Skip happier. I couldn't thank you enough. As a brother, that's all I wanted for him, to see him this happy."

Bloody fuck! It hurt to admit, but deep inside, I knew he wanted the same thing for me, but right now, I had no luck in finding my true happiness.

"You should tell me then what's bothering you." Something in her voice that made me want to open up, but I was one hundred percent sure she would tell Skip about it.

"Owt."

"Don't owt for nowt me, CC."

I chuckled. "I just have a lot of things in my mind right now."

"And?"

"Just hard lines. Nothing I can't handle."

"I can feel your tension filling in the air, Clyve, and your constant sighing made me harder to breathe. I promise I won't tell your brother if that's what stopping you from telling me, or would you rather talk to a shrink about it? Trust me, it's not good to keep it to yourself. I've been there, and it's hard to even breathe and sleep every night."

"I'm good."

"Are you sure? Because it doesn't tell the same as I look at you right now."

"God, woman." I took a breath. "She's married."

Chapter 23

Lyndon Bloom

WESTLEY

CLOSING MY eyes, I took a deep breath the moment I climbed out of the cab.

In front of me was the perimeter stone walls covered with creeping ivy. The expansive double iron-wrought gate swung open like someone was already expecting my arrival.

Jackson, the security guard from the station tipped his head as a courtesy.

The two-story French summer house from the distance came to view with its outdoor living spaces for the guests. This was where everything happened.

The same layout of the well-manicured hedges and shrubs the last time I was here. I walked into the long and wide driveways until I reached the three black SUVs and a black Mercedes Benz parked in front of the house, showing me that my father was here. Two men in suits that I didn't recognize guarding the front door. Of course, my father was always heavily guarded like an effing Fort Knox.

"Good morning, Miss Bloom!" A mid-thirties man in a black suit and sunglasses with more than six-feet tall pushed the door open.

Another breath I let go before I stepped inside. The rich smell of wood and expensive perfume filtered the living room.

My father must have let someone renovate the entire area. The last time I remembered, the floor was made of granite, now it changed into slate stone flooring. The crown molding of the curve stairways looked classy compared to the previous modern designs my step-witch-mother had chosen.

"Your father is in his library, Miss Bloom," informed the guard. I wasn't aware he was following me until he spoke.

"Thank you."

We made our way to the hallway which was under the stairways. The aroma of cinnamon spice made my stomach grumble—a reminder that I missed my breakfast.

After I wrote a note for Keene, I left him while he was still sleeping in his private room in the hospital. The diagnostic evaluations were successful, but what was unnerving was to wait for the results. Compared to his condition last week, he seemed to be feeling better.

I started chewing my inner cheek the moment my father said to come in. How could I forget that deep voice? The guard left as soon as he pushed the thick door open, leaving me alone to meet the monster from my past. I quickly lost all the long speech I prepared to say now I was about to face him.

My knees weakened and my heart flipped over the moment our gazes locked.

Lyndon Bloom was in a three-piece suit that was tailored to fit his always physically fit body for a mid-fifties like him. He slowly rose from his seat with slightly wide eyes and half-opened mouth as if he was shocked to see me walking in toward him in the flesh.

Well, I wasn't expecting this.

I should be feeling happy at one point in my life that I was finally here with him because I never thought I'd live to say this day, but I didn't feel that way. Anyhow, it was bound to happen.

Trace stood up and genuinely smiled. "I'll leave you two alone." I didn't even realize he was with my father until he spoke.

My father merely nodded as he kept his gaze pinned at me.

"Thanks for doing this. I owe you one," Trace whispered and kissed my cheek before he walked out of the door.

Something deep inside me twisted the moment Dad stepped forward, closing our distance—it was guilt or something that I wasn't expecting to feel now he was at arm's reach.

He took a deep breath and pulled me into a hug. "I missed you so much, my little girl." Dad was squeezing me, and I was just there freezing in my place, and I could not say back how much I missed him.

The entire situation was like a dream. It couldn't be real because the last time I was in front of him, I was begging, and all I could see was the disappointment and disgust showing on his face, anger flaring his eyes. Right now, it seemed surreal. Maybe people were not always they appeared to be.

Maybe in some twisted fate, he still cared for me.

"I couldn't believe I would be able to hold you in my arms again, Harry." He pulled himself away, cupped my face, and took a look at me. His icy-blue eyes glittered with unsaid thoughts. He kissed my forehead. "You looked different, my little girl."

The last time I heard him calling me like this was when I first rode a horse without falling. He was so proud of me, and I was his most priceless gem until Harlow came to our lives. In a blink of an eye, my life fell apart.

“Good to see you, too, dad.” I stepped toward his desk—the same desk where I asked him to believe me that I did not sleep with Trace, but he never bent his twisted belief to give me a shot even I begged him with my life.

Walking into this place again hurt me so terribly—everything that night came reminiscing back like a skin disease—the more you scratched, the more it itched. All the hurtful words, the disgusted look they threw at me were just like yesterday.

And here I thought Harlow was on my side—I was utterly wrong. She did those things to get rid of me. How could I be so blinded with my judgment? How did I miss those clues? I was completely blindsided. If I slept with her fiancé, then why she didn’t even hate me?

I wandered around. The paintings were the same—they were mom’s favorite. The only things missing were those picture-perfect family photographs that those bitches were in. Dad seemed to believe now that they were all after his power and wealth.

“How are you, Harry?” he spoke again. I could feel the hesitation in his voice—I guessed his guilt was eating him up. Good to know he had still emotions left in him.

I couldn’t believe I heard my name again that I loathed. I had been Audene Westley for three years, and now I was back to Harriet Audene Westley Bloom again.

“I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

“How’s Keene? I heard he’s in the city for treatment.” Of course, now he heard everything about me. He wasn’t blind and deaf anymore.

I tried hard not to roll my eyes because everything he said seemed absurd.

“He’ll be fine.”

“Let me help him.” He did this for a living. People believed in him, trusted him, and respected him. To the public eye, my father portrayed as a perfect man, a perfect husband, and a perfect father, but what they were not aware of, was that daddy dear had his imperfections to the core. He couldn’t even solve and face his own family problems, but being a public figure, he hired someone good enough to hide his family’s little dirty secrets to make his name clean as a whistle.

“I don’t need your help.” I could be so lucky right now, but I couldn’t feel the luck—it was a curse. I knew he wouldn’t just hand it to me without a catch.

The face of a shock and hurt Clyve came flashing right to my sight. Despite what happened between me and him, he had a word of honor, and that was what I admired in him the most.

Still, it was a slap that in a freaking heartbeat, Clyve left.

I felt the searing pain—the pain that I thought I would never go through that again. *It hurts so much, knowing that no one will ever stay with me when things get tough.*

I faced my father. “I didn’t come here to reconcile or to have a little get together with you—to catch up for those years we missed, or to feel sorry for being a Bloom’s little spoiled brat, and for ruining your reputation, father.”

His face contorted with pain. I did not notice his graying hair was cut shorter than he usually preferred. He must have changed his hairstylist too.

“I came here to taunt you. To blame you. To let you realize what huge mistakes you’ve done over the years,” I added.

“I know I wasn’t the best father you wished you have—” Ridiculous!

“I did not wish for the best father. All I wanted was, to have a little attention from you since I didn’t get it from Mom. Anyway, it’s too late for that. You can still find a new wife and a new step-daughter to shoot a perfect family photo and a perfectly functional family *you wished you had.*”

Chapter 24

True Intentions

WESTLEY

DAD SIGHED shakily. “I get it you hate me for turning my back on you, for hurting you, and for not believing in you.”

“That’s a strong word, don’t you think? But you don’t have any idea.” I shook my head and glared at him.

Dad remained calm, but I could sense he was struggling to admit his mistakes because he used to be right all the time. “That was years ago, Harry. I lost you once. Let me atone for all my mistakes. Give me another chance. This time, I won’t let you down.”

“Do you think it would be easy? I like my life in that small town. I’m going back there once Keene is done receiving his treatment. Thanks to your wife, we suffered for years.”

“I want you to come back home with me.” He seemed sincere, but he would hate me if he knew what I had been doing for these past years. He must have been so clueless with what I did for a living because if he knew who the new Harry Bloom and the character I created, he would never be asking right now.

“Trust me, you don’t want me to be here with you, to be near you, Dad. You don’t want to taint your clean reputation because I am not who I was before. I am a disgrace to Bloom, remember?” I threw his words back, and I felt it right.

“It doesn’t matter to me now. We all did terrible things and made terrible mistakes. We’re only human.”

Wow!

“I wish I heard that from you three years ago. It wouldn’t have come to this.”

“I’ve been lost, worked hard to the point that I’ve been blinded by the power in my hand, and with all those people around me who I thought genuinely cared about me, I didn’t even realize that I already lost my own daughter.” His voice became quieter. He must be referring to his ex-wife, his beloved step-daughter, and the bodyguard he entrusted his life to. “It wasn’t the true happiness I’d been looking for, Harry.”

He looked down and he seemed had lost in his own thoughts. “I thought you’re dead.”

"You thought, but you never came and searched for me!" Tears formed at the back of my lids as I glared at him. No matter how hard I tried not to be emotional before him, but I couldn't help it.

"I did—" He reached out.

"But you never tried harder. And you hired the wrong people because you thought you could trust your bitch!"

"Language, Harry."

"Oh, I've done terrible things to even care about my language anymore, Dad." I wiped my tears with the back of my hand.

"It doesn't matter now."

"It does to me. Can't you see it?"

"I just wanted my daughter back. Come home with me, please, daughter?" His voice cracked. His eyes turned red. I guessed I underestimated his emotions.

Dad held my hands for the first time, and it felt comforting. He had emotional turmoil as I had, and if we continued doing this, I might end up giving up and throwing myself into his arms, because honestly, I missed him, and he was still my father after all.

"You must have hit your head pretty bad. You never begged." Snorting, I pulled my hands back.

"I am doing this for you, Harry. For us. I should have seen things before it turned me to be who I am today. I know our mistakes had made us different persons, but do you think it's not a good thing? It made us better people."

"How long have you known I'm still alive?" I wanted to know the truth. Everything.

"Weeks ago."

"And yet you did not come to get me."

"I have someone to look after you since then." *Of course.*

"After how many years, why now? I bet you want someone to stand by your side during your upcoming campaign, am I right?"

He shook his head. "I am not running again, Harry. I'm done. I dropped my candidacy."

"Wow!" My eyes widened in surprise and sarcasm. "You gave up just like that? Why? Is it all about your perfect wife and step-daughter?"

"No," he said without hesitation. He walked toward his liquor rack, grabbed a bottled of Whiskey, and poured a shot.

"Early in the morning?" I glared at him.

He ignored me and drained the amber liquid in one gulp.

"Then tell me what is it all about? Are you sick? Dying? Bankrupt? Did you lose in gambling?" I was harsh, but I couldn't forget what he did to me. Being here with him and couldn't get the answers hurt me even more.

"I don't gamble, you know that. I am not dying and business is doing great. I need peace of mind, a peaceful life before I die. I am not young anymore, Harry. I couldn't see the point of having power without having a real-life out of the public eye." He stepped closer and sat on his desk. He looked at me, and as if telling me to look through his eyes. I saw everything. He felt lost, vulnerable, in pain, and he wanted to be loved.

"What made you say that?"

"I thought I fulfilled something and had self-contentment that somehow I was able to help people. I could still help them in so many ways, but not in someone's terms. I may have power but it wasn't a real accomplishment. I was with those greedy bastards all these years, and they controlled everything. I couldn't even suggest my strategies. So what was the point if all I did was to follow their own agenda? I wasted my time. I knew you didn't like that kind of life, Harry," Dad spoke with disdain.

"I thought that was what you wanted."

"At first, yes. Then I had to pay the debts to those who funded my campaigns, and they didn't want my money in return. They wanted the impossible. And I regretted it for stepping on to that life because it changed me." His brows furrowed in frustrations. "I played dirty, Harry, but I don't want to die telling myself that I did the best things in life when the truth is I did nothing. I was a puppet of those greedy businessmen. I was a corrupt politician, and I could not live in that life again."

"Then weeks ago after the announcement, I felt I was missing something. Something that was supposed to be here in my heart," he added.

My brow arched. "I didn't expect you to feel that way after all these years."

"It's not too late to do the right thing. I hope it's not too late to make it up to you as your father, Harry."

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling offended. "Wow! You must have been hurt so bad that I could feel the desperation seeping through your veins."

"This has nothing to do with them. Not the hurt from throwing them out of my life, believe me. But realizing what I've done, losing my only daughter, and for not being there—"

"Cut the crap, father!" If I returned the time, this wasn't me. I was the black sheep, but I never yelled to my father. Right now, I was conflicted. "I don't even know the reason why I came here in the first place. I don't have reasons to come back anymore. I hated this place! Oh, maybe I wanted to see for myself that they're gone for good!"

"They're gone. As of this moment, my lawyers are processing the divorce, and they won't get even a cent from me."

"I don't care even if you give them all your assets. But father, what do you want from me exactly?" I was vibrating with anger that all he wanted was me to return. Why couldn't he just tell me the reasons why he was so desperate to have me back all of a sudden?

"I want nothing more than to have you back." I could feel the anticipation rolling in waves inside him, in his eyes, but it wasn't enough for me to prove he had changed.

"I don't believe you."

"Then allow me to prove it to you."

My brows furrowed, and I wanted to scream in frustrations. I shouldn't have come over.

This is ridiculous! A waste of time.

At the back of my mind, I wanted the truth—I also wanted to hear that he cared about me, that he still loved me despite my bad reputation as his daughter. I didn't know what was he up to this time because he didn't want a black sheep in the family. Then what changed? I was sure this had nothing to do with him, dropping off his candidacy. He didn't look sick either. Judging by the house and the guards he had, he was not closer to bankruptcy. If Trace was telling the truth that he transferred all his assets to my name, he could transfer them back, couldn't he?

He wasn't the father I knew after those bitches came to our lives. He changed, and so did I.

Then I realized I became entirely a different person—someone else. "If you can accept me that I let people pay me to show my naked body in front of the camera? then I will come back."

Chapter 25

Austen Westley

CLYVE

MY LIFE was back to normal. If being boring I could call it normal, then it was. I made progress forgetting Westley—bollocks—I was just fooling myself to believe I did.

I had not seen her since last week. Keene was staying at her family home since he left the hospital. The last time I spoke to him, he had the same diagnosis, though he was better now that he was under treatment.

Despite Westley and I were not in talking terms, I kept my promise. Good for Keene, and since Westley's father hired a private nurse for him, I knew he didn't need me anymore.

Until now, I couldn't figure out their marriage. Whatever it was, I thought it was better that way—the lesser I knew, the better, and the less the pain I felt. Again, bollocks! It still hurt bloody much.

I purchased a rundown real estate that would take months to be done its renovation. I used the back that served as the studio, and I spent half of my time there alone. In less than an hour, I was going to meet an artist, and if we ended up in good terms, he would work with me.

I just finished half of my acrylic painting of a cherry blossom tree in fall. I stood up from my chair and examined the result. I usually used a brush, but I tried a palette knife, and it looked good than I expected, but something was missing that I couldn't put my finger on it.

They said paintings were meant to be seen, interpreted, and to be praised, and beauty was always in the eye of the beholder. Maybe what I lack in this piece was some emotion, or it was the same element of chaos I wanted the people to see.

I sighed in frustration.

"That's pretty good. Maybe a little bit lacking passions or you painted it out of frustration because you wanted to finish it on time," said the male voice from my back with uncertainty as if he was afraid to offend me.

I turned around—he was the artist who posted his works on the art website. "Sorry, the door is opened. When I asked a man about you, he said I could find you here."

I needed an artist. The first time I checked his works, I knew he would be a great deal. I emailed him last week to bring his resume if he was interested to work with me, and he replied and willing for an interview.

I wiped my hand against the smock and held out. "You're younger than the photo in your profile."

He was around my height—a few years younger than me, athletic, curly chestnut brown messy hair, sharp brown eyes, and days' worth of scruff. He was wearing a plain white shirt and ripped jeans with leather and threads bracelets. He didn't look he came from California based on the address from his profile. His skin wasn't tanned, or he probably spent most of his time in the studio, painting?

I wasn't entirely expecting him to appear with his outfit for a job interview, but he wasn't looked like the type of guy who always followed the rules.

He shook my hand. "Mr. Linton, nice to meet you."

"Glad you made it. Nice to meet you, too. So, do you have a name other than West? Or is it something like a pseudonym?"

"Friends call me West. My name is Austen Westley."

"Pardon me. Did you just say Westley?" My voice made a pitch cry. My eyes widened as he caught me by surprise.

Bloody hell!

Is this some cosmic joke? Way to forget her, mate. Now, this could be a nightmare having another Westley in my life every bloody day.

"Yes. My mom's surname. Is there a problem?" He eyed me suspiciously.

"No. I happened to know someone, but I guess it's a pretty common name around here, yeah?" I removed my smock and hung it on the rack. "There's a café a few blocks from here. Let's talk about the job I am offering you when we get there."

"Sure. Thanks." Austen walked out of the studio after he handed me his resume.

After washing my hands, I grabbed my phone from the table and dialed Westley. I was tempted to hang up when it took a few rings and she hadn't picked it up.

"Linton." My heart hammered in my chest the moment she called my name. Her voice seemed lively compared to the last time we spoke.

Never a bloody day she didn't visit my thought, but she was married and she betrayed my trust, so it had to end one way or another.

I did a great job of ignoring her messages and her calls until she finally gave up. But not quite on forgetting her though. I still missed her. Terribly.

“Westley.” I locked the door after me, and Austen was inspecting the entire place. I realized they have something in common; their posture, the shape of their faces especially their lips. Dear, God.

“Linton, are you there?”

I blinked and shook my head. “Yeah, I’m here. Do you happen to have a brother?”

“Well, that’s so random for someone who ignored me for days. And you didn’t even say hi or ask me *how are you this fine day, Westley?*” she mimicked my accent.

“Just answer me, please? I hope this time you’ll answer me truthfully.”

There was a moment of silence from the other line, then she cleared her throat. “I’m so sorry for hurting you, Clyve. I wanted to explain, but you never gave me a freaking chance.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it, Westley.” My heart ached. I liked her a lot, and if she happened to tell me before I found out, I might have taken the risk because it hurt like hell knowing that we had something, yet we couldn’t be together.

“If you say so,” she said in dismay. “Well, I have a half-brother from my mom. When my father was busy making money and a named for himself, Mom had an affair, and you can fill the gap. I was still a little to tell you the details, but I remember they fought a lot. Mom chose to keep her pregnancy and left my father. That was how Austen Night Westley was born. I haven’t seen him for years. The last time I talked to him, he was in L.A.”

“I see.”

“What is it all about, Linton?”

“We’ll be at the Steaming Café in a few minutes. Might wanna meet someone there?”

“We? And who’s someone?”

“Why don’t you come and join us for a cuppa?”

“Linton?”

“See you there, Westley.” I hung up the phone and walked towards Austen who was leaning against the white wall. “My apology. I just called a friend.”

Chapter 26

Busted

CLYVE

THIRTY MINUTES later, I knew a few things about Austen. He seemed to be a cool bloke and didn't have habits other than painting.

"So, you've graduated from Uni with major in English, minor in Arts, but you didn't have a job other than a dog walker?" It sounded like an insult, and I felt like an asshole.

He swallowed hard and looked away.

Oh, shit! At least, I'm not alone with a life full of drama.

"Why a dog walker though?" I held the steaming mug tighter, and let the aroma fill my lungs.

"Look, I am not judging you, mate. I just wanna know a little bit about you. I want to trust you if we have to work together." *Because lately, it's harder to pretend that you know someone, yet you awfully know nothing at all.*

"My girlfriend died five months ago from a car accident. She was walking home when the two cars collided. Then it ended up crashing into her. She died on the spot," he said monotonously.

"I'm sorry for your loss, mate. I lost my dad as well, and I know how you exactly feel."

"Her dog, Cronus was my last gift on her birthday, and it's the only living thing she left for me." He paused. "While I walked Cronus in the park, he barked at the other dogs, and I thought he was lonely. So I started posting—"

Suddenly, we were interrupted by the chiming of the door, then she walked in with a white blouse, tight trousers, and a crossbody purse. Again, Westley took my breath away because she was wearing a radiant smile on her face.

Despite the pain growing in my chest, it was quickly compensated with excitement and longing as our gazes met. I couldn't say I was surprised that my feelings for her had never completely vanished.

"Linton." She pulled me into a hug, squeezing me tight.

I couldn't remember how did I stand up from my seat—as if I was expecting this to happen. Her embrace was warm and inviting, and I could sense that she missed me as well. I wrapped my arms

around her and inhaled her scent—the same smell that I used to love. The word used tightened my chest.

“Good to see you again.” That was the only thing I could say—it was so daft, but she rendered me so damn speechless.

She instantly pulled herself away and looked at me in the eyes.

“Really?” There was a hint of sarcasm, but before she could throw another, her gaze found the man in front of me. “Austen? Ohmygod!”

Austen threw himself into her like they had not seen each other for a long time. Well, literally, yes. Their embrace could only tell one thing—they were siblings.

“I-I t-thought you’re dead.” Austen’s voice cracked in the end, squeezing her more into a hug.

“Well, I’m alive, ain’t I?” she chuckled.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“Hiding?” There was amusement in her voice that I found myself chuckling.

“Not funny.” Austen cupped her face, inspected her, and kissed her forehead. “Jesus Christ! it’s real! You’re real! You’re alive.”

If I had not known he was her brother, I already ripped his hands off of her face.

Okay, mate. Let’s clear things out first. First, you don’t have the right to do that. Second, that’s her half-brother, and she’s married, so shut that archaic act out of your system because it doesn’t suit you. And lastly, you invited her to come over, remember?

“Let’s have a seat.” Westley took a seat beside me and smiled at Austen. “I can’t believe you grow up into a monster.” She was even wrinkling her nose, and I found it cute. “What’s with the hair and scruff?”

“Oh, come on, it looks cool on me, right?” *So, they’re close.* He was even waggling his brows, still smiling at her while I was still gobsmacked in my seat.

She laughed freely. Westley seemed to be a different person right now. “You look like a rock star.”

“Harry, I’m actually on a job interview with Mr. Linton.”

Westley turned her head, eyes searching on my face. “Oh, sorry for interrupting. He’s applying for what position exactly?”

“I need fresh artists in the studio. I saw his works, and they’re amazing. I thought I’d like him to work with me.”

“So, does it mean I’m hired?”

I raised my finger. “Not so fast, mate. Bring your painting to the studio tomorrow, and I’ll review your resume tonight. You need to paint for me on the spot.”

“Sure, man. Thanks!” he said excitedly. “I’ll be there.”

“Great.”

“By the way, how did you two meet?”

“It’s a long story,” Westley answered shortly.

“Would you like something to drink, Westley? And I think you two have a lot of things to catch up.”

“Why are you calling her Westley?” Austen asked with curiosity or more likely demanding an answer.

“It’s a long story,” we chorused. *Well, she has actually many names, and I don’t know which one is real, mate.*

“A long story, huh? That’s the second time in like two minutes. Interesting.” Austen looked more puzzled, shifting his gaze from me then back to Westley. “Huh! You two are sleeping together, aren’t you?”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Wow!” He leaned against the chair, crossed his arms over his chest, and scowled at us. “Mr. Linton said yes, and you, Harry said no? Which one of you is telling the truth the fact that I can literally cut the tension with a knife since she arrived?”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business, Austen,” Westley said defensively, looking at him as if telling him to stop prying.

Okay, this is getting awkward. I shouldn’t have invited her to come over. This was a job interview for Christ’s sake!

“Of course, you’re an adult, but I’m still your little brother. The last time I heard you’re dead, and now you’re in front of me. So freaking alive! So, cut me some slack because I wanna know why did you disappear and pretended to be dead?”

“I’m sorry—” Westley muttered, averting her gaze outside the glass window.

"Let me guess, it's another long story, huh?" Austen took a deep breath, seemingly regret his outburst. "Look, I just missed you. I'm actually mad at you right now. You're alive and you're back, but you still did not reach out to me. Why?"

"I'm planning to meet you. I thought you're still in L.A. I just needed a little time to get my life back. A lot of things happened in the past three years, and I don't think this is the right time for us to catch up since you came here for a job interview."

"I'm glad you're okay though. And I am more than glad to see you right here, right now. I mourned for you, don't you know that? But something deep inside me believed that you're still alive since you were declared as Death in absentia." He reached out to Westley and squeezed her hand. "I don't care if I'm not gonna get this job, but is he treating you right?"

I cleared my throat, my cheeks burning. "I shouldn't have told her to come if I am not treating her right, ain't I?"

"Something doesn't add up, man. Shouldn't you be holding her hand or kissing her when she arrived?"

"Austin," Westley warned and looked at me. "Sorry, I don't know he never changed. He's a little bit nosy and observant."

"A little bit?" I cocked a brow. "But, It's alright." *For a beautiful woman like you, I would do the same if you happened to be my sister. And thank god, you're not.*

"It's been years, Harry. The last time I saw you, you were different and I was barely eighteen." Pain flashed across his face. "I can't believe this."

"I know."

When I looked at Austen he eyed me intensely. "What?"

"You're in love with her."

Chapter 27

The Deal

WESTLEY

“JOIN ME over tonight.” I held his hands and squeezed them while I looked at him in awe—he grew up pretty fast into a handsome man, and I couldn’t believe he finished college on his own. He inspired me.

Austen shook his head slowly. “No, Harry. I don’t want you to get into trouble. The last time you came to see me, your father grounded you for a week. I can’t let that happen again.”

“That was years ago, silly.” I rolled my eyes. “He won’t do that again. Besides, we’re not gonna have dinner with him. He’s out of town until the end of this week.”

“So, it’s with Mr. Linton then?” His brow arched suggestively.

“Just for clarification, we are not sleeping together.” I was surprised to see Clyve’s reaction—he froze in his seat for a couple of seconds when Austen told him he was in love with me, but he neither confirmed nor denied.

“Let me rephrase, you were sleeping together.”

I looked down at our hands and nodded as a shot of fear of judgment twisted in my gut. “He didn’t know that I am married—”

“What the fuck?” he roared. His expression twisted into anger. “You’re fucking married? To whom? Then you slept with another man?”

“Language, young man. You are completely off the base.”

“Is that why you disappeared?” he continued throwing questions. “Because your daddy dearest didn’t approve your groom, then you flew to Vegas and married the man you barely knew, right? Like in dark twisted romance novels!”

“I married Keene for some reason.”

“Keene? Your best friend?” he scoffed and pulled his hands away. “What the fu—hell? What is this, Harry? This...” Then he threw in the air out of frustration. “...this kind of life you have. You are capable of so much more, yet look at you.”

“I said I have reasons,” I asserted.

“Well, there must be so fucking huge reasons on your sleeves, Harry. You may be a lot of things, but cheating with someone is not one of them.” He shifted in the passenger seat and stared blankly outside the windshield while his jaw clenched tight. He was going to hate me for this.

It took a few seconds for me to gather my thoughts. I didn’t want another shocking moment between us and I wanted him to know directly from me. He needed to know.

“I-I have something to tell you.” I blinked up the tears that threatened to fall and squeezed his hand again.

“I don’t think I can let it all sink in at one time. Give me a break, Harry. I think that’s enough for today.”

My chest clenched painfully. “I was supposed to come to you, but I didn’t want to drag you into my mess, and you were so young, Austen. You were doing good in college.”

“I get it, sis. I can’t help you that much while I was staying at the frat house, and who would want to stay with a bastard son?”

“Don’t you ever say that again. You didn’t choose that life, Austen—our mother did!”

“Well, you know she can’t take that back now, can she?” He shrugged.

I hated my mother for choosing him, but when I met Austen for the first time, I thought I found comfort and a real sibling in him until my father took that privilege away from me. Austen didn’t exist in my life, literally.

“I don’t want you to be like our mother.”

“Too late. I am already like her.”

“Do you love Keene?” His words were almost a whisper, and there was hesitancy in his question.

“Romantically?” I shook my head. “No.”

* * *

“GOOD MORNING!”

Keene turned his head from the breakfast table at the visiting lounge. My father made a deal just to make me stay with him for a while, and I took his bait—if I could give Keene a better treatment and had some privileges for us, so be it. And I got an Amex card—to compensate for the years I missed. Not bad at all.

“Morning.” He smiled. “What a lovely smile you have in there, sunshine.”

“Sunshine? How about my smile before? Was it like a storm? A twister? Or maybe a hurricane.”

He chuckled. "I think I fell asleep early last night. I didn't know what time you came home."

"I actually came back pretty early. I was in the neighborhood when I received a call from Clyve—"

His eyes lit up. "Clyve? That's great! So how did it go?"

I sat across the table. Allona, one of my father's staff poured coffee into the cup and offered it to me.

"Thanks." I smiled at her. She was around forty. Her hair was always tied neatly in a bun.

I didn't know why Dad chose older employees, but probably his way to suppress his temptation. Dad was still Dad. I bet, he had already a mistress somewhere.

"He didn't wanna know," I forced the words out because honestly, it hurt. He chose to be kept in the dark about my marriage to Keene than to know the truth.

"I'm sorry, Westley." He was still calling me by that name, and it only reminded me of how I met Clyve, but it somehow helped me saved the happiest moments I had back at that town.

"We're over with that sorry, Keene. I will still make the same choice I had years ago over again. Enough of that. The morning is so bright to be ruined by his ego. Anyway, did you take your meds?" I sipped my coffee.

He pointed at the bottles aligned in the tray. "It's not about his ego, Westley. It's his feelings. And I have a private nurse, remember? Thanks to your persuasive father."

"That's part of the deal."

"Don't ever sell your soul to the devil again for my sake."

"Oh, for you?" I stood up and grinned. "In a freaking heartbeat."

"Going somewhere?"

"Yep, to make another deal."

His gaze followed my moves. I didn't also miss the amusement. "Good luck then!"

"We're not gonna be alone, so there's no chance to push the issue. Austen will be there too."

"Wait, what did I miss?" His brows squished together. "Austen? The Austen Powers?" Keene knew about him, and he named him Austen Powers to hide my brother's identity.

"Yes. He's the reason why Clyve called me yesterday."

"How's he?"

"He's tall and grown-up—"

“Not Austen.”

“Oh.” I paused. I didn’t want Keene to feel bad, but he saw it anyway.

He leaned back against the chair and let out a deep breath. “We need to—”

“Not now.” I grabbed my tote bag. “I’ll be home late. You don’t have to wait for me, okay? Take care of yourself. I love you.” I kissed his cheek and walked away.

Chapter 28

The Eyes Say it All

WESTLEY

AFTER AN HOUR, I walked into the address Clyve gave me. The building was a little bit old, but the space was huge. There was nothing yet to see, but this would be great in a few months.

I was happy for him that somehow he quickly moved on with his life. Cut the crap. I was hurt that he didn't seem to care about me anymore, but this was my life now—people come and go. Those real and who cared for you were the only one who would stay, like Keene.

I pushed the door open that led the way to the studio. I let my eyes wandered. There were lightings, shelves of color-coded paint tubes, paintings on the wall, two easels on the other side. A table area with a dark couch at the corner with sketch pads, jars of pencils and paintbrushes, palettes, and two paper cups from the Steaming Cafe.

On my left was the opened window, at the far corner was a bookshelf and a plain white wall from my right. He probably prepared it for a mural.

A single bed with a dark blue sheet at the center caught my attention. Before I could take a closer look, Austen walked in carrying two canvases.

"Hey, sis!" He was wearing the same style as yesterday, but he changed from sneakers to work boots today.

"Oh, hey." I stepped closer to kiss him on the cheek. "Where's Linton?"

"Right here." His voice made my heart speed up in unsteady beats. He was carrying a tripod with his camera slung around his shoulder.

"Morning, Westley." He set the tripod and hooked the camera easily, then took a look at the angle without even looking at me. Great! "Perfect," he muttered. "I'll be here, and you can choose the angle you want, Austen."

Well, a deal is a deal, and I have to deal with him even if he's giving me the cold shoulder.

"Sure." Austen moved the wooden easel stand just a few feet away from Clyve's tripod, then he placed down an empty canvas.

I felt instantly out of place, at the same time, I was amazed at how they became instantly closed as if they did not just meet yesterday.

"Where's our model?" Austen asked.

"Right here," I sang, waving my hand.

Austen snapped his head toward my direction, staring at me incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," Clyve answered. "Don't worry, mate. She won't be posting nude," he said half-jokingly.

"Seriously?" Austen was still pinning his gaze at me.

"Yep." I forced a smile. "Do I really look that ugly to you?"

He chuckled. "That's not what I meant, sis. No offense, but do you even have experienced with modeling."

"None taken, but ouch. I made a deal with him. So, shall we?" I jittered.

Honestly, I was more nervous than in front of the camera, knowing I was going to have a photoshoot with Clyve. I didn't want to be a disappointment. Added to the fact that Austen was about to paint me, and he knew what was going on between me and Clyve.

I suddenly didn't know where to put myself. This was awkward. The least that I could do was to act like a professional model.

"Very well, then. There's a sheet inside the room, go ahead, and change." Clyve pointed to the door. "And I'll tell you what to do next."

Thirty minutes later, I was posing at the center of the bed with only a cream satin sheet wrapping around my body. My shoulders were bare, and so as my legs. I wore my hair down that cascaded at my back. I couldn't help but not tense while Clyve captured me in all angles.

Click.

Click.

I lost count of clicks. My shoulders started to stiffen.

He told me not to move—just my head, and whatever he told me to do so.

At the corner of my eye, I noticed Austen was sitting on the chair, crossing his arms over his chest with his lips pressed into a thin line.

He wasn't impressed

A few seconds later, he groaned. "You are not a statue, Harry. Show some emotions to that pretty face. Mr. Linton told you not to move, but it doesn't mean you show us your emotionless expression."

"I'm already numb."

I was sure I heard Clyve groan.

"That's not it. For the love of God, express something through your eyes—your passion, loneliness, love, desire, even your anguish. Look at Clyve." Clyve stiffened when Austen mentioned his name, but nothing could stop my brother. "Think about him as if it's just the two of you alone in a dim-lit room while you two are looking at each other, touching at each other, baring your souls..." My mind went to the scene Austen was creating. My body instantly responded, my breathing started to quicken. I could feel my nipples hardened and poked against the thin satin sheet. The heat started to burn my skin, rushing my neck up to my cheeks. I blinked and stared at him in disbelief. "Wait a second. Seriously, Austen?"

There was no way I could do that because right now I felt embarrassed. My skin was burning further the way Clyve was staring at me through that lens as he focused his camera on me. I could sense it, and I did my best not to squirm while every fiber in my body was aware of the intensity of his stare. If my brother was not around, I would be happy to oblige and flirt with him.

Unfortunately, we were not alone.

He stood up. "Yes. I need a beautiful model to paint, and I want those emotions and not the reluctance you are showing to us right now."

When I looked at Clyve, he seemed to agree with Austen.

I pressed my lips together before I spoke. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Have a problem with that?" my brother asked.

"Yes!" Scowling, I fisted the sheet, stood up, and stormed away toward the room. "I quit!"

"Westley!" Clyve called me urgently.

"I said I quit!"

"This is a bad idea," I murmured and squeezed my eyes shut as I leaned against the door.

"Westley?" Clyve knocked softly, and he just made the situation more difficult for me.

"Give me a minute."

"Open the door, please? Let me in."

Oh, God!

I tucked the sheet securely around my chest and took a deep breath before I pulled the door open. “I know, it was stupid and childish and unprofessional. I’m sorry. I promise I’ll do my best next time. It’s just Austen, he gets under my skin. Just give me a few minutes to calm down, okay?”

Clyve seemed surprised by my admission. His eyes drilled into mine, unblinking—the same gaze that haunted me when I thought of our nights together. I was right after all, and he didn’t even bother to hide the emotions clouding in his eyes.

“And seriously? You could just send the address through text, Linton. You don’t have to bother it through email unless you blocked me. Oh no, you called me with your number yesterday.” I crossed my arms over my chest, and his eyes landed to my chest, right to my hard nipples poking against the sheet.

I raised a brow. “Or unless you want to keep everything between us nothing but a business deal?”

He let out a deep breath. “Look, Westley...” He seemed to have trouble forming his words—he scratched his head and pursed his lips tightly.

“Linton—”

He stared at me in the eyes long enough that made my brain freeze. The shiver started to travel down my spine and unfurled to every cell in my body.

“Bloody hell,” he uttered before he grabbed the back of my head.

Chapter 29

In Sickness and In Health

CLYVE

She's a tease.

I DIDN'T know what was I thinking. My skin tingled with lust. Obviously, I was never over with her. *I am stuck in this loop of raw emotions.*

The moment she came with only a silk sheet covering her chest, I wanted to drag her back to the dressing room, kiss her, ravage those lips, suck those sweet baps, and fuck her until I told myself I was insane of ignoring her.

She was about to break every self-control I had left. The only thing I could do was to bolt out through the back door with a bloody hard-on, unsatisfied.

"Bloody shit," I whispered, grabbed the back of her head, and leaned over. Then it hit me hard before our lips touched.

She was married.

Temptation.

Professionalism.

And Austen was waiting outside.

Jesus!

I had to let her go and took a step back. Disappointment flashed over her face, but I couldn't let temptation conquer me. Not again. I was better than that.

I pressed my palm and forehead against the concrete wall and took some deep breaths.

"Is everything okay?" Austen's worried voice made me still.

Damn it! *I'm losing all my shits.*

He already knew that I and Westley had something. What I didn't know was if he knew that his sister was married to her best friend when we slept together. It clenched my gut with guilt.

"Just give me a moment, mate." I raised my hand. "I'm okay."

"Okay, we'll be waiting for you. Take the time you need."

A moment later, the door shut close.

I dialed Arella.

“Hey, handsome.” Her voice was lively, unlike mine.

“Hey, you. I thought you believe that my brother is the only handsome man you’ve ever seen.”

“You are his brother, and you know that you are his spitting image.” I could feel she was rolling her eyes. “So, how’s the gallery?”

“I couldn’t say it looks like one, but it’ll get there,” I answered proudly. “In fact, I have a new artist with me right now, and we’re having a photoshoot. I think he has potential.”

“And?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. She seemed to know that this call is not just to say hello.

“Clyve?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I can sense that something is not okay. What’s wrong?” I hate that she was worried. But for fuck’s sake, I’d rather open up to her than to my brother or a shrink. And I needed to spend my time working than talking to a therapist right now.

“I like the artist, but do you think it would affect our professional relationship if I will hire him?”

“Why do you think so?”

“I was excited when I found his works posted on the website. I emailed without asking his full name, and I wasn’t aware that he’s her half-brother.”

“Wow! Half-brother of the married woman—”

“For the love of—can you please stop saying that word?”

Arella laughed. “What’s wrong with the word—fine. But, wow! Small world, huh? You are a good person, CC. What happened back there is not your fault. You were not aware. Don’t beat yourself up. If you’re over with her and not seeing her anymore, I think you can hire him if you like his work. Does he know?”

“I wanted to believe he’s like a mentalist. The first day I met him, he figured out quickly—”

“Wait a sec. What did I miss?”

“I called Westley if she knew someone by the name of Westley, then she told me the story. My mistake was, I told her to come over—”

"It was not a mistake, CC. It's like an adrenaline rush, and it came out naturally. You probably wanted to see her. And let me tell you this, you won't just call someone to come over if she doesn't mean to you, and she came over because she probably wanted to see you, too." Her words were a punch to my face. She was right. I wanted to see her, and yes, after the lies she did, I didn't hate her—I only felt like an arse.

"Thanks. I got to get back to work."

"Okay, good luck. You know that I love you, right?"

"I know. I love you, too." I hung up the call and rubbed my temple.

After taking a frustrated breath, I marched towards the door only to stop abruptly. Westley was already standing in front of me, fully dressed with a deep scowl on her face.

Shit!

"What's wrong, Westley? Are you leaving already?" I asked as I stepped closer to her. Every step I made, she was also stepping back.

"You're with someone." Her chin trembled. "Already? Wow!"

My brows furrowed. I was beyond confused. "With someone?"

"It doesn't matter." She looked down. "I-I thought, I can do this." She shook her head. "But what we have is too much to ignore, and you ignoring me is too much to bear. I can't just pretend that I don't wanna jump into you every time I see you. I'll pay every penny you cost for Keene."

"I don't need your money, Westley. I need you as my model, and I won't accept another replacement either by money or a person. We have a deal, remember?"

"I can't do this. I'm sorry."

"No, you are not. You can go home now, but we still have to continue it tomorrow. Austen will be here, and as long as I can't capture the right angle he wants for his painting, we still need you for that job. Or would you rather post for him for hours?"

"Who's she?"

My brow pinched, studying her. "Who's she?"

"The—" She bit her lip. "—woman." Then a single tear fell from her eye.

Fuck! *I'm screwing this up.*

I had to look away. If I would close our distance to wipe it, I would be so tempted to pull her into my arms, and I knew myself. She was my weakness, and the moment I would feel her against mine, I couldn't or wouldn't let her go.

"Good for you." Her voice cracked. "I-I'm happy for you, Linton."

"Are you sure about that? Because it doesn't tell the same thing of what I see right now." I propped my hands over hips, pressing my lips together to contain my anger towards myself.

"You already moved on, I get it. You left me, but you promised me that you wouldn't. I guess I should believe now that promises are meant to be broken."

"Because we can't be together. Damn it, Westley! You lied to me. You betrayed my trust. You kept me in the dark. Keene was just at that house while I was shagging you! Who insane people would do that?"

"So, that was just shagging, huh? It meant nothing to you?"

"Jesus! You know what I mean."

"I actually don't."

Chapter 30

A Brother's Advice

CLYVE

I LOOKED UP in the sky. The sky was better than my emotions—it was clear and blue. I couldn't just wash it out from my system. I was terrible in moving on especially when someone I thought what we had was more than just sex.

"Why—" I breathed deeply. I felt like I was going to have a panic attack. I couldn't even breathe on how it hurt me a lot. "Why did you think I was so hurt?"

"I was hurt, too."

"Well, not the way I feel. If you can cheat on someone—"

"Damn you!" She pushed me on my chest, causing me to wrap my arms around her. "I am not cheating on Keene! I married him because that was the only way I could help him."

"But you are still married, Westley. That's the truth. Marriage is not just a piece of paper. It's sacred. And you made a bow, remember? To have and to hold, for this day forward, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health—"

"You are so damn righteous that you don't understand."

"It doesn't matter if I understand or not. I can't be with you. Just so you know, I haven't moved on. I can't even get over you even if I tried. I don't know why or how, or I just don't wanna let you go. I haven't slept with anyone after you. I almost kissed you in that room because I was so tempted that made my head buzz, burned my skin, constricted my lungs, and the funny thing was, I couldn't do it because it was wrong. I wished I was like those people who could sleep with anyone with no strings attached. But I felt guilty. I felt like I cheat on you when I think of going and fucking someone else. That's how much you mean to me. Until at this very moment."

* * *

"YOU LOOK like shit." Skip placed a bottle of beer and a can of soda on top of my counter. "Do you sleep well?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Do I look like a bloody zombie?"

He grinned. "You're tense. Something's wrong with what you're working on?" I had a theory that Arella sent him here. He came unannounced most of the time but never brought beers because he knew that was the last thing he would take with him.

"Nah." I rubbed my palms against my jeans. "There was no progress. I still need advertisements once the whole place is renovated. I have a lot of things to do, Skip, and I need to focus. I need to convince those people who need therapy to engage in art than wasting their lives on drugs, depression, and keeping their horrors to themselves. Yesterday, I contacted another artist if he's willing to post his works, but I might still need your help."

He smiled. "Might?"

I rolled my eyes and drunk my soda. "You are the famous CEO," I quoted in the air. "You might know some famous artists who are willing to show up and put their paintings into the exhibit during the launching. For free."

"Absobloodylutely. You don't have to worry about that."

"Just let them know that the gallery is not all about me. I might profit from the sale, but half of it would go to charity."

"You're such a good person, Clyve. I'm so chuffed." He gripped my shoulder. "Now, let's talk about the love who put that tension on you."

"Pardon me?"

"Don't lie. Not your strong suit anyway. I know you and Arella are talking. I might not be good at giving advice and probably half of it is just rubbish, but come on, brotha. You never kept secrets from me." He took his phone from his suit pocket and typed. "Or I will call Mum to come over."

I grabbed the phone from him. "It's the same woman from that town you and Are threw me to."

"Brill." He crossed his arm over his chest and rubbed his beard. "Then what's wrong?"

"She's married."

Skip's posture stiffened, jaw dropped dramatically, then blinked.

"See? That's why I didn't wanna tell you." I looked away and sighed with frustration.

"How long have you known?"

"That she's married? After we arrived here."

"And this relationship started since you were there?"

I nodded.

"Is she sleeping with her husband. I mean, are they still together?"

"This is so awkward." I grimaced at the thought of Keene was being balls deep with Westley.

"Because you made it awkward. Tell me, brotha."

"You are as nosy as Arella. To answer your question, I don't know if they're sleeping, okay?" My voice raised. "The bloody I want to know. Aren't they supposed to shag? They're married for bloody sake!"

"And the problem is?"

"I like her!" I stood up and paced around my kitchen. "Sobloodymuch, and she likes me as well."

"But they're still living together."

"This the worse pep-talk I ever have. No one would suspect them because they look like brother and sister, or just best friends." I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration as I let my mind flip through pages. "I never suspected them. I never saw them snogging. They clearly care for each other, deeply, and Keene didn't seem to care that I was showing interest towards Westley—"

"Hold on. Your landlord is Keene, right? And the husband of the babe you like?"

"Yes. They don't wear wedding bands."

Skip chuckled. "I see."

"What's so funny when I can't think straight, Skip?"

"You're funny, brotha."

"Then I found out Westley's a rich kid. They call her Harry Bloom."

"Harry Bloom? How is she related to Lyndon Bloom?"

I stared at Skip with pure shock. "You know her father?"

"Yes. The district attorney for three years turned district representative, of course. I met him once. I heard he has no plan to run for 2021. You should probably use your Google search, Clyve. It's helpful." He scratched me with his hypocrisy.

"Stop mocking me. Shouldn't you be giving me your rubbish advice?"

"I told you my real expertise is not giving advice, but one thing I can tell you is to follow your guts, Clyve. I wonder why you haven't encountered Lyndon Bloom through your social media. Anyway, did you check Ry-Ry's Insta? Sweet baby, my girl just posted her picture with Arella. Love that girl so much it bloody hurts."

I looked at Skip. His different colored eyes were glossy with pride and love towards his girls. He definitely loved his child and Arella, no doubt. *His life is perfect.* He had everything. And he just shoved it right into my face.

“So, tell me something about Westley.”

Before I could start, the doorbell went off. Saved by the bell.

Chapter 31

Marriage of Convenience

CLYVE

“KEENE, WHAT a surprise?” We hugged each other. “Please, come in.”

I wasn’t expecting to see him at my door. He didn’t have the off-color anymore and seemed to look fine.

If I may have guessed, this had something to do with what happened between me and Westley today.

“I apologize if I just drop by your apartment unannounced. I called Ms. Rogue and asked for your address.” Arella must have informed the doorman ahead of time, allowing Keene into my apartment floor.

I shook my head. “Don’t apologize, mate. I’m glad you drop by.” I closed the door and swallowed. My stomach churned suddenly, and I wanted to throw up because I think I might have a few ideas on why he was here and how this visit would end.

“Thank you, man. I won’t stay long.”

I led him to the sleek and contemporary living room. “Have a seat. Can I get you something—”

“Don’t hassle.” He looked around from the huge abstract art on the wall to the metal panel fireplace, and the modern art skew furniture.

“Nice place.”

“Thanks.”

A modest cough to my right drew my attention.

“Clyve.” Skip walked closer.

“Oh, hey. Keene, this is my brother, Skip. Skip, my friend, the cabin owner, Keene Storm.”

I rubbed my palms against my jeans, afraid Skip would blurt out about what we talked earlier.

Now that Skip knew about him and Westley, it made me guiltier. He knew Keene was sick, yet I took advantage of his illness and slept with his wife. It was not entirely my fault. If I had known they were married, I would have never slept with his wife. Still, the guilt was killing me. And I had a whack job staying away from her.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Linton." They shook each others' hands.

"Just Skip. Fancy meeting you too, Keene. I heard so many good things about you. How's your wife?"

My breath held in my lungs. Bloody hell. I brought my shaky hand on my forehead as the word wife hit me in the chest.

"Oh, Westley. She's fine. Thank you for asking." He nodded, glancing around uneasily.

"Hope to see you again, Keene." Skip felt Keene's uneasiness almost immediately. "I let you and my brother catch up. I have to go to pick up Arella from her friend."

I wished he could just keep it to himself. But Skip was Skip, a little bit overprotective of me and my feelings. I knew for sure he must think of something that Keene was aware of my affair with Westley, yet he didn't stop his wife.

Skip turned to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Walk me out, brotha."

When we reached my door, he eyed me intensely. "That's the husband?"

"Your voice," I hissed. "And yes, he is." I had to look away.

"And he's sick," he whispered.

I wanted to roll my eyes because he was aware, yet he had to ask. "Yes."

Skip nodded slowly in understanding. "We'll talk later. Call me if you need anything."

"Sure." I let out a shaky sigh.

"Hey. None of these is your fault." *None my arse*. His stern expression melted into a smile. "You better go and talk to him. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't important. If he hurts you call 911."

I burst into laughter. "He would never do that."

"Just be careful, okay?"

"You sound like Mum."

He threw me one last look before he walked away.

I drew a deep breath before I walked to the living room. Keene was still standing with his hands on his pockets.

"Have a seat, mate. Are you sure I can't get you something to drink?"

Keene remained standing and smiled tightly upon seeing me. "You probably know why I'm here."

My stomach twisted again. I shrugged and looked down. "I have a few ideas." *Probably, to shove it in my face how asshole I am.*

"I have to go back." His tone laced with sadness and somewhat frustration. "Westley's father paid a construction to renovate my place as part of their agreement."

"That's great, mate." Whatever their agreement between Westley's father, I was not interested in knowing.

"And she's gonna be here for a while. I love that place you know that, and that's the only thing I have left from my family."

"So, Westley won't be coming with you, huh?"

He shook his head as sorrow glimmered in his eyes, and I felt guiltier. Something more was coming than what he just said, and the time seemed to slow down between us.

Why did I have to feel like this? It bloody hurt because Keene was a friend, and I betrayed him. But that thought of him going back alone caused hope to grow inside of me when I shouldn't.

"What is between me and Westley—"

I stopped him. "It was my fault, and I ask for your forgiveness. The—" I breathed through my nose. My chest constricted with so much guilt and pain that he was feeling this way because of me. Unintentional or not, I still betrayed him. "The moment I found out, I ended up everything. I'm so sorry, Keene. You are my friend, and I would never ever cross that line if..." Jesus! It was even hard to say. "...if I knew you were married to her."

"Don't apologize." *What?* "For three years, she had never been with a man, and when you came, I could see the light in her eyes when she looked at you. I couldn't take that happiness away from her."

"W-what do you mean?" I asked with uncertainty because I didn't entirely get it.

"I pushed her because I knew that she would be happy with you, and I have never seen her that happier. I also knew she felt guilty to keep what tied us together from you, and she was scared of your judgment."

"Y-you knew?" I stuttered in shock, my eyes enormous. "But why?" I opened my mouth to say more, but I had difficulty in finding words. I let out a breath and turned away to gather my thoughts. When I turned to face him, I pointed my finger at him. "You two are married, aren't you?"

He nodded to confirm.

Fuck. Me.

“Are you with someone? Did you cheat on her? Are you gay?”

His eyes widened. “I am not. Never. No.”

“Then why? Don’t you love her?”

“I love her so much. She’s the only one I have, Clyve.”

“Then why the bloody hell did you do that? Can’t you make her happy?” It wasn’t my business, but I think it was already mine since he did it on purpose, and I was still bloody confused. “Do you have dysfunction?”

“She’s my best friend—”

“And your *wife*,” I spat out.

“Yes, and we never slept together.”

My lungs suddenly expanded when I shouldn’t have felt like that. That was so selfish of me, but I was relieved and still confused.

“The last time we kissed was during our wedding. That was only show off because we were in front of the judge, and it didn’t feel right.”

“I don’t think I wanna hear the details.” I glanced away and drew a deep breath before I decided to ask him. “Why are you exactly here, Keene? You knew all along that I slept with your wife, and yet, it was okay with you. Don’t you think you should throw punches at me and loathe me for betraying you?”

“It’s is a marriage of convenience.”

Chapter 32

Tonight

CLYVE

“YEAH, SURE IT is, and still feel guilty as fuck. That’s why I don’t sleep around as rich kids do, Keene because this is what I don’t like—to sleep with a woman in a relationship. Yet here I am, the only person I wanted to sleep with is bloody married, and worse to my friend. Do you know how odd that sounds and how does it feel like? It’s terrible! Every time I looked at Westley—God, I wanted to—” I blinked and swallowed the lump in my throat. It was clear that my attraction to her was off the chart, and our connection was nothing like I ever felt before with women.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

I groaned. “This is all wrong. I wanted to take her over and over again, and I wanted to hurt myself at the same time because she is your wife. It fucking hurt that she didn’t tell me. That I let her commit infidelity.”

“I want to make things right. That’s why I am here. I held too much of her life, needs, and wants. I know deep inside she wanted to have a life—the way she used to do. I can’t let her give that up because we tied to this marriage. She felt responsible for me where I should be the one responsible for her because I am her husband. Because I was sick, weak, and no one would take care of me, she thought that was the right thing to do. She had privileges. Her fund could treat me when I told her that I’d rather die than putting my place on the market. Then her fund was cut off, and we left with nothing. I couldn’t even work and do something for the cabin—”

“Because they thought she was dead.”

“Yes. Her step-mom manipulated her father to believe that she was dead. At first, we withdraw her money from another state so that they couldn’t find us. Then someone froze her account and left us nothing. I was already sick at that time.”

“I’m so sorry that you have to go through that.”

“You were aware that her family accused her of sabotaging her step-sister’s engagement party. You have to know that Westley would never do that.”

Yeah, and how about now? Isn’t it cheating?

“I remember that woman.” How could I not? She was the one who dropped the bomb on me.

"Everything fell apart when I became sick. Every time we went to see doctors, they would only treat me if I could pay a huge amount of bills. Westley married me to save the cabin because I would rather take the cabin to the ground rather than to give it to my relatives who treated me like a rug. Marriage was her idea, and she promised me to keep the cabin if something bad would happen to me. And she thought she would put my name as her beneficiary in her insurance."

"This is too much to wrap my head around it, Keene." I paced back and forth.

"Our married is only in papers, Clyve. I couldn't destroy our friendship. As odd as it sounds, but she's like a sister to me, and she sees me as her brother."

"It sounds quite atypical." My heart swelled that Westley would do anything for the person she cared about, contradicting to what I believed that she was selfish. *But she still lied to me.*

"I know. Every time I mentioned about divorce, and she just pushed the topic aside. Now that her father is back in her life, all she wants is to give me all the access to the tertiary treatment. Her father even hired a private nurse for me just to keep his daughter closer to him."

"So, you came all the way here to tell me about your marriage?"

"Yes, and I am also leaving tonight. I will send her the divorce paper once I settle everything back home."

I shook my head furiously. Jesus Christ! His idea would break Westley. "This is the terrible idea I heard in my entire life. If she pushed that topic aside, how do you think she would feel if you left and sent her a bloody petition? You will break her heart, Keene. Get me out of this, be a man, and fix your fucking mess!"

"She'd done so much for me already. No matter what will happen after tonight, we're still friends, and it feels like I am the one who's holding her life. I'm fine now, and her responsibility toward me is over."

"Does she know you're here?"

Keene looked away. He didn't have to answer me anymore because it was obvious he sneaked out.

"Does she know that you're leaving tonight?"

"No." I could feel the guilt he was carrying, but I had a lot on my own to make him feel better.

"This is a terrible idea. You came here, and let me guess, you left her a note that you're leaving, and I am the only person who is aware. Now it's my responsibility to keep your secret, isn't it? Are you bloody insane?" I pointed to the door. "Go home, and be that man to your wife because I am not doing this horrible idea with you!"

"I am sorry, Clyve for putting you in this situation. I just want you both to be together." His words didn't hold any bite. He made it pretty clear that even Westley couldn't stop him.

"This is not supposed to be this way, Keene. Maybe I and Westley are not meant to be like you are trying to push us together. Stop playing matchmaker because you are terrible at doing your job. Just don't put me in this situation because I have too much guilt in me that would last a lifetime."

"You two suffer too much because of this hoax marriage."

"That is not a hoax."

"It is, Clyve. If I knew this marriage would hurt both of us I wouldn't have agreed to her suggestion. And I would have fixed this before you came into her life."

"You can't do this to her, mate, and you know her better than anyone that if you do this, you're going to hurt her."

"I'm sorry, but I made up my mind." *Of course, you do.* "Do me a favor to please take care of my best friend."

"Keene." I let out a frustrated growl when he started to walk away. "This is insane!"

Once he reached the door, he looked at me and pleaded, "You are the only person who able to break her wall. She'd suffered too much already. Please, don't wait for her to restore it because she might not welcome anyone into her life for good."

Chapter 33

Goodbyes

WESTLEY

I WOKE up late. I had a drink with Austen last night after dinner. I was thankful he came home with me without protest, or I did not give him any choice as I was too drunk to drive, or at least that was my entire plan.

I walked down the hallway toward the kitchen only to freeze in disbelief, staring at my father in front of Austen.

Since my mom's affair and chose Austen over him, he swore to put my brother's life in hell if he ever saw him again, yet something shifted in the air, and the scenario in front of me was not what I ever expected to find in the morning.

"Dad, I thought you wouldn't be here until Monday morning." I walked closer to my brother who was flipping the pancake.

"Hey, sis. Morning." He leaned down to kiss me on my cheek.

"I came back early, and I found your brother was criticizing those paintings on the walls." Dad didn't look at me, but I could sense the smile in his voice that I'd never heard in a very long long time. "Pass me that salt."

"Where's Keene?" I grabbed the salt and passed it to him.

When none of them seemed to hear me anymore, I walked away. I was at the door when my father called my name.

"He went home, Harry."

Ice crystal formed in my veins as I slowly turned around to face my father. "What did you say?"

"He called me last night—"

"And I don't know about it, why? Did you threaten him?" I glared at my father. My heart was already thudding with fury.

He looked taken aback by my accusation. "Why would I do that? I did everything to have you back. I know if I cross one thing that you love, I end up losing you." He gave a sideways glance at Austen who stopped from his chore.

“How about you?”

Austen shrugged. “I don’t know anything about it, sis.”

“Give him some time, Harry,” my father said.

“Then what? For how long? He could be dead by that time.”

“He will continue his treatment, Harry. I already arranged a flight for his nurse, and she would be there in the afternoon. She will report to me if Keene won’t be feeling well.”

Tears misted my vision as I blindly stared at my phone screen. I realized he was leaving me. When he couldn’t convince me to file for divorce, this was how he thought to solve our issues since I just set aside every time he suggested.

I dialed his number, and it went straight to his voicemail. Great. It was all my fault for why this happened between us. I let my lust over Clyve control my mind.

All my life, being with Keene was the best thing I ever decided even our lives just turned upside down with his illness. I’d never been certain he was the only person who never left me, yet I was wrong.

All the people in my life were but temporary. When I started trusting them, all they did was broke my heart and left me nothing but heartaches.

“Sis?” Austen was already gripping my arms, and I wasn’t aware that I was already shaking to cry until he pulled me into a tight hug.

“It’s okay. We can get through this. And it’s not that we don’t know where to find him, do we?”

“It’s all my fault,” I said between sobs. I’d offered and gave him everything just to prolong his life so that we could spend more time with each other. I did something that I thought I couldn’t do. I made a deal with the devil, and I took the bait my father had offered just to see the smile on his face again. Still, he left me when he was the only person who mattered to me.

“I understand him, and so do you. Just give him some time alone.” Austen was rubbing my back when I pulled away from him.

I shook my head. “I can’t do this right now.” I stormed away from them while they were both calling my name.

* * *

I WAS TRYING to recall the situation, and I realized that all this time, what he had been doing was to push me out of his life. He may not tell it right to my face, but he must be fed up babysitting

a spoiled brat. I may be his wife, but it was nothing but paperwork. I didn't think of his needs, and all I thought was myself.

I couldn't find any other reasons. When he couldn't voice it out to me, he suggested a divorce. I thought it was because of me and Clyve. I'd been misled all along.

I'd cooled down a bit on my way to the studio.

I found Clyve scrolling on his laptop, and he hadn't noticed me yet. My heart leaped to my throat just thinking that we were alone. At the corner of my brain, I didn't come here to pick up what we left off. He'd moved on, and I should be doing the same.

"Do you know anything about Keene's plan?"

His back went rigid before he turned around. "Westley."

I wasn't expecting to see the glittering sadness in his eyes. "Why am I not so surprised that you know about it, too?"

Clyve stood up and shook his head. "I didn't agree with his idea of keeping it from you—"

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"I wished I could, Westley, and I should have stayed away from both of you. Your problems should be between you two alone. I can't get in the middle. I'd done so much trouble already, and I have enough regret in my life."

"Yeah, because you already moved on. You are the reason why he left, don't you know that? And you are the reason why we are in trouble in the first place. So, it's too late for you to not get involved because you already are."

His eyes narrowed at mine. "Because you lied to me. You used me, Westley. Your decision of lying to me is the reason why your marriage is in trouble. Don't put your blame on me. I may be one of the reasons because I wasn't aware that I was sleeping with a married woman, but shouldn't you be blamed? Wake up, because you should be doing that to yourself instead."

"He left me because he believes that I have a future with you. He thought you are the right person for me. If you didn't go to that place, maybe our friendship was still intact. Then you promised that you won't leave me, yet you just broke it and never even gave me a chance to explain."

"I am still your friend, Westley, but nothing more. And I think it would be best if we should not see each other. Consider our deal is off." He just broke my heart. I struggled to stand in my place. My eyes felt like burning, and I could hardly breathe.

Clyve sat back in front of his laptop and sighed deeply before he spoke again. "He told me about your marriage. I understood that now, but you are still married, either by papers or to help your friend. Still, it doesn't change the fact that I slept with a married woman."

"I'm sorry." My voice was low and ragged.

"It doesn't matter anymore. What happened couldn't change the fact anyway."

"That's it? I just lost my best friend, and now I lost you, too?"

He didn't even look at me. He didn't care about me or our friendship anymore. He made a point.

"Good luck then." As I reeled from the gut-wrenching blow, I turned around, hoping I wouldn't bump into him again.

I didn't know how long I stood outside the studio until someone put a hand around my arm and put an umbrella above my head. It was raining, and I was soaking wet. All my life, I'd been a brat, a loser, and no one had ever appreciated me. When I was with Clyve and Keene, they accepted and had seen something good in me, and that was one thing that I couldn't just ignore.

"It's okay, baby girl. Daddy is here now. If they care enough about you, they won't just get rid of you like that. They soon realize how precious you are to them. They will come back. Just give them some time."

I squeezed my eyes shut as Dad wrapped his coat over my shivering body. I inhaled deeply and thought of those great memories with Keene. If he left and thought that it was good for the two of us, then I could not hold him back, but he thought that it was because of my feelings toward Clyve. I made sure to point out that his decision was wrong. One thing I was sure was that Clyve pushed me out of his life for good.

Besides, Clyve deserved someone better than me. He was a good guy, and the last thing he should be doing was to get tangled with someone like me.

Chapter 34

Tender Loving Clyve

CLYVE

Damn it!

I WAS ALREADY sitting on my bed trying to grasp if I was in the state of dreaming or not, but Austen kept on calling my name from the other line.

I rubbed my eye. “You okay, mate?”

“I am, but, um, I need your help.” He was like catching his breath. He must be running or carrying something heavy, and that alarmed me.

“What’s wrong?” I may have known him for a few days, but he was Westley’s brother. I already felt guilty for putting a boundary between us, and I never gave her a chance to speak for her side. I thought that was good for both of us, and added to the fact that she was still married.

“Clyve, are you still there?”

“Yeah. How can I help you?”

“Um, I found Harry drunk. I can’t take her home, and my place isn’t exactly good for her. You know her father would kick me out of Harry’s life if I let her daughter get drunk.”

Damn it!

My throat choked up. I should have told her as soon as Keene left my flat, and now she was pissed.

“You couldn’t even stop your sister from drinking?”

“Man, I’m so sorry for waking you up in the middle of the night, but I couldn’t think of anyone to ask for help.”

“And you thought I was the best choice, huh? How marvelous.”

“It’s okay, Clyve. Sorry for the bother. I’ll drive her home.”

I groaned and pressed my lips into a thin line as my conscience was like bees buzzing my ears. “I’ll text you my address.”

“Thank you, Mr. Linton.” Mr. Linton my arse.

“Just drive safely. I’ll be waiting.”

After I informed the security about their arrival, I brewed coffee and leaned against the counter because this would be the longest night.

I didn't know how exactly how I would react to this whole situation. If Westley was sober, I was sure she didn't want to see my face again. I didn't stop her from walking out of the studio because I couldn't be her friend anymore. I would be tempted to break my rule again.

* * *

"HOW MUCH DID she drink?" Austen walked past me as soon as I opened the door for them. He was carrying Westley bridal style. She must have passed out on their way here.

I averted my gaze when my gaze landed on her thighs. Her dress drove up, and I could almost see her arse. I fought the urge not to take her from Austen, but he was her brother.

"A few shots. Where should I put her?"

"Follow me." I marched through the hallway and opened another door. I was thankful that the cleaning service was here last weekend to keep this place tidy even when I was away.

As soon as he put her down the bed, he breathed deeply and propped his hands on his hips. "I need to call her father."

"Hold on a sec. Did she call you to pick her up?"

He shook his head, his gaze still pinned on sleeping, Westley.

"What's going on, Austen?" I pulled her shoes off and covered her with a blanket.

"I don't really drink. This is the second time we went to a bar. This time, she got herself drunk. She must be so upset, and I couldn't stop her. So I just watched her until she couldn't drink anymore." He faced me, concern plastering all over his face.

I swallowed the guilt in my throat. I knew the reason why Westley was getting wasted. "She didn't take it pretty well, I guess."

"So you know about Keene?"

"Yeah." I let out a shaky breath. "He came to me before he left. I didn't wanna get involved than I already did. It was a mistake, but I also wasn't aware that they're married."

"Hey, man. It wasn't your fault." Why everyone was kept telling me that it wasn't my fault?

I stared at him intensely, and the worse part was, I couldn't see the judgment in his eyes. It was supposed to make me feel better that someone understood my situation, but I still felt guilty.

"I know Harry's life is complicated. She should also be lucky to have everything handed her in a silver platter. Everyone wishes to be in her shoe, but Harry doesn't feel that way. She has a twisted family, an insensitive father, a terrible mother, and of course the two villains in her life. She always wants attention from her father, but she can't just have it. Lyndon was too busy with his power until Harry turned herself into a rebellious kid, but what she did to her best friend was the bravest and the best thing she ever did in her life. I thought maybe you should think twice before you judge my sister."

His last words hit me hard in my stomach. I looked down. I might have judged her. Who could blame me? I trusted her, and I cared about her a lot. Then she lied right into my face. Convenience or not she should have told me before what happened between us went deep.

Every time I thought of those wonderful two nights, I couldn't help but wince at the thought of Keene while I was losing my mind with the best feelings I had for years. Who people wouldn't feel remorse when you considered him as a friend? Yet you were unintentionally stabbing him behind his back.

Austen was already out sight when I lifted my gaze to the moaning sound of Westley. My steps were calculated. As I stepped closer, my brows furrowed to see her seemingly profusely sweating despite the room temperature.

"Westley?" I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed, wiping off the strands of her locks away from her face. When I felt her forehead with the back of my hand, she was burning up. I did the same to her neck. "Westley?"

All she answered to me was moan. I was quicker on feet and bolted out of the room. "Austen?"

I found him on the kitchen counter, seemingly in deep thoughts. "Do you know Westley is burning up?"

His eyes widened in shock as he shook his head in a daze. "No."

"You can't feel her burning up?" I glared at him, but he looked like he wasn't aware that Westley was sick.

"I honestly don't have any idea. Should we bring her to the hospital?"

I pulled out my phone. "Good thinking. And her father will definitely kill us both."

"Okay." Panic, stood straight. "What should we do?"

I dialed my mother, and she was probably sleeping. "She didn't pass out because of the effect of alcohol. She has a fever. Go get a bowl and fill them with cold water. There's a clean towel in the bathroom. Damn it, Austen. You just signed our death wish!"

"Hey, honey."

"Mum?"

"Honey, what's wrong with the two of you? You always call me at a bad time."

"I'm sorry, mum. This is a matter of—"

"Of life and death? Are you in trouble, CC?" Her voice filled with alarm, and I wanted to punch myself.

"No. Not yet at least, but my friend is kinda having a fever. What should I do?"

"Oh? Mum is good at that. First, check his body temp if you have a thermometer with you. Then if the result is high, you can give him acetaminophen per oral if he's awake."

"Her, mum."

"Oh, my god! Where is she? Your brother mentioned someone to me when I met Ry. And she's Westley, am I right? The one I met in the hospital with Keene Storm?"

Fuck! I scratched my scalp. "Mum—"

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Mum?" She hung up on me. Great! Now I needed to explain to her who Westley and Austen were to me.

Damn it. My brother couldn't just shut his mouth up. How would I tell my mother that Westley was married? She didn't have to know, and I hoped my brother intentionally skipped that detail from mum.

Austen was already tending Westley in the room when I brought him the thermometer. "Check her temp. My mum would be here shortly. She's a doctor."

"Thanks." He lifted his gaze. He was sad and worried. I would feel the same if I were him, but neither of this was his fault.

I glanced at Westley again. I had to set aside my anger towards her. I shouldn't have followed my guts and my lust towards her, but it wasn't just lust. I knew it the first time I saw her on the screen. I even admitted to her.

I initiated everything, and I literally seduced her because of these stupid feelings I had for her. What we had was some kind of twisted fate. No one had to be blamed. It was just, it had to end. What we had was wrong. Not until Westley was free from her tangled life. The only question left was when?

Chapter 35

Lost

WESTLEY

I WOKE UP with the feeling that someone pulled me out of the train wrecked. My body was burning. My mouth was dry and tasted bitter. The first thing I noticed was that the room was dim-lit. I stilled as I half-opened my eyes to see a familiar figure sitting in front of me.

Clyve.

What the hell is going on?

He hadn't noticed that I was already awake. He was staring at me, but I knew he was in deep thought. His brows knitted into a deep frown and his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Linton?" My voice came out hoarse and low.

He startled and blinked repeatedly. "Westley?"

Before I could blink, he was already sitting beside me on the bed. He placed the back of his hand on my forehead, then on my neck. His touch alone made my heart race even it was so innocent, and I could feel my skin burned more.

"Are you hungry, thirsty? How are you feeling?" With worry in his voice, he grabbed the glass on the nightstand and offered it to me. "Drink this. Mum said you needed to rehydrate. Austen gave her the consent so that she could give you IV fluids and injection to lower your fever. You were burning up, Westley. How could you go to the bar and got drunk when you were not feeling well?" He continued babbling while I dragged myself to lean against the headboard. I was still confused about how I ended up with him in one room.

The glass of water was still on my hand, and he was already placing the thermometer on my ear.

He glanced at the screen and said, "You still have a fever. Mum said you would be okay soon. Do you want a bowl of soup? Austen made some."

"Linton, hold on." I gulped the water and gave the glass back to him. I swallowed hard. My throat was parched though. Then I realized I was wearing a shirt that wasn't mine.

"I changed you." Finally, he met my gaze. His eyes were filled with worry and remorse.

"Linton, where am I?"

"Twelve hours ago, Austen called me and asked for my help. I thought you were just drunk, then I found out that you're burning up."

"How did your mom get into this?"

"You needed a doctor." He shrugged.

I met Dr. Everly Hynson at the hospital. She reminded me of Clyve, and they both had good hearts.

"I know." I looked down, feeling ashamed of my recklessness. "I should go home."

I froze to feel his hand on mine. When I looked at him again, he still cared about me.

"You can stay here for as long as you want. Austen called your father that you are staying with him, minus the detail that you're sick."

I shook my head despite the headache that was killing me. "I need to change to something."

"Don't you feel comfortable with my shirt?"

His question had me stilled. He had no idea how soothing his shirt was, his smell, his touch, and even his soft and calming voice, but I shouldn't get too carried away because this experience wouldn't last long. He hated me. He made sure that whatever he had for me had completely ended since he found out my current status.

Speaking of Keene, he didn't even answer my call. It hurt a lot that even my best friend who gave me everything to survive finally gave up on me.

"Hey, everything will be all right. I promise. Just get better, okay?" Clyve wiped my tears that I didn't know I was already crying.

"You all are a bunch of liars." I pushed his hand off of me and pushed him away "Back off, Linton because I'm going home."

"You should be getting some rest, Westley." He was already on his feet while I dragged myself out of bed, ignoring the soreness of my muscles and my headache.

"Or what? Where are my clothes?" I wrapped my arms around my body when I felt I was shivering.

"Please, just stay until you get better."

I grabbed my purse on my nightstand. When I checked my phone, I found missed calls from my father and a message. Then the door swung opened, revealing Austen ready to spit fire. There was no emotion on his face other than rage.

"Are these real? These video and photographs are real, aren't they, dear sister?" He showed us his phone screen.

I thought my world spun. My heart crushed inside my chest. I felt I was getting smaller, burning, and melting as he stared at me with disgust and disappointment.

"You were gone for years, Harry. And this was what made you busy that you forgot that you have family back home?" He shook his head as hatred filled his eyes. "I can't fucking believe it that you went this low—this far."

"Austen, can you please stop being so righteous for a while. If she ever did this, I am sure she has reasons," Clyve said. His tone was strong and firm. I was already in his arms before I completely fell to the floor. "Can't you see she's still burning up."

"Stay out of this. This is between me and my sister, Mr. Linton." Austen was ready to tackle Clyve if he made a move.

"And may I remind you that you are in my flat. Since you called earlier, what happens in this flat is my problem as well."

"Just answer me this, Harry."

I'd never been so terrified that I couldn't even speak.

"She doesn't have to tell you anything. She doesn't owe you anything. People made mistakes, Austen, but that made them stronger. Mistakes don't always make them bad people. Stop judging your sister as if you haven't done terrible things—"

A yelp escaped my mouth, and I almost fell to the floor. Apprehension and dread chilled down my spine. A moment Linton was holding my arms, in a blink, he was on the floor, and Austen was punching him.

"Stop! Please, stop!" I yelled at the top of my voice. And I was shaking with fear and fever.

I watched them brawl each other, exchanging punches, and I was shaking, unable to think correctly. I scanned around the room until I found a pitcher of water. I grabbed it and threw it to them, causing them to pull apart.

"Stop this nonsense! You both are idiots. When instead of hating me, you are punching each other. I hated myself! After I lost mom, I also lost Dad's attention. I thought I lost my way until I met Keene. He never judged me of being a brat and a black sheep. He saw a little goodness in me. He respected me as a woman and a real person. He took care of me for years without asking anything in return." I wiped my tears that kept pouring. I looked at them through blurry visions. "He was there for me when the bitches took everything from me and tore my world apart. When he got sick, I wished I could help, but I didn't know what to do. And camming was the only thing I could

think without leaving him out of my sight. I took all the risk just to save a little money as long as I could see the smile on his face when the time will come.”

“I’m sorry, Westley,” Clyve muttered.

“I regretted doing it behind his back because I knew he wouldn’t allow me to do such thing like that. He was still my husband, and I was scared that it would come to this, but I never regretted doing it for him. What I only regretted was falling for my needs instead of taking care of him.” At the corner of my eye, Clyve went rigid and dropped his gaze.

“Just hate me, Austen. I deserve it, and I don’t give a damn! Anyway, I already lost him completely.” With all my strength left, I grabbed my purse and walked past them.

“Westley!”

“Leave me alone! You also judged me, Linton. I saw the look in your eyes when you recognized me back at the cabin.”

“That’s not true, Westley.”

“Just fuck off! I don’t need all of you.”

* * *

BEFORE I COULD hail a cab, I felt like a loser crying outside the apartment building. As always, they didn’t care. They didn’t even come for me. It wasn’t a surprise anymore, especially for Linton. I thought he cared, and again, I was wrong. He just wanted to satisfy his curiosity. Now, he got what he wanted, he was over with me.

I cried the whole time on my ride back home. I lost everyone.

I realized those missed calls coming from my father was all about that video. I told him that I’d done terrible things and that I was not the Harry Bloom he once knew. What he wasn’t aware of was that what I did for a living.

I was lost in my thoughts throughout the ride. I was dwelling my own agony alone.

Still shivering from the fever, I paid and got out of the cab. With my arms shielding my face, I shrieked and froze in my place like a deer caught in the headlights to the situation where I was in. I wasn’t exactly expecting to get home like this. When I thought Harry Bloom was dead years ago, I was completely wrong.

With flashes and snaps of the camera focusing on me, I stared at them in wide eyes. I was caught in the middle of the crowd of nosy people, asking me horrible questions.

I didn't know what to do. I could not think straight. All I could feel was fear. At this moment, all I wanted was to hide, but I had nowhere to go.

This time, I could not escape. I could not escape from my own doing backfiring at me.

Chapter 36

Worst Weeks are Over

CLYVE

THIS MIGHT BE the worse three weeks of my life. Losing a good artist, losing a friend, and losing Westley. But life must go on as they said. So, here I was, trying to get back on track.

For the last three weeks, I hadn't got a break. I missed dinner with mum and my brother, or rather, I intended not to meet them because I knew they wouldn't stop asking me, which I wasn't ready to give them answers.

After I watched Westley on TV, I also happened to Google her. Her secret of being Harry Bloom alive, and being a cam girl was not a secret anymore. Her father gave a statement to the press. The news dwindled, but Westley was completely ignoring my call.

"Clyve?"

"Yeah?"

Austen scanned my face with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"I've been calling you in like five times now." I was grateful he came back and apologized. He was a good lad. I couldn't afford to lose a good artist and a friend. Last week he came back to work. And so far, so good.

"How're they doing back there?" We found aspiring artists and men who were suffering from PTSD and chose art as part of their therapy.

"They're doing great." We went back to the studio. "I thought you wanna see Lloyd." We found Lloyd on the street. He was an artist. After we offered him a good deal, he finally agreed, but it took a week for us to get him to join us.

They were working on Westley's photo I took before our launch ride. Every time I looked at that picture, I thought my heart was ripped apart from my chest, but that was her choice. If she wanted to talk to me, she surely knew where to find me. I felt relief that she wasn't ignoring me alone. She was also ignoring Austen. I was just hoping she was fine somewhere.

"He was so good." The only thing we had a problem with him was, we couldn't get through him. He built his walls for years, and he was the most cynical person we'd ever met. Austen was skeptical about my idea of inviting him in, but we needed an artist as talented as Lloyd.

"Yeah," Austen agreed as he marched forward. "Guys, it doesn't have to be perfectly copied from the picture. Take it as your inspiration. You can see through the eyes of our model, her smile, the background, or look beyond it."

"How are you doing so far, Buckley?" He was one of the bravest soldiers who fought in the Middle East and lost his left leg there. He was the most silent among the class.

"I don't know." He sighed. "I felt like I'm not doing any good."

"Don't beat yourself up, mate. Remember, this should not pressure you. Just do what you can do."

"Thanks. If I did good, maybe I can help raise a few bucks for your fundraising."

"Our, Buckley. And no worries. Baby steps, mate. I'm not good either, but I never give up. It also helps me a lot."

"Mr. Linton, done with the paint. Once it dried up, we will start with re-coating tomorrow." We were interrupted by one of the team members Eli had suggested were good at making this place possible in a short time. They did pretty great actually. They broke down the walls that separated the studio and replaced it with a more sturdy one.

"Thank you."

The studio looked more welcoming with huge windows for the light to come in. It would naturally dry the painting. And for the gallery, they already installed lightings. In a few weeks, the first art gallery I'd be hosting would open to the public.

"Any news?" Austen nudged me.

"I should be asking you that."

"She's still ignoring me. I sent her flowers, but I don't know if she even received it or worse she asked the staff to throw it to the trash. I called her father, but he only said to give her some time, and that she's okay."

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. "Then that's what we should do."

"It's almost a month, man."

I faced Austen, glaring at him. Before I could speak, he raised his hand.

"I know. I know this is my fault," he whispered. "You've been shoving these words right into my face for days. I started to get it now."

"Good." I checked my watch and clapped. "That's enough for today, guys. See you all in two days."

* * *

"DON'T ASK ME again," I warned Austen and shove a forkful of vegetable curry in my mouth.

He was my constant meal mate, and he was good at helping me forgetting things for a while. My heart was still hurting, but just like Westley's father said, to give her some time. And that was what I'd been doing.

"I have news though." I could hear the excitement in his voice.

My fork hung in the middle. "What is it?"

Austen grinned. "But promise me that you will have dinner with your mum and your brother this weekend."

"You've been talking to them?" My question came out a little bit harsh and accusing, but Austen seemed cool with it.

He shrugged. "Dude, your brother came to see you, and you just talked to him in three sentences? So, I entertained him. He's a good man, you know. I wish I could change his seat with Harry because I really missed that woman. I lost her for years, and now that she's alive, I can't spend quality time with her. It's torture."

"I'm sorry. We'll gonna see her again," I assured him. "Whether she likes it or not."

He shrugged again. "I hope so. Very soon."

I realized we both were suffering from our losses, and then we both missed a person we cared about.

"About your good news, what is it?"

"She went to meet Keene."

"Keene is still not talking to me." I rolled my eyes, ignoring the twinge of pain in my chest. Thinking of them trying to work things out with their marriage made me want to puke my guts out.

I completely lost my appetite. I placed down my fork and took a deep breath. Austen must have noticed my discomfort because he was already offering me a glass of water.

"Thanks." After I emptied the glass I let out a deep shaky sighed. "You're saying?"

"I didn't know you care a lot about them, and I wasn't also sure that you were in love with Harry until I just confirmed it right now."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I am not."

"Don't lie to my face, Clyve. She's my sister, and you're a friend. What I learned from my experience, I wish I told my girlfriend how much she meant to me, and that's the regret I always carry in my chest. I loved her, but I never told her when she was alive. I realized she meant to me more than what I showed her when she was already lying cold in the morgue. Don't do the same mistakes I did, Clyve."

"Thanks, but—"

"She lied to you. If you compared her situation with yours, don't you think she deserves a little bit of an exemption. I love her. We didn't see often because of her dad, but she made sure she could reach out to me. She didn't come to me when she ran away because I was staying at the frat house. If she had another choice that day, I still let her choose to be with Keene because she learned a lot. She became stronger, independent, and stood on what she believed was right. If she was with me, she'd be more in trouble, and I don't wanna think the worst-case scenario we ended up to be. Just take that some things happen for a reason." His words stabbed me like knives.

"If I were in her shoe, I might be doing the same. It's not all her fault why we ended up sleeping together. I was the one who made a move. We opened up to possibilities. I just wish she told me about her marriage—"

"And I know what choice you would choose. Cut the crap, Clyve. For a man like you, I know you would choose to keep your feelings locked inside your chest than letting her know how you like her more than a friend. It sucks, I know. That's probably why Harry went there to see her husband because she already realized that she can't be with you while she's still tied in marriage with Keene."

My heart nearly stopped. "What do you mean?"

"They're getting divorced."

Chapter 37

Back Home

WESTLEY

I COULDN'T REMEMBER the last pleasant meal I had or a good and long soak in the tub. When was the last time I caught a good sleep? I couldn't even remember if what day was today, or was it day or night?

I spent days in my bed for days, crying, dwelling in my pain, and my losses. I lost everyone I cared about. The only person who promised and stayed by my side was my father—the last person I expected.

He'd been checking up on me every now and then, sometimes when I was sitting on the bed, lying down, and biting my meal when I couldn't take the hunger anymore.

One day, I felt I was sweating, feeling dizzy, then I realized I might have low blood sugar. I had to eat. I didn't want to cause more trouble for my father that I already did.

Then, last week, I received a package from Keene. It took a day and all my strength to rip it open because I knew exactly what it was. And I was right.

They said some feelings would take over if you chose to dwell on them, especially fear and pain. That was what I was dwelling with right now.

The door swung open while I was applying some color to my face. I stood up, even though I felt like I was going to collapse from weak knees. I didn't know what to expect other than what tied between Keene and I would soon be over, and that frightened me.

"Are you ready?"

I nodded to the voice of my father from the door. I took a deep breath before I turned around and grabbed my bag. "I am now." My steps forward took like hours for me. I was scared what awaits outside this mansion where I'd been hiding for weeks, but whatever was there, I knew I had to face it somehow. I couldn't stay and live my life like this forever.

The only thing that had progressed in my days locked up in my room, were books, which was odd because I'd never been a reader. That was my constant company. I thought people had different ways in dealing with their heartbreaks. Dad was happy to bring me books from non-fiction to the cliches romance novel I asked. Then I found myself writing. I was able to pour all my emotions, my struggles, my anger, hatred, and my losses into those words. That was when I saw a smile on my

father's face for the first time since I was barged by those paparazzi and reporters who wanted to scoop my life into their trashes.

"Don't worry, no more paparazzi and reporters here. I already made a statement. They won't bother you anymore." He rubbed my arm as we walked toward the black sedan.

"Thank you," I said before I got in. I couldn't be more grateful that he was there as my anchor when I needed someone there for me. When everyone was gone, the family was always there no matter what bad choices you made or how big mistakes you'd done. I realized that now.

The jet made us faster to reach Keene's hometown. My father arranged a private meeting with our lawyers while I was dwelling with my heartaches.

My heart was about to burst out of my chest the moment Keene came to view. I never thought I'd missed him so much. For three years, I stayed with him, never a day he'd been out of my sight until he left weeks ago, and this was the longest and the most painful days from me.

I hadn't realized I was already throwing myself into him until he chuckled while I was sobbing in his arms.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm still alive," Keene said with a laugh as he rubbed my back.

"You left me. I know you would survive without me, but I never expected that it would be that easy for you, and there it is." I wiped my tears once I was free from him.

When I looked at him in the eye, he seemed happy and sad at the same time. I didn't know which one that made him down—me leaving him for good or for what I said. Nevertheless, this might be good for both of us.

"I can't watch you breakdown in front of me, and I also know how this marriage had been hard for you. And don't lie to me that you don't care for that man, Westley. I'd never seen you that happy since he came to our lives. Now that I'm fine, and your father keeps his end of the bargain, this has to end. It just happened that the expiration date of our plan is not the way we like."

I held his hands and squeezed them. "I would do it over and over again—"

"Even doing something behind my back? Just to see me happy. Seriously, Westley? That choice alone, I couldn't forgive myself. I was mad at you when I found out. I was planning to ignore you for a couple of days because I wanted to prepare myself for your outburst, then that thing happened. Jesus, you're the most selfless woman I've ever met." This time he was the one who pulled me into his arms and squeezed me tightly.

This time I broke down. I couldn't take it anymore. I'd be gone insane if I couldn't cry it out loud. "I wanna see your smile before—when I thought I was gonna lose you. That's how much I love you,

and that's what best friend should do. You've gone hell and back for me. The least I could do was to give back—"

"But I wasn't asking anything, Westley." He pulled away and looked me in the eye. "Right now, I am asking you. After what we did and survived together, do me a favor, and if something happens to me, I would never forgive you if you will ignore this."

My chest squeezed tight because I had a few ideas of what he was about to ask me, and I didn't know if I could it, considering how it ended the last time we separate.

I shook my head. "Don't do this to me, please."

"You've done the impossible for my sake. I know you can do it again. I want you to be happy."

"I will be for as long as you are happy." I met his gaze, and I saw hope and happiness.

"Great. Let's go inside. They're waiting for us."

I sat beside my father and my lawyer. Keene was sitting in the middle of his lawyer and his nurse. After a few minutes of reading the statements and conditions, my lawyer agreed, and so as my father.

I was aware of how the divorce was going to end. At this time, Keene's assets were in my name. Dad and my lawyer already briefed me about it. All papers were waiting, and I was ready to sign every page of it before it filed.

I took a deep breath. Before I signed the divorce papers, I asked Keene again, "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Keene smiled. "Yes, Harry."

* * *

"THIS ISN'T what I expected?" I was propping my hands on my waist, facing the new cabin that double the size of the old one. It was in the middle of the two. It was not finished, but it looked already great.

"I was planning on creating a website and an account on social media to advertise this place."

"I want to help."

"No, Westley."

"Please? You are still my best friend, and I want to give you something." I pulled an envelope from my bag and gave it to him.

He hesitantly took it. "What's this?"

“Don’t waste my effort because I can’t and won’t forgive you if you will not use it, Keene.”

He already knew what I meant. His eyes started to water. He breathed deeply and nodded.

“Don’t say anything. It was my decision, and I wouldn’t have the courage to stop it if it wasn’t because of Clyve. He forced me to stop. In return, he’d kept my secret and helped us. I knew without a doubt, he would help you, Keene, but it wasn’t because of me.”

“How is he?”

I looked away, wiping a single tear fell from my eye.

“What’s wrong? You two haven’t been talking since I left?”

“No. I don’t think there’s a thing to talk about with him.”

“Hey.” Keene held my arm. “Something is going on between you two, and it wouldn’t just disappear because of a misunderstanding or a mistake. Big or not. That’s why we have this so-called communication. Fix this. You know what you two have is special and you might not find it anywhere or anytime. That’s the reason why I forced myself to stay away from you. It was not because I don’t care about you, or I don’t love you because I will always love you. You are my best friend—that would never change. Nothing’s gonna break what we have, even this freaking divorce. I left because I knew I was the reason why it happened, why it ended. Our marriage, Westley. Now, you are about to be a free woman, it’s about time to pick up what you two left off.”

Chapter 38

Surprise Guests

CLYVE

IT CAUGHT ME off guard that I got their attention. I knew this dinner would not be easy now that they knew I slept with a married woman and a cam girl. It was not that they cared about Westley being a cam girl or whatever she did for a living, but they'd seen her on the news, and they knew I cared about her a lot.

"Shut that looks on your faces." I glared at them, especially to my brother. "Where's my baby girl?" I asked when I couldn't find Rynna.

"She'll be here next week," Arella answered. "The dinner will be ready shortly."

"Okay, let's not make my baby uncomfortable." Mum stood up and marched towards me."

"Thank you." I kissed her on her cheek. "Don't you get tired of white and plain colors in your living room? I only see two colors in here."

"Stop it, CC. It represents tidiness, purity, and simplicity. And it's refreshing." She did a little exaggeration with her hands, causing Skip to chuckle.

"Or it's boring/ Don't you wanna add paintings at least."

Mum rolled her eyes. "I have a few in the other room, honey. Don't worry, I'm the first person to be there at the opening of your gallery." Then her expression turned serious. "By the way, how is it going?"

"It's doing great, Mum." I was interrupted by the doorbell. "Do you have guests?"

"Yes, honey." Then her staff rushed towards the door. "I invited your friends."

My brows furrowed. "Friends?"

"Dr. Hynson, thanks for having us here."

Fuck! It was Austen, and I didn't have to turn around who was the other since mum said 'friends'. I could feel the instant racing of my heart, the tingling of my skin, and the adrenaline pumping through my blood. It was all due to the anticipation of seeing her in the flesh again.

"Hey, man." Austen patted me in my back, or more likely he was saying, turn around you, idiot.

“Hey, man? I saw you yesterday, and don’t tell me you missed to mention that I’m gonna see your ugly face today.” I eyed him, and he just grinned at me.

“Good to see you again then.” He shook my hand with a knowing smile. “Ugly? I doubt that. The last time I checked, I shared half of her DNA.”

Jesus! “Shut that smile off your face.” I knew he was enjoying seeing my reaction. Now I got it why he didn’t give me a choice, in return, he would tell me the good news.

Then I shifted my gaze till it landed on Westley. I had to swallow hard because it was like she was the only person I saw right now.

She was wearing a knee-length white dress. Her hair was shorter, just above her shoulder, and she even changed the color to auburn blonde. And she was smiling—like an ear to ear smile as she interacted with my brother and Arella.

“I agree with her,” Mum said to Arella. I didn’t know what was it all about.

“This scent means a lot to me, and knowing that you are wearing it, I’m so touched.”

“Well, I love it. And I’m honored to meet the woman behind this perfume.”

“The honor is mine, Harry. And thank you for accepting Eve’s invitation tonight.”

“Oh, boy. Shouldn’t you be joining them? What happened if I am not here? What would you do? Just stand at the corner like a total loser?”

“I am not a loser.” I groaned.

“Well, you will be if you will just stand here beside me.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “So, you intentionally—”

“Hi, Linton. Don’t I get a hi or hello from you?” I stilled to hear her voice. My pulse kept pumping fast as I could feel she was stepping closer. I instantly felt the heat radiating between us as she stopped in front of me.

“Got to chat with your brother. He has a lot to say than you.” Austen literally slapped my back harder.

“Good to see you again, Westley.” And you look stunning like jaw-dropping-stunning-I’m-drooling-right-now.

Shit! Come on, Clyde. You could say better than that. Just compliment her look tonight.

There was something in her smile that I had not seen it before. She looked radiant, and I was sure it had nothing to do with her new look or the makeup on her face. Her eyes were shining bright.

“When was that? The last time I saw you.”

Her face fell as she looked down.

“You ignored us for weeks. No message, no email, no return calls. Why would I even expect that from you, huh? Oh, yeah. I know now because I told you I couldn’t be your friend, right? Your brother was worried sick. And hell I was, too. But yes, you have a father, and you don’t want other people to worry about you anymore because look at you right now?” I motioned to herself.

“Unrecognizable. It looks good on you, though.”

Wow, Clyve! That was not the speech I should be rehearsing, but it just came out, and I couldn’t take it back anymore.

“I know you’re mad at me—”

“Bloody hell I am. The last person you’d ever think would ever judge you is me, Westley, because that was not news to me anymore, then you just dropped off the grid. You were untraceable. Then I realized it was my fault why shits happened.” I wasn’t aware I was racing my voice until the room went eerily silent but no one dared to interrupt us.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was barely audible.

I could say the same thing, though. Her disappearance seemed made her whole, unlike me, I was still wallowing in self-loathe—I was still carrying the burden and hurt of losing her and my friend. And after that shit, I didn’t think our relationship would ever be the same again.

“I only came here because you’re not the one who invited me. You can’t throw me out, but I am happy to see you.”

“That’s absurd, but I can just walk out right now.”

My family chuckled.

“Are you gonna walk out?”

I shrugged. “I’m still thinking.” I just missed her terribly, Westley. *Just say it, Clyve.*

“Let’s not make this dinner awkward. For the sake of your family.”

“You don’t have to whisper. They’re nosy as they are. They’ve been listening since you started talking. And it sucks that I still love them with all my bleeding heart.”

“Let’s have dinner,” Finally, Skip spoke.

I should be sitting beside Westley, and that would be awesome, but I chose not to. Even their divorce was filed, she was not completely free, and what sucked the most? Nothing was going on between us.

Although I still felt the same towards her, that was it. The last thing I wanted to recheck was my feelings because I knew I would break my heart again.

I cared about her a lot. Hell, I was in love with her. I realized that now. The reason why I couldn't or wouldn't want to move on because there was no other woman could replace Westley in my heart. She hurt me, yes, but that was why I was hurting because I cared deeply about her.

I tried to understand her reason because we fell in deep with our needs and our raw emotions. She thought what we did was not a mistake. We followed our desires, but it would never change the fact that she committed infidelity, and she did that for me.

"Clyve?"

"Yeah?" I blinked at Skip. He was narrowing his eyes at me. "My apology. You were saying?"

"Mum is asking if you like the food," he said.

I smiled at Mum. "Yeah, Mum. Thank you." Whenever I came for dinner, she made sure she prepared the choice of food I liked.

"Austen said you got recruits. How are they doing?" It was Westley who asked.

"I am sure Austen didn't miss anything." I placed my cutlery down. "They're not recruits. They're there in the studio to express their feelings, their emotions without pressure, to reduce their stress, to increase their self-esteem. A few of them are good in art, hell they're great, and it's a way of giving them hope to their dreams instead of turning their lives sideways that they thought they don't have value in this world anymore. Austen and I are giving them chances. Hopefully, their paintings would be hanging in the grand opening."

Westley blinked repeatedly, and I thought I saw a glint of awe and pride in her eyes.

"I'm so proud of you, CC." Mum was teary-eyed.

"That's my brother."

"It's your dream, Linton. I'm happy for you." Westley seemed sincere. Is she now?

She didn't have any idea that she was one of my inspirations. She didn't have to know. It doesn't matter anymore.

Mum proposed a toast. "For CC and Austen."

* * *

“SO, I HEARD you visited Keene.” I was still a little bit shock about the divorce. I didn’t know if I had to feel happy. or I should be feeling guilty, but what would be the worse feeling or living in a trap of marriage. I just wanted her to be happy with whomever the luckiest man that deserved her. Now it was a load of bollocks!

“Yes. I’m sure you are aware of the divorce.”

I nodded, unable to meet her gaze because I didn’t want her to see that somehow I was anticipating it, or I was thrilled to hear it coming from her.

“One of the reasons that I agreed with Keene was you.”

Chapter 39

Chances

WESTLEY

“SO, HOW WAS it?” I asked my agent Mark about my manuscript. The anticipation was killing me. It still sounded bizarre to me that I was able to write a whole book while dwelling on my life misery.

When his expression looked like he wanted to drop the bad news, I sipped my coffee.

“I read the whole manuscript, and I like it, Harry. For a newbie writer like you without experience, and someone who graduated from fashion design, I admire you, and you have great potential.”

“But?”

“I want you to revise it. Don’t worry about the editor, you can have one from the publisher,” he assured me, but I knew he was still holding something.

I leaned against the chair. Despite the vibe in the coffee shop, I felt like I brought back to the event where I didn’t want to visit again.

“What should I change?”

“Your characters were great, but I think you should show your readers about the deep of your main characters’ relationship.”

“It’s not a romance novel, mark.”

“I know, but readers are anticipating the juicy details, and may I remind you that romance is still the most read genre. What happened to your main characters’ romance? Give us a satisfying ending. That’s what readers are looking for in a novel. Unless you are writing a duo, trilogy, or a series.”

I shook my head. “I’m not gonna change anything in the plot, especially their romantic relationship.” Because nothing happened after that.

“Then I can’t promise you a good deal with the publisher. I accept your manus because of your father. You should start with your website and blogs to build your readership, and also your page as a writer. You’re already famous—”

“Don’t ever mention that.” I looked away. It was the most horrible experience of my life, and he couldn’t use it as my stepping stone to being a writer.

My step-mom and Harlow got a copy of my video as a cam girl. Good thing, Dad had a lot of connections and his lawyers made sure to file a case against them if they would use that video as a way to destroy my reputation.

"It wasn't all bad. Think of a brighter side. You got a lot of sympathy from viewers."

"I don't need it. That's why I need to use a pen name because I didn't want them to know that I am Harry Bloom."

"You can't be a ghost if you wanted this career, Harry. You have to be ready with opportunities. Your readers need to know who you are. You have to promote yourself as a writer, and it should start by promoting who the real, or the new Harry Bloom is. And everyone who reads this book thinks the character is Sindy Kate."

* * *

"SO, HOW DID your meeting go?" Austen was painting a half-naked woman in front of him. And here I was, distracting his concentration.

"Not good news."

When the word bad came out from my mouth, he diverted his focus from his canvass, giving me a sympathetic look.

"Concentrate," I warned him. "You have a deadline to meet."

"Clyve won't fire me," he said confidently.

His name alone made my heart leap up to my throat, but the way he treated me the last time I met him during dinner, I knew there as nothing to catch up. Keene felt guilty about that news when I talked to him two days ago over a video call.

I felt my heart was breaking, thinking that after I confessed what I did was for him, still, it didn't end so well. I didn't know what to do anymore, the fact that I couldn't forget him no matter how hard I tried, or maybe I didn't try harder.

I wasn't ready to be out there dating. I started installing HeartRated, but I ended up deleting the app again. I was scared that if men knew it was me—the cam girl, they would look at me differently, or they would only use me in the end. That image ruined the already ruined Harry Bloom, but I didn't feel any regrets.

I was just so glad that Keene was going to use the tickets and the cash I earned from camming. I couldn't wait for them to share their experience.

"You're stalling."

"I need to revise my story."

"You still haven't told me about it."

"I want you to read it and not me telling you this story."

"You will see it in every bookstore and ebook form, sis. Trust me."

"I wish I share your confidence, Austen."

"Because I believe in you, and you're not a type of woman who easily gives up because of one rookie mistake. You can do it, and we're always here for you."

"Thanks." I kissed his cheek. "Now, concentrate. I have to go before he sees me here."

"You can't run away from him forever, Harry. Your world and his is getting smaller, and trust me on this. It's converging."

"Don't start." I walked out of the studio, and I must say the gallery looked like already a million bucks. The only thing that didn't look a gallery, it did have art in there yet, but the lighting, the interior was like I was brought back to the history museum, yet the modern vibe was still present. It was a complete replica of the personality of Clyve and Austen put together.

I was so proud of them, and I couldn't wait to see this on the grand opening. Skip informed me that he invited famous painters and artists to exhibit in this gallery to show support for Clyve's program and causes.

Of course, I was not surprised if Clyve did this for causes because I'd never met someone who had a huge heart than him. He was selfless.

He deserved this. He deserved success.

"What are you doing here?"

I jumped at his voice. Speaking of the devil. My hand instantly on my chest. and I was pressed against the white wall as I tried to breathe deeply. "You scare me."

"Do I look so scary to you know, Harry?"

He never called me Harry before, and it felt like he was trying to erase the memory of Westley in him. I knew we were over, but it still hurt a lot that he just gave up on us because of my terrible mistake.

"You know what I mean."

"What are you doing here? I thought you quit." He did a little emphasis on the word quit.

"I did, but I came here to see my brother."

"You should not distract him. He's working on something extraordinary."

I took a deep breath. When I looked at him in the eye, I knew he was trying harder to hide the anticipation of seeing me. I still saw it before it completely vanished. I was not that dumb to not get it why he acted as if he didn't care. I was not making a move because I wanted to be patient until my divorce was finalized. Then when he didn't want to pick up what we left off then, I couldn't do anything for us anymore. Maybe God had a better plan for me. And for him.

"Look, I know I am the last person you wanna see right now, but at least, don't pretend that you are this cold because I know you no matter how harder you tried to hide your feelings, Linton. And you suck at it."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

I poked his chest, and he let out a deep groan. "I think you know exactly what I am talking about. You just choose not to get it. It's okay. Since you accepted the last job I had, and you have no issue about it, I'm still gonna win you back, Linton. Mark my word."

"Very well then. I think you should start to be honest if you plan on winning me back."

My lips spread into a wide smile. "Really?"

His brow arched. "You heard me right. So why are you here?"

I rolled my eyes. "I came to see Austen."

"And did you two talk about what?"

"Still nosy, I see."

For the first time in weeks, I saw him genuinely smile at me. "I'm still me. I hope you are still you."

"Well, how about we talk about it over a coffee. It's on me."

He chuckled. "I think I can still afford to buy coffee for us, Westley."

* * *

Damn, I missed this.

I TOLD HIM about my meeting with Keene, the tickets I bought, and of course, the important part, the divorce.

"Wow! I missed it a lot. So, how did you take it?"

I smiled. Deep inside, it still hard for me, but I couldn't tie Keene with me longer. Now that he was getting better, he needed a life. And I could see that something was going on between him and his nurse. It was not any of my business, but as long as she would take care of Keene, I would be happy for them.

"It hurts at first, but at the same time, I wanna see him happy."

"We're here for you, Westley. I'm here for you as a friend."

Chapter 40

Still, The Rule-breaker

CLYVE

I HAD BEEN sitting with the advertising agency representative for nearly an hour, and I wanted to bolt out from the room if I only had the power to do that. I knew how it worked. I just didn't know how the bloody fuck took it so long.

I looked down at the bunch of flyers, samples, and templates on the table. She showed me a short campaign that would work for the gallery. Still, she was not done talking.

I admitted she was pretty good at sales talk, but I wanted a good outcome. Her company had a remarkable reputation, that was why I chose them when Skip listed down some names.

"We can talk more about this over a coffee if you haven't made your decision yet." Bloody fuck! *Is she this dumb?*

"I think I already have a few ideas. I'll keep in touch via email, Laila." I rose from my chair and extended my hand. "Thanks so much for your time."

She smiled. It was almost flirty, but I pushed that image out of my head because I knew exactly what she was doing. She'd been shoving her chest into my face the whole time. I got it, she had amazing tits, and I'd been cockblocked for quite a while now, but I had an eye for someone else, and I kept it like that.

"I'm just a call, Mr. Linton." She shook my hand firmly and then dragged her fingers against the palm of my hand.

"Of course."

I leaned my back against the chair, my arms at the back of my head when she was gone.

Closing my eyes, I finally able to release a deep breath, but her perfume was still left in the room.

"She's hot."

I stilled to that voice. My lips spread into a smile, knowing there was a hint of jealousy in there. Our last coffee date was uneventful, and I was counting how I would smash my lips against hers or press her against this new office wall. I had thought of that a lot, but I could be patient as I could be when it came to Westley.

"Yeah, she is." I was still in the same position, my eyes were still close, but the air in the room had shifted into a tension that my pulse accelerated its beat.

"So, is she your type, Linton?"

Her scent reached my nostrils, indicating she was now closer.

It was sweet, sensual, and feminine. "You changed your perfume."

"Are you jumping the fence on this topic, Linton?"

I opened my eyes, and I thought I fell from my chair. She was only wearing a white blouse and high waist trouser, but she was a sight for sore eyes.

"Come closer, Westley. Have a seat. I still don't bite." I sat straight. "Can I get you anything?"

"Who's she?"

I rolled my eyes. "Don't be ridiculous." I slept well at night, knowing we were friends again. "Don't you have meetings or lunch date with your father?"

"Now you're being ridiculous." She sat across me.

My gaze landed on her lips as she bit her bottom lip unconsciously. "I can't remember to have a coffee date with you. Maybe I should really follow my brother's advice to hire an assistant because I'd been forgetful lately. Why are you here, Westley? And don't give me shit about visiting your brother. Haven't you get tired of seeing his ugly face? You had a whole day together yesterday."

Squinting, she eyed me. "Are you jealous? You are the one who said you're busy."

She had no idea why I had to lie to her. God knew how much I wanted to spend time with her every bloody day if it would be possible, but she was not completely a free woman.

I couldn't trust myself anymore when I was with her, and I knew that this time, once I would have a taste of her again, I didn't think I would be able to control myself. Even right now, I wanted to capture those pouting lips with mine.

Heat flushed my face, and I quickly looked away when that thought seemed so vivid that even my lips tingled. I gave myself a mental shake, trying to snap myself out of that haze.

I scratched my head in irritation, thinking of this whole friendzone thing was not a good idea. I knew that Westley was like good therapy for me.

This week, she made me think straight, knowing that she was still here, offering me her friendship.

I stood up. "I have a lot of things to do."

“What’s with the overthinking, Linton?”

“Just have a lot of things in mind.”

“Should I come back?”

“What?” Confused, I asked.

“Oh? I thought we’re gonna check the apartment. You replied yes when I texted you earlier.”

“Wait. Did I?”

“Yeah.” Hell, she looked confused as well.

“I’m gonna break your brother’s nose.” My jaw flexed.

Westley laughed out loud. “It’s time to put a lock on your damn phone, Linton.” When she was done laughing, her eyes glittered with amusement. She walked toward the door. “Never mind, since your busy, I’m gonna go check out myself.”

“Hey.” I quickly rushed to catch her arm. The moment my skin touched hers, I thought I would combust. We were merely a part, yet heat radiated between us.

I could see the anticipation pooling in her eyes, and I was sure she could see the same thing in mine.

I knew I would not hold myself back, she wouldn’t either, but we made a point to be just friends since she was still married. I could just shake that thought off my head if I wanted to touch her—if I wanted to kiss her—if I wanted to take her right now because I knew we were both struggling with controlling this tension between us.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Her voice was shaking, and I hadn’t realized I was already holding her on both arms.

“I’m sorry.” I let go of her arms and stepped back.

She smiled sadly. “I should go.”

“No. Since you’re already here. I’m coming with you.”

* * *

WE RODE in her car to the apartment building she was talking about earlier. Thankfully, my hard-on didn’t give me a hard time at this moment.

When she parked the car, I looked out the window only to find myself looking at the building of my apartment.

"Westley, are you sure we're in the right address?"

"Let's go," she said enthusiastically and climbed out of her car.

She grabbed my hand once we were outside, and as we marched inside the lobby.

"Hello again, John," she greeted the security.

You made friends already." I looked at her, and she was smiling at me. "Westley, what's going on?"

Once we were inside the elevator, she replied. "Isn't it obvious?" I could feel she was rolling her eye. "I'm taking my quest seriously."

"That we're gonna be flatmates? Bloody, I started to get it now. But why here?"

Pain crossed her beautiful face. "Don't you want it?"

I let out a defeated breath. "Don't get me wrong—"

"I get it, you don't trust me—"

"Don't say something like that. It's not you that I am worried about, Westley. It's me. Earlier, I wanted to kiss you and take you there in my office, and I always held in a fine thread every time I was with you. The problem is, you are the best therapy I have in years. Since we talked to each other last week, I started thinking back straight. I sleep pretty good at night, but of course, there's always a darker side in that."

Her face softened. A small smile graced her lips. When the elevator slid open, she stepped out without a word.

"What?"

"Don't worry, Linton. I will give space between us."

"What?" I had her pinned against the wall before I even realized. Her blue eyes widened in shock. Hell, I was shocked by my action as well. "Did you even understand what I just said?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Yes. My brain is still intact. That's pretty damn clear, but you might have forgotten how stubborn I am."

"Don't do this to me, Westley," I pleaded.

"You, don't do this to me."

"Don't you think it's easy for me?"

"I started to believe it is for you. Why can't you just break your fucking rules for us? If you can't or won't do it, then I will. I made a move because I wanted to do the things that I should be doing for

weeks now. Hate me all you want, but I want to be closer to you. That's why I am here. We are consenting adults for god's sake. Life is too short to hold on to your desire until the time is running out on us. And you made me damn insane every time you held to your self-control. If I can't have you the easy way, then I will have you the hardest."

Still overwhelmed, I gasped in shock as I felt her softest lips pressed against mine.

Chapter 41

Giving In

WESTLEY

THE INTENSE sensation rushed through my veins, making my skin tingle and burn. The moment my lips captured his, I knew I couldn't stop. Instantly, I felt a familiar feeling, yet it still felt new and full of anticipation.

I grabbed the back his head as I angled my lips and moved intensely against his reluctant ones. No way, I would let him go without showing him how I wanted to do it like it was the medicine left to treat my obsession over him.

He moaned as he wanted to speak against our mouths, and I found a way to slip my tongue inside.

I arched my back, pushed my hips forward, and pressed my body against him. My nipples hardened at the burning sensation our skin created against the thin fabric we were wearing.

Then he kissed back as intensely as I did, then abruptly stopped as he spoke into our mouth.

"Westley."

I tightened my hands around his head, and I felt his hands traveling to my back.

"Westley, please?" That plead made me stop abruptly, and I felt like I just stabbed myself by a knife right into my chest. At the same time, I felt the intensity of the pain when I realized what I just did.

"Hey, look at me." He was still catching his breath before he quickly pressed his lips against mine.

"Please?"

I was still scared to see the emotion, disgust, or anger in his eyes.

"I'm sorry." I bit my lip when tears started to well in my eyes.

"I am not." He lifted my chin up. "Just look at me, please?"

I thought my heart stop beating when he said he wasn't sorry. Finally, I got the courage to meet his gaze. I could see the concern, the care, and the admiration in those pools that I never expected.

"You know we both feel the same, Westley. It's making me insane. I am not refusing you. Hell, I want to take you right now." He pressed his bulge against my lower belly to let me feel that he was affected by our kiss. "Feel me. I know we are not taking it slow anymore, but first, I want to take you out on a date."

I felt my mouth slacked open. My eyes were probably as wide as my mouth right now.

“How about Friday night?”

I nodded like a stupid while my tongue was still stuck in my mouth before he held my hand.

“Where’s your apartment?” he asked.

“Um, just right here.” I pointed at the door just next to his.

Clyve just shook his head and laughed as he looked at me. “I must say you’re a creepy stalker right now, Westley.”

“Obsessed,” I corrected.

“I’m beginning to love your obsession.” He took the key I offered to him. “We might as well make a secret door towards mine. What do you think?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I also think about that.”

“Maybe we could share a living room or kitchen since you’re a good cook.” He wandered his eyes around.

“I was thinking the same thing.” The size of the living room was good enough where I could put a set of couch and a few furniture. The apartment had two bedrooms, a kitchen, and two baths just like his.

“That’s the best idea you’ve ever come up with,” he said as we moved to the kitchen.

“I haven’t been able to take a good look at your apartment. Do we have the same floor plan?” I wrapped my arms around his waist as he leaned against the kitchen counter.

“Let’s go then and find out.” He turned his head to look at me.

“Are you sure?”

“I would not say it if I wasn’t, Westley.”

I wished he knew what I was trying to point out. We walked out, and my anticipation was killing me as he pushed the door open. My breathing quickened as he locked it behind us.

A gasp escaped my lips the moment his hands cupped my face and kissed me hard that held my breath in my chest. It was a kiss of confidence and certainty—a kiss that made my toes curl, made my heart race, a kiss that he made a point I was linked to his soul, and a kiss that I was sure I couldn’t run away from.

“Don’t ever think that a single second I never thought of kissing you. You know the reason why I stayed away from you. I couldn’t, and I thought I’d ripped my heart open every time I looked at you, yet I couldn’t touch you, and I couldn’t take you like you were mine. Do you know how hard it is, Westley?”

I looked at him in the eye, and I was pretty sure I’d seen some sincerity, and I just caught myself in the hunger blazing deep inside. “I am sure I know exactly how it felt. I’ve been there, done that. I’m so sorry if I hurt you and if I lied to you. I knew the moment I did that, I ripped my heart with my words.”

He kissed me again. It was quick, and I felt like I wanted more that had my skin prickled. I sagged against the door when our lips parted, and he was squeezing his eyes shut, seemingly tried hard to have everything under control.

“Fuck!” That was the last word that came out from his lips before he smashed into mine. We kissed like it was our last seconds together. His taste mingled with mine, and it was the most delicious thing I’d ever tasted.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and as if on cue, he lifted me, his hands on my ass. I snaked my hands around his neck as we kissed, and before I even realized, he was crossing his living area right to probably his room.

I unwrapped my legs around his waist and stood on my feet. We fumbled to take off our clothes. Within a few seconds, we were both naked, staring at each other as if it just now came to our senses of what we’d done.

I was still stunned, trying to process, trying to wrap my head around it, but I could see the determination in his eyes as he stepped closer to close the gap between us.

He was a sight to behold, and I was instantly ablaze with naked lust powerful than I had ever felt before. I was fascinated with him naked in front of me that I forgot how to breathe. I traced my fingers on his chest down and relished the feeling of his well-sculpted abs against my fingertips.

“What happened to the taking you out on a date?” he seemed amused. “Forget about it, but we are still going to dinner. Right now, I couldn’t think straight. I want you, Westley like I never needed anything in my life. I need you. I was a fool to think that I could control my feelings with or without you. I was wrong, and I think we’ve both suffer enough, and we deserve a little happiness right now, don’t we? Do I talk too much?”

“Yeah. Kinda. Can we talk about it later?” I slowly moved my hand to his back and the other to hold his fully erected cock, and he rewarded me with a deep groan. “We have a moment, and we will

continue that later because I missed you, and I wanted you so much I would collapse if you wouldn't take me," I said between strokes.

"I missed you so bloody much, Westley. I thought I completely lost you." He leaned down and captured my lips. His arms wrapped around my body as he pressed himself against mine. His warmth enveloped me, and I just melted into him.

"I want you now." I wrapped my leg around his waist as I guided his length into my wet entrance. I couldn't ignore the ache between my thighs anymore. It'd been too long since we had each other like this.

In one rough movement, I was lifted from the floor. He then carried me to the bed and settled at the center.

"I want you—" I said urgently. Before I could finish my words, he was all deep inside me. I let out a scream as I felt my walls stretched, and he let go of a guttural roar in surprise.

"Bloody fuck."

The feeling was like a *deja-vu*. Nothing had ever felt so right when it was with him. It had never been felt perfect like this with anyone. My vision blurred with so much sensation building in my core. I squeezed my eyes shut as I felt the kind of contentment, the kind of happiness now that I was with him again.

Then he suddenly pulled it all out. I opened my eyes to the sudden loss of contact, and he was looking at me with the same hunger earlier.

My skin tingled with fierce anticipation as his fingers traveled further to my ass. It was sensory overload as he found the forbidden area, but I didn't want him to stop.

Linton leaned in, and I stilled with a moan, my head backed against the pillow, absorbing the feeling of his hot mouth on my nipple. He sucked it and bit the tiny bud, at the same moment, the tip of his finger pushed inside the ring of my tight hole. The way he grazed it, the sensation promised so much more. The pain and pleasure started to fire on my skin, and it was so delicious that I whimpered in his arms.

He moved to another breast. I gasped in shock and opened my mouth with a silent cry of ecstasy as he bit harder and pulled my nipple into his mouth. My fingers dug into his arms. My hips backed.

He thrust in again. I forgot how massive he was, how he filled me, and stretched my two holes at the same time until I thought I would split apart. Heat raced through me as I was all filled up. I felt he was too much, too full, too good, and I was breathless as we moved in rhythm, and I lost myself with him.

I'd been longing for him, not only to feel his touch, his kiss, him being inside me, it was more than that. I'd been longing for a man's love, for a man's care, and I knew only one person could give that to me, and even if it took a lifetime for as long as he would end up with me, I took my chances.

I opened my eyes, only to meet his heavy-lidded with satisfaction. "I wouldn't want to be with anyone else, Linton." Tears flooded my vision.

"I couldn't think of anything else other than you, Westley. Let go, love. I couldn't hold any longer."

Chapter 42

Take the Plunge

CLYVE

NOTHING HAD ever felt so damn right than to be with a woman you loved. And yes, goddamn right, I loved Westley. She might not tell me the three words, but I knew the feeling, and I knew she was almost there. And my heart just soared high with hope.

I was still inside her, and I felt I was hard again. I wrapped my arms around her and rolled over so that she would be on top of me.

She lifted her hips with a wicked look on her face and bit her bottom lip as I positioned my cock into her entrance. I watched her pussy swallowed my cock inch by inch. The further she sunk in, the louder she moaned until she reached the root.

When she rode on top of me, I matched her movement, lifting my hips. I covered her moan with a searing kiss as I pushed my length forward. My nerves shimmered, sending waves of pleasure throughout my body.

I gripped her thighs to widen her legs as I plunged all the way in. A cry tore out of her throat. As I watched my cock sinking into her pussy, the sensation was building pressure towards my balls, and my muscles began to tighten.

Westley started to writhe on top of me, and her moan was getting louder, her pussy was tightening around me, but that didn't stop her from riding me harder that had my head back against the pillow while I continued to pummel her further.

"Oh god!" She stared up, her eyes enormous, transfixed.

"Come around me, Westley." My pace got faster, my cock began to thicken, and I was breathless as we moved in rhythm, determined to reach the highest.

Then an ecstatic cry filled the air as her inner walls spasmed, and waves of bliss washed over her and collapsed on top me. My body tensed as the strong waves hit me, and I growled as the unspeakable and indescribable pleasure flood through me.

* * *

NO MATTER how I wanted to spend and be with Westley, my phone kept on buzzing. I dragged myself out of bed after I kissed the snoring Westley. We had another round before we finally got some rest.

We hadn't talked if I wouldn't consider moaning, groaning, and screaming with ecstasy could be called talking. Before I closed the door behind me, I looked at her one more time, and I didn't realize how much I missed her and how much I wanted her in my life.

All this time, I let myself suffer from agony when the only answer was right in front of me. I felt a weight lifted off my shoulder, and I was able to breathe freely again.

"About time you answer. I went to your studio, Austen said you left early. How's the meeting with ad service?" It was Skip.

"As you said, I let them do their job. I'm gonna email the pictures they asked, and let them take a few shots they want this week."

"Great. You need that." The tone in his voice changed. There was something he wanted to hold up.

"What is it, Skip?" I felt my throat choke up.

"I have good and bad news."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Bad news first." Either way, I had no choice but to listen to both.

"The artist I asked declined my invitation. He might want a little push." I got it, he didn't know me. Sometimes well-known artists were dicks. They were setting their standard. Small artists wouldn't take a break because of them. For a first-timer art exhibit like mine, they wouldn't even give a chance, especially when it was for a cause. They were scared that it would just go to the pocket of the organization handling the event. I couldn't blame him, but a part of me wanted to shove it to his face when my exhibit would be successful. Hopefully.

I nodded as I pressed my lips tightly before I spoke. "It's alright. I can find another artist, or if I can't, maybe the ads would help me. The good news?"

"I able to convince someone to put his collections on sale. All of the profit will be for the cause."

My heart raced. I could feel my lips slowly spreading into a smile. "How many? I mean, who is he?"

"How about a surprise?" He laughed. I trusted Skip. I was sure I'd be satisfied with those collections, knowing my brother's taste when it came to arts. He was just like my father. I hoped I could make my father proud when the exhibition time came.

"Damn you, brother. Stop being a killjoy." I laughed with him, then familiar hands wrapped around my waist and a soft lips pressed on my bareback. My body responded, and I instantly felt our skin creating a searing heat. I closed my eyes to relish the feelings she caused. I already wanted to be inside her again. I could still feel her warmth, her taste, her sound, her body. She was perfect.

"What is important is you have additional paintings for your gallery."

"Thanks so much, brother. I don't know what to do without you."

"You shouldn't be saying that to me. Try telling that to someone else."

I chuckled. "Fine." I turned around. My gaze transfixed at hers, and I didn't want to look away. She looked well-fucked, sated, and gorgeous, her hair was a messy finest gold against the light. We stared at each other in silent conversation. I was just glad that I made the right call, of picking up what we left off. "I don't know what to do without you. You are the only thing that I am doing right, Westley."

Skip was laughing his ass out loud from the other line before I hung up. I cupped her face and kissed her lips. She must have brushed her teeth or used my mouthwash—she tasted minty.

She didn't kiss me back. Her lips were immobile. When I broke the kiss, she was still staring me at me, deadly serious.

"Westley, did I say something wrong?"

"You're the only thing I'm doing right, Linton."

I wrapped her in an embrace. "What's wrong?"

She sighed in my chest. "I have to revise my manuscript."

"Then do it."

"You don't understand." She pulled away, grabbed a mug, and poured herself a coffee."

"It's dinner time, love. Are you hungry?"

"It's past dinner, but I could eat some sandwich."

I opened the fridge and took something to make her sandwich. I already had a green salad for me.

"Let me do it," she suggested.

I let her and gave her the knife. I waited for her to talk to me, but it didn't happen. "Make me understand, Westley. I wanna help you. We're in this together.

"We passed through secrecy, and I promise to do the same."

She stopped slicing the bread. "Do you have cheese?"

I grinned. "Yeah. My brother was here."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"You haven't told me the story you were writing. Tell me about it."

"I'm not ready to show you. When it's ready, you're the first one to read the sample."

I could feel pride in my chest as I kissed her cheek. "I'm sure it would be a bestseller, Westley. I'm so proud of you."

I grabbed my salad from the fridge and started digging when she bit her sandwich.

"I wish I have the same confidence as you."

"I believe in you."

We sat side by side. I couldn't help but sigh in relief that this was finally happening. I was still trying to wrap my head around it, but when I kissed the side of her head, I knew this was all real that Westley and I were finally together.

"Can I ask you something?"

I looked at her. "You know you don't have to ask me that. Shoot."

"About the painting."

"Your painting?"

"Yeah."

I chuckled. "You're not gonna see it until it's ready."

"So, I'm gonna see it during the exhibition?"

"Yup." I was still not sure if I would put that during the exhibit, but I didn't want to spoil her excitement.

Her brows met together. "What if I'm not gonna like it?"

"Well, then it sucks."

"What if we trade, my manus to your painting."

I shook my head. I was going to read it anyway, but I wanted to see the reaction on her face when she saw her image in the painting. "Still no."

"Fine." She slid from the stool. I wasn't nearly done with my salad, and she was done her sandwich.

"You're hungry, love."

Then she smiled slyly and wickedly. "How could I not?"

My skin started to heat as to the way she looked at me. "Let me finish, then I'd be honored to shut that sultry smile on your face."

Chapter 43

The Painting

WESTLEY

YOU MADE THE right decision. You won't regret it—those were the last words that kept taunting me after I signed the contract and walked out of the publishing house. I hope I wouldn't regret it because that story was very important to me. It was like I opened my soul to those who read it. It was the story of my life, my autobiography.

"Are you ready?" My dad emerged from the door with a smile on his face. I made the right decision to give him a chance. He'd been nothing but thoughtful when I thought I couldn't have my life back.

"You look well-clean up, dad." I looked at him through the mirror. People always said that I got his eyes and lips.

"You are beautiful and the strongest young woman I've known, Harry."

"Thanks, Dad. I guess I got those qualities from you." I smiled. I could see the love and admiration glittering in his eyes—that was enough for me.

"Let's go before your boys would think that we are ditching their exhibition."

When we got to the car, his driver steered the car out of the mansion. When I thought visiting back here would give me a *deja-vu*, I was wrong.

I always loved this place even though most of the time, I had terrible memories. When Dad planned on putting this place on sale, I quickly opposed his idea. We may have some experience here it was not too late to start a new one.

"Dad," I called him while I kept my gaze out of the window.

"Yes, Harry."

"I know you said before that you don't wanna run again, did you regret it? It's not too late, you know. For the next campaign."

"I made my decision, Harry." I felt his hand on mine, squeezing it. "I'd rather spend time with you after traveling and meeting with our investors and shareholders. I know you have a life, and you would be busy too, but I make sure to meet you at least a few times a month."

I looked at him. "I just don't wanna be the reason why you're holding back the things you wanna do. You're not too old, you know."

"Like dating someone?" He shook his head. "If your mom is not the one for me, then maybe no one is out there." I knew he loved my mom, but he was too busy building his empire back then, and he forgot that he also had a responsibility to his family.

"I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy as long as you are. And Clyde seems to care a lot about you."

I couldn't contain my smile. "I care about him too, dad."

I thought we didn't have a lot in common, or we were too much opposite, but lately, as I spent a lot with him, I realized, we almost alike regardless the food we ate, or we didn't have the same taste in music, but he loved art, and I loved literature and designs. We were both broken, had been lost, longing for the love of our parents, and those things that brought us back together.

Clyde was my light, who guided me to the right path. He was my anchor. If it wasn't for him, I might still in that place doing the same thing. I didn't regret my decision. I did that for Keene, but I also need to grow up on my own. Whatever happened to my marriage, maybe it was for my own good.

"You've been silent, Harry."

"I was just thinking about Keene."

"Haven't you two talked yesterday?"

"We did. I'm glad he is happy and enjoying his vacation in Fiji." He sent me a bunch of pictures. I saw a lot of changes in him. He wasn't the guy who worried about tomorrow anymore. He started to live his life the way he wanted.

I cried when I realized I was his burden because I was his best friend. He just couldn't voice it out to me.

"Is he doing okay?"

"Yes. I think he's dating his nurse." I chuckled.

"As long as he's happy, Harry. He'd been through a lot, too."

We arrived at the art exhibit. The last time I was here was two weeks ago, and it didn't look like this. The old building turned out to be a well renovated Italian inspired 19th-century museum.

The media were already gathering in front of the entrance. My nerve was racking as soon as I saw the light and the backdrop. My hands started to sweat. It didn't go unnoticed to Dad.

"You don't have to answer if they will ask you. Remember your briefing?"

I looked at dad. "I think I got this."

"If you feel claustrophobic, just say a word."

I nodded. "Okay."

Dad and I posed for the sake of media. I tried hard to smile nicely even my heart was pounding a million a mile. After a few flashes, the reporters started asking.

I took a few deep breaths. Of course, I was expecting this, and their questions were related to my old job.

"Let's go, Harry," Dad whispered.

"I'll answer a few questions."

He looked worried as he looked at me in the eye. "Are you sure?"

I met his gaze. "Yes."

The media moved forward and formed a ruckus.

"Is it true that you are writing a story about yourself?"

"Since your father admitted that you were in that video, we want to know what pushed you to do it?"

"What inspires you to write a book?"

"What can we expect in that story?"

"Is Sindy Kate really gone?"

The questions continued, and I was like a deer caught in the headlight. My teeth started to tatter, and the flashes were blinding me.

I swallowed all my nerves and smiled. "Yes, I am writing a novel. It's fiction but inspired by my life experience. I want to inspire all the women out there, in all walks of life, that it is okay to dream high, not to give up when things get tough. I want to show them that I may be born into a privileged family, but life isn't always perfect."

"Are you dating Clyde Linton?" A lady in a white blouse asked.

"I'd rather keep my life private. Thank you." I smiled. My mind went back to how lucky I was to be with him. He made me utterly happy, and I'd like to keep my relationship with him private. Dad's security pulled me out from the reporters.

When we got inside the exhibit, my eyes widened in awe as I swirled my head around. The soft background music reached my ears. The first thing that caught my eye was their signature pieces—my brother and Clyve works. There were already framed paintings and textured artworks hanging on the plain walls and sculptures on the tables. There were a lot of unfamiliar people, art patrons, and potential buyers as well.

I spotted my brother talking to a man in his late fifties at the left corner, but I had not seen Clyve yet.

"Let's go meet your brother," Dad said.

Before we could reach closer, Austen saw us first. He smiled. "Harry." Then he looked at the old man again. "Of course, you already know Lyndon Bloom."

The old man smiled and did a handshake with Dad. "Nice to meet again, Lyndon."

"You seem have not aged, Arturo. This is my daughter, Harry."

"Arturo Carilli, my dear." He shook my hand, and I saw a glint in his eyes.

"I know you see me in the video." My mood turned sour.

"Video?"

I stilled, when I shifted my gaze to Austen, he was already clenching his jaw with wide eyes, telling me to shut up.

"I was thinking about that." Arturo pointed at the biggest painting on the wall.

My jaw literally dropped. My eyes might be bigger than saucers. I found myself sauntering toward the painting that had the biggest audience—most of them were discussing in a low voice, but it felt like a buzz to my ears.

"Oh, my god." I stared at the painting, transfixed. "It's me. I was in that painting." It was the photoshoot I did while my brother was painting me, and I still remembered I quitted that day.

"Mr. Westley won't sell it. I thought you can convince him for a hundred?"

"A hundred dollars?" I faced Arturo, seemingly insulted.

"Hundred thousand dollars?"

I turned to the painting again and studied it in awe. My eyes were sad. My hair was perfectly falling down my shoulder while I was gripping the satin sheet to cover my chest. My legs and half of my thighs were exposed. It felt like I was brought back to that day where I was broken—that was how I interpreted the painting.

“Perfect and gorgeous,” a whisper in a low and deep voice in my ear that had me yelping.

Chapter 44

The Plot

CLYVE

IGNORING THE HEAT swept over my body, I gave her a huge grin while her eyes were still wide in surprise. There was also unconcealable anticipation that swam in her blue pools.

She completely turned to face me, then scrolled her gaze from my face down to my toes. “You look...” She met my gaze again.

“Did you just run out of adjective, Author Westley?” I was only wearing a black tuxedo and wore my hair back while she was wearing a floor-length long sleeve embellished silk daring gown with Swarovski crystal beads that covered the important part of her body. The swells of her breasts were exposed, but it still looked pretty decent on her. Her hair was curled and fixed it at the back of her head in a stylish way.

I noticed Mr. Carilli was with us, which I met him earlier. He was one of my brother’s invites.

“Did you find your choice, Mr. Carilli?”

“Indeed, I did. That one.” He pointed at Austen’s masterpiece.

“I see.” I snaked my arm around Westley’s waist. “You know that you are one of many buyers of that masterpiece. You just have to wait at the end of the night, I guess,” I teased him. “The higher price you offer, the higher of chances you would get the chance to own it.”

He picked up his phone from his suit jacket. “Great. I have a call to make. Now, if you excuse me, Clyve and your beautiful lady.”

“Why does he like that painting so much?”

“Because you are gorgeous and Austen just created a masterpiece that would make him famous and rich. I’m happy for him.”

“Me too. I feel his passion. Thank you for giving him a chance.”

“This is why I have this exhibit and studio. And I couldn’t just watch Austen as he waited for someone to discover his talent when I believed that could help him.”

We entered another hallway with a collection of paintings when we spotted Westley’s father.

“Mr. Bloom.”

“Just Lyndon, Clyve.”

“Are these?” A surprise voice of Westley caught our attention.

“Yes. I thought I could donate the profit to Clyve’s Heal Our HeArt Organization.”

Her eyes swam with tears. When Lyndon Bloom visited me last week, I thought he would warn me to stay away from his daughter. Then his men just brought his painting collections inside the studio.

“Whether they get buyers or not, I will trust you to take care of these paintings. Since you are dating my daughter, I’d give my trust that you won’t break her heart. Take care of her just like how you take good care of your art.”

“I won’t promise that I might end up breaking it, but you have my word that I’ll take care of Westley with every cell in my body.”

“These paintings are the only good things left I have for her mother. We both collected these during our trips and visits to art galleries all over the world. I hope, I could help you even a little.”

“Thanks for trusting me with your collections, Mr. Bloom. I will make sure the money will benefit the project I am handling.”

“Thank you, Dad.” She hugged her father.

“You don’t wanna mess your makeup, Harry.”

Westley laughed. “Can’t help but feel emotional. Let’s go to the lounge.”

“You two go ahead. I already chose two pieces. Congrats on the success of your first art exhibit, Clyve. You’ve just proven to me that I chose the right man.” Lyndon just complimented me, and I thought I just blushed.

“Did you just win his heart?” Westley whispered.

“Or I just won your heart,” I marveled.

“Looks like one helluva of a successful exhibition, brother. I’m proud of you.” Skip raised his wine glass as we got closer.

“This would not be—”

He snorted. “Don’t be such a humble when you’re with Harry. Just say thank you, brother. Good to see you again, Harry.” He kissed Westley’s cheek. Westley moved to Arell. Then they started to have their own conversation.

"Thank you for the boost of confidence. Do you think we can sell ten pieces?" I had not checked the desk about the sale, but I hoped to get more buyers.

"Are you kidding me? I'd been watching that desk for almost an hour now, and the staff couldn't put that phone down. They are constantly ringing once they hang up. Look at the people around you, they all have deep pockets, and people like them, they are ashamed to go home empty-handed."

"How about you? You are one of those people who have a deep pocket."

"I got one." He grinned.

"Don't tell me you are one of the buyers of Austen's masterpiece."

"Nah. The rate is getting higher. I chose another painting, and Arella likes the woman under the tree."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"It's painted by one of the soldiers."

"Yeah. She met him earlier."

"So, which one is yours?" I painted one of the images of Westley, but I couldn't sell it. I kept in my studio in my apartment. I had a few paintings I included in the gallery, but none was related to her.

"Guys," Austen called. He was wearing a huge grin on his face. He chose to wear a dark blue tuxedo. When I mentioned him to cut his damn hair, he gave me an odd look. "Can't you believe it?"

"What it is?" His sister with Arella came closer to us.

"Mr. Lau offered six figures for the painting."

"Let me guess, the Sindy Kate," Skip interjected.

Westley narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you just name that painting Sindy Kate?"

"Yeah. It suits the painting. Don't you think, Austen?" my brother said.

He shrugged. "That's the name actually."

"Don't you think you should ask me first before you named it? You need a lawyer brother."

Westley's eyes narrowed into slits. The tone in her voice changed. "Can I talk to you for a sec, please?"

"Are you mad at me?" he asked.

Westley shook her head. "No. Please?"

"Okay. We'll be back." He held Westley's hand. When I gave them a knowing look, they both walked away.

"What was that all about?" Arella asked.

"I don't know." I walked to the buffet and picked up herb-marinated olives and snatched a glass of wine. "Maybe she doesn't wanna hear about Sindy Kate again, but she seems okay with it though."

"She can't run away from the character who made you two closer, you know. Even me, the Sinderella is still stuck with me until now," Arella said.

"It's not the same. She was a cam girl, and her step-mom used that name to humiliate her," I replied.

"I guess you're right. I shouldn't have mentioned it," Skip admitted.

"It's alright. I thought Austen had informed Westley about it. I'll go check them both. See you guys later."

I checked them everywhere, but I couldn't find either Westley or Austen. Maybe they went to the office after I called their names at the female loo and knocked and nobody answered me.

"Westley, are you there?"

The door swung opened. "You okay, mate?"

Austen came out of the door and acted as if he didn't hear me.

"Westley, can I come in?" I was already inside, and I heard nothing from her. She was facing the wall and seemed to be shaking.

"Westley, what's wrong?" I rushed towards her and forced her to face me. She was crying. I cupped her face and wiped the smeared makeup and tears. My heart sunk to my stomach to see her like this. I knew for a fact now that her pain was my pain. "What's wrong? Did that asshole hurt you?"

She shook her head without meeting my gaze. "No."

"Look at me, love. What's wrong?" I pulled her into my chest and wrapped my arms around her. She kept crying no matter how I tried to soothe her. "Tell me, Westley."

If it was bad news I knew I had known it by now, but it had something to do with them. This may be a family matter, but they were also my family. I shouldn't have to get in the middle of siblings fight, but seeing her like this, and the expression on Austen's face, I knew I had to do the right thing. Westley was my love, and Austen was my friend.

“Westley, I’m not good at guessing games, and I can’t leave you here like this. Do you wanna go home? I can ditch the exhibit if you wanna rest.”

She pulled away. Her eyes were pleading. “Don’t hate me, please?”

My brows squished together as I kissed the top of her head. “Why would I do that?”

She sobbed. “I told Austen about the story I was writing when you should be the one who I consulted first. I’m so sorry, Linton.”

I held her arms. “And is that what upsets you?” I shook my head and smiled at her to show her that it wasn’t a big deal to me.

“It’s not all. I did something that I knew was intrusive.”

“I don’t care, Westley. I don’t care for as long as you are with me. That’s how much I—”

Before I could finish my words that I’d been keeping in my chest, she stopped me, and I felt like she just stabbed me with a knife.

“You should. The story I wrote is about Sindy Kate and your relationship with her.”

Chapter 45

Trouble in Paradise

WESTLEY

IT'D HAD BEEN bugging me for weeks, but I couldn't ruin the things we've already started. The story was also important to me. I knew what would happen when Austen mentioned about his painting, and he made me promise to tell Clyve before the book launching, but I never imagined that day would be tonight, and I just ruined the best night of his life.

Clyve stared at me, his gaze was vicious. "Come again?"

I felt my throat choke up. I still gathered all my power to explain since I already blew the bomb right in front of his face. "It was a part of the deal. As an aspiring writer, I needed that."

He waved his hand to cut me off. "No. You wanted it. You wanted to sell your story, including mine. That's what is all about."

"That's not like that. Hear me out first."

"What else to hear you out, Harriet? You already took their bait. You are a lot of things, but you are not stupid." He hissed. His voice was deadly quiet. "And when are you planning on telling me?"

"I'm just waiting for the right time."

"And when would it be? Tonight? In my bloody exhibit? Well, scratch yourself with your hypocrisy. You just shot me in the face. You ruined my night!"

"I'm so sorry." I ignored the insult swept over my body. It already happened, but I still wished it didn't happen tonight.

"You are not. I thought what we had was something special, but I was wrong. I was wrong to trust you again. You used me. Jesus Christ, Harry, you are the shallowest woman I've ever met. Of all the things you would sell out was all about us—the only thing left that hadn't been out to the public."

You used me. My heart turned to ice. "I didn't write your name."

"People are not so damn stupid, Harriet. Let me guess, your story is entitled Sindy Kate, isn't it?"

I nodded slowly. My heart just broke. I felt my tears rolling down my cheek as I waited for him to say another hurtful word. It didn't take five seconds, the frightening moment just happened.

“Of course, it’s Sindy bloody Kate!” he spat out. His rage was boiling out. “I am fucking you, and that’s your story? Don’t you think that man you wrote with another name is not me?” Ouch! It hurt like hell.

“Just fucking now, huh?”

“What else is there?”

Suddenly, I felt terrified that I could even speak, and I couldn’t even look at him in the eye because I was damn guilty.

“I thought that Sindy Kate’s issue is over, but I guess you love that idea. You embraced that character you created because a lot of people have their sympathy in that fantasy character of yours. For bloody’s sake, Harriet. You just sold our story. I couldn’t believe I am looking at the woman I care about right now. When I thought that issue is settled, and that we could finally have a chance to be together. How could you not care about our lives, Westley? Is that the legacy you want your children to know about you? A woman who fucked herself in front of the camera, who showed her body to the viewers for a little token?”

Jesus Christ, that was way more aggravating than I thought. I lifted my gaze. The hatred on his face matched mine. “You are completely off the base, Linton!”

“Well, you are selfish!”

“I know you look at me worse than a prostitute. Go on, shove that to my freaking face, Clyve, because you are so damn self-righteous that you never made mistakes. But I can’t turn back the time. One thing you should know is I never regretted every damn time I did what I did. That’s what made me who I am today. That’s why I am still here standing despite what happened in my past life. I will do it in a heartbeat for the sake of someone I care about. I never felt ashamed of being a Sindy Kate in case you haven’t noticed.”

Maybe there was a grain of regret and trust left in him because he suddenly dropped his gaze. “Let me guess, you never experienced in a situation without a damn choice, have you? And you never have someone you care about that you wanted to risk everything to make them happy. All your life was to take orders. That’s who you are Clyve Clifford Linton. A puppet. And that’s what you should be ashamed of.”

* * *

TWO WEEKS HAD passed, and I realized I might have crossed the line. Anyhow, I couldn’t take it back. My father told me that my painting was sold with two million dollars. Well, I was happy for them. I never heard from Clyve and Austen since then.

I agreed to meet Arella since I couldn't make anymore excuse. Now I was sitting across hers in the coffee shop. I kept toying the cup while she kept on explaining how Clyve felt terrible for throwing those words into my face. If I was being honest, he had the right to, besides, I should have discussed it with him first. That was the relationship all about.

"Do you hate him?"

I met her gaze before I shook my head. "No. It was my fault. I should've asked him first before I decided. I thought it was okay for him since he accepted me as who I was. I couldn't hate him. I already have a lot of burdens to carry for a lifetime."

"Then give him a chance, Harry."

I sighed deeply. "How would I do that when I haven't received a single message from Clyve since I left the exhibit?"

"He felt guilty. You know when I was in trouble with Skip, he was the first one who put a smile on my face, and I haven't formally met him at that time, and he was also the first one to be there for me when I lost my job."

My brow arched. "So, this is all about him, huh? You're here to return the favor for him." She reached out for a hand. "Of course not. I am here as your friend. I put Skip's life at risk when I slept with him. I was just seventeen at that time. Then I met him again only to figure out he was my brother's best friend. Do you know how hard it is for us? Skip is Skip, and I am willing to break another rule if I have to do it just to be with him. Thankfully, he did the same. True love comes only once, Harry. You will meet many people in your lifetime, but there's only one true love, and no matter how many obstacles you cross, you both end up in the finish line together. Relationships are always scary. That's why there are you and him to work things out together."

"He didn't reach out. It means to say, I am not that important to him anymore." There were these famous words that you had not realized how much you needed him until he was no longer there. That was how I felt when I was sitting alone just right next to his door, yet, I couldn't just knock, and he also didn't even make an effort. "I should have been honest the whole time."

"I made the same mistakes, Harry. Seven years, I carried that burden. It didn't feel right. There was a time that I wanted just to scream to pull out the struggle I had, but I made my choice. Don't do the same mistake as I did. Don't make it longer for another seven years."

"How did he handle it?"

She smiled sadly. "When Skip found out I was pregnant, he threw awful words at me, but he also looked devastated when he realized I was still young to get pregnant alone because I couldn't disappoint my family."

I looked up when tears filled my eyes that blurred my visions. “When Clyve knew I was married, there was a time when I woke up from a nightmare, and I felt I’d rather not wake up from it rather than waking up, and there was no Clyve there to comfort me.” Every time I mentioned his name, I felt like I was twisting a knife in my heart.

“It’s not too late. I am sure when Clyve reads the book, he’s gonna be proud of you. You risked your relationship with him, not for nothing—it’s to reach your dream. Skip understood him when he chose his passion than helping his brother managed their Empire. Soon, he will understand that your passion means a lot to you.”

It felt good that someone understood me even though her intention was for Clyve’s sake. Suddenly, a feeling of peace enveloped me. “Thank you. I actually need that.”

“I’m just a call away, Harry.” Relief flitted across her face.

“So, how’s he?”

Arella laughed. “Haven’t you ever thought that he might have been listening to you or watching you from a small hole, or maybe he’d been waiting for you when you get home or get out?”

“I was actually hoping I’d bumped into him every time I got home, but his apartment seemed so quiet.”

“You both are so silly. Why doesn’t anyone of you just swallow your pride and makeup?”

“I was hurt, and he was, too. I apologized, but he acted as if I wasn’t sorry.”

“Sometimes, Skip and I fought over a small thing, but we ended up in the same bed, and I couldn’t sleep until I knew we were okay.”

“I hope he will give my book a chance.” All of a sudden, I felt I was being watched. The hair at the back of the head rose. I rubbed my arms, and my heartbeat raced. Even Arella noticed my discomfort.

“Harry, is that you?” I startled from the voice behind me.

I was quicker on my feet, facing my worse enemy. “What do you want?”

“I just wanna talk to you, Harry.” Look how fate was so twisted. I couldn’t even recognize my step-mom and her loving daughter anymore. I guessed my father’s money was the only thing that made them look like rich.

“I have nothing to do with you anymore. After you took everything from me, you also have to humiliate me. If you come here to apologize, forget about it. If you come here for money, I don’t have any. That’s why I’m doing my best to get a decent job despite my colorful past. You two can

ask the staff there.” I pointed at the counter. “Maybe they’re looking for waitstaff. Stay out of my life before I will make your worse nightmare comes true.”

Chapter 46

For CC

CLYVE

“WHAT THE BLOODY fuck?” I closed the book. It was so funny when I might be the first one to buy Sindy Kate. I ordered online, then I realized it would take a day before it could be delivered to my office. Then I had to walk to the bookstore and fill in line because apparently, it was a best-seller.

I couldn’t be prouder for her that for a rookie author, she made it to the best-selling list.

Austen ignored me. I threw a pen to him just to catch his attention.

“Fuck off, Linton. I am reading.” He didn’t even look at me.

“You are a horrible company.”

“You are a distraction.” He paused, then he roared, “What the fuck?”

I rose from my chair and sat beside him on the couch. “Which page are you?”

He raised his hand to warn me. “Don’t. You, Collin the asshole forced her for a deal?”

“What? That’s fiction. First and foremost, Collin is a rubbish name. Second, I am not that shy. I’m just choosy over women I slept with.”

Austen laughed. Finally, I got his attention. “When was the last time you get laid?”

“Seriously, do you want me to shag another woman while I’m still with your sister? What kind of brother are you?”

His brow arched, amused. “You must have hit your head too hard. The last time I checked, you two broke up. Like a very nasty breakup.”

“We only had a little misunderstanding, idiot.”

“Then what are you still doing here? Do you need my help, Linton? Did you lose your touch?” He chuckled and shook his head while I was glaring at him.

“You’re no help.” I opened the book again and searched for the page where I left unfinished reading.

I was just in chapter ten, but I could say it was full of emotion. The character of Sindy Kate was complex. She had full of flaws, yet she was also strong and driven. She was completely the Harry Bloom I knew, and she did a good job in making Sindy a heroine in the story.

Westley was a good writer, an inspiration to all the women out there. Even men could relate to the story of Sindy Kate. When I watched her interview, it was too late that it wasn't actually a secret of her writing a story about her other character. Now, I couldn't do anything other than reading and dwelling my life in sorrow.

She met Arella weeks ago. I knew it because I wanted to know how was she doing, but she seemed okay and even faced her monsters of a step-mom and step-sister with courage.

"Okay, this is the best part."

My head snapped to Austen. I snatched the book from his hands. "That's awkward, mate. You shouldn't be reading a sex scene, especially when you know it's your sister's story."

"And other men can? You are overreacting, man. Give my book back. This is fiction, remember?" He stood up, trying to snatch his book from me.

"Let's go and get drunk. My treat."

He rolled his eyes. "More likely, let's go and get you drunk, asshole. Give me my book, or I will go and buy and read in my apartment."

Austen rent a new apartment just across my building. I stayed most of the night with him when I couldn't sleep thinking about Westley. He once lied to me that Westley went out on a dinner with her agent. I couldn't even begin to imagine them enjoying a night together while I was staying awake at night, missing her like crazy.

Who would want to be with me anyway? I was no one when I met her, and I was still no one up to this very moment. She was right about one thing though—I should be the one who should be ashamed—I was just a puppet who had not proven anything.

That night, the thought of her alone with her agent, kissing or moaning beneath that asshole made me angrier and sad at the same time. Thankfully, before I could do something stupid, Austen took back what he said and that he was only messing with me.

There was a part of me wanted to knock on her door, but I had to keep myself apart to rethink what I did for her and what I sacrificed still mattered for both of us. In my heart, I knew I still loved Westley. I never doubted that. My heart always ached when I thought how good we were together, then in an instant, I let my anger and rage consumed me, and I ended up screwing things up between us.

I hadn't realized how much I loved her until she was no longer with me. I could still remember the hatred look on her face before she bolted out of this office. It was still fresh to me, and I wished I let her explain, and I wished I knew how to control my rage, but I let that anger control me instead.

I sighed again, wishing she was thinking of me, but that was impossible. She didn't like an idiot like me anymore.

All these past few weeks, I wondered if she ever missed me after she bolted out without a proper goodbye.

"Just say it out loud. You're giving me a headache."

"I love her."

"Why am I not so surprised?" Austen rolled his eyes. "Did you tell her that?"

"She stopped me." His expression turned sympathetic before he focused back on the book. "Oh, that's terrible. Your fault. So, what's your plan?"

"Apologize?"

"When your plan won't work? Do you have plan B?"

"I'll make sure plan A will work. That's plan B."

"Great. Sign me up."

My gaze flew to Austen. "Really?"

He sighed, finally closed the damn book. "Yes. Because look at you, man. You look like shit. Harry is just right next door, but you didn't have guts to knock and apologize because you are damn guilty. A woman has a soft heart. If sorry won't be effective, there isn't a little persuasion and determination won't do the trick. You only have to make them feel and prove it to them how sorry you are and how sincere you are of winning them back."

"Westley is different."

"That's where you are wrong, man. Men are mostly stupid, thinking relationships and women are complicated."

"Let us say you're right. How should I apologize to Westley? I sent her flowers, only to find out she gave it to the homeless old man."

"Seriously, dude? Did you write a message?" He stared at me, transfixed for a few seconds. "You actually don't have a plan?"

"Not at this moment." I shrugged.

"Jesus, do you really love my sister?" His voice was deadly serious.

"You just told me I looked like shit. Would I look like this if Westley meant nothing to me? I made mistakes for not giving her a chance to explain, for saying words that I couldn't take it back." My heart crashed because I hurt her when I should be the last person to judge her.

"Enough of your melodrama, Linton. Read the book from start to end."

"Why?"

"Did you even read the dedication?"

"I don't think it's necessary."

"You are full of shit!"

"You are a horrible friend."

"Man up, man. You can't let your sorrow drown you. Trust me, there's nothing painful than watching your girlfriend for the last time being rolled down six feet below the ground, but what I thought of if she would be happy to see me drowning in alcohol or dwelling in sorrow. Of course, I knew her well, and she would be cussing me from wherever she was if I did that to myself. Moving on doesn't mean I have to forget her, or she thinks that I replace her. It's part of growing up, and that there's always a life out there waiting for me."

"I am not moving on. I can't give up on us. I don't think I can, Austen. I made mistakes, and I am a horrible person, I know that, but she changed me. My life used to be black and white and messy until I met your sister."

"Sometimes we hurt the one we loved because of the choice we made. For CC. That's her dedication."

Chapter 47

Late Than Never

CLYVE

THE TRAFFIC WAS horrendous.

I stared at my phone, watching the clock as if it was a time bomb ready to explode in my hand. I was going to be late, then Austen was not answering my damn call.

“Why aren’t we moving? I am kinda in a hurry here,” I asked the cab driver irritably. I should have driven or hired a driver already, but I thought my life had a pretty boring routine.

“Maybe there’s an accident ahead, sir,” the cab driver answered with disinterest. In his mind, he was already cursing me like shit. He thought I was an asshole like most of his passengers when times like this.

I redialed Austen. This time it went to his voicemail. Damn it!

In hindsight, maybe not talking to Westley for weeks was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have done that, besides these past few weeks without her in my life was enough for me to run away from the hell I called my flat.

Since I found out her divorce with Keene was finalized weeks ago, I couldn’t wait another day telling her how I felt.

Took you long enough, asshole. You should have done that months ago.

I dialed my brother. Maybe he could help get me out of this bloody traffic. He picked up right away as if he was constantly staring at his phone just like I did moments ago.

“Clyve?”

“Yeah, who else?”

“Whoa, brother. What’s wrong? Aren’t you suppose to be her book signing?”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for shoving my sorry arse right into my face.”

“Is that even possible.” He chuckled, and that irritated me even more. My pulse was already racing with anger because of the bloody traffic, and now my brother was no help.

“Maybe you can call your fairy godmother to magically turn this cab into a bloody helicopter so that I can fly out of this bloody traffic, how about that?”

“Wow! You are scary, brother. Just calm down.”

“I don’t wanna calm down. What I want is to get out of this bloody traffic and be at the event. I am terribly late.” I checked at the watch on my phone. Ten minutes more before the event would start. Great!

“Hey, this is not the last book signing she’s gonna have. If you can’t make it, then just talk to her after the event. Or brother, maybe you should man-up and be realistic. Knock on her door and ask for your forgiveness. There’s nothing better than you two would talk about your unresolved issues in private.”

“My plan should work, Skip. You are not helping.”

“I know it will, but just in case, you know.”

“Fine.” I hung up.

Finally, the traffic moved an inch a minute.

“There’s an accident ahead, sir,” the cab driver informed.

I felt like a shit for snapping at him and for the family who got into an accident. It was an SUV collided with a black sedan. The cop mobile was already in sight and the ambulance just drove off. The men in that vehicle were probably in a hurry just like me. I could be in that accident if I drove myself because I had an event to catch up.

My anger cooled off as we moved smoothly towards the place where I wanted to be. Then I found a text from Austen.

Austen: Sorry, man. My phone is in silent mode. WTF are you?”

CC: Caught in the traffic. There’s an accident ahead of my cab.

Austen: You are the only billionaire who doesn’t have a driver and doesn’t own a private jet. Time to get one, man.

CC: I don’t need them. And I’m not a billionaire.

Austen: Just get the fuck in here. They’re gonna close the venue in like 3.

Fuck!

After twenty bloody minutes, I finally arrived.

“Keep the change.” I gave a huge tip to the cab driver.

“A-are you sure?” he asked me incredulously.

“Yes. Thanks for driving me here safe.” I ran toward the bookstore building. And now, I hated the revolving door. I was stuck with the family who had three kids.

Seriously, the universe hated me.

From the glass wall, I instantly saw her. She had a mic on her hand. My heart thunderously raced in my chest. I missed Westley like damn crazy. Westley was beautiful, always. Right now, she had the most genuine smile on her face. She was literally glowing. I wondered what made her glow like that, or who made her glow? I ignored the twist in my stomach as I pushed the glass door.

It was locked. Fuck. I pulled it instead, but it was really locked.

“I’m sorry, sir. The door is closed for the event. You can’t get inside,” said the ginger head young man.

“Really? What if I blow this fucking building?”

His green eyes went wide, terrified. Then I realized I could be in jail with my threat, and he thought I was a terrorist.

“Look, mate. I was stuck in the bloody traffic for almost two hours. You can ask Westley over there.” I pointed at Westley through the glass door. “That I’ve never been late, but there’s an accident that happened before my cab could pass through. That’s why I am late. You can watch the local news to confirm. Besides, my friend is in there already. You can call Austen. He’s the brother of Harry Bloom.”

He stared at me, transfixed. After I explained to him for like a fucking minute, he just stared at me.

“Are you gonna let me in or what?”

He shook his head repeatedly.

“Fine. I’ll punch myself and tell the people that you assault me. How about that?”

His eyes went terribly enormous again. “Are you insane?”

“Then open the bloody door, or I swear to god.”

“Okay, okay. Jeez, man. Stop threatening me.” He fumbled the keys and unlocked the door.

“What’s your name?”

“Byorn.”

“Thanks, Byorn. I owe you big time. If you need anything, just go to any Linton businesses and tell them you are there to see Clyde Linton.” I patted his back.

Finally, I was in. Relief washed over me. Westley's voice was like a melody to me. She hadn't seen me yet. Her focus was on her book. I slowly marched forward, but there was no single empty chair, and most of the audiences were standing. Since I was taller than most people around her, I could still see her even from a distance.

Pride and relief swamped over me. This was where she exactly belonged, inspiring her readers to embrace what they love, their true colors, and to be true to themselves. Despite making mistakes, there was always a new beginning, and she just started hers.

When she was done, she smiled and gave the mic to the emcee.

"We will take a few questions from the audience. Then we will move on to the book signing."

I raised my hand, but I was at the back, and there was no chance she could choose me.

"I'm from Weekly Magazine. I love the story. It's hard to find inspirational books as a story like yours. If you've given two choices for your character, like asking help for her parent over letting her choose the job, what would you choose?"

"Thank you." She took a deep breath. "This story is inspired by my true experience. It wasn't easy for me to be in that position, and you might all raise your brows and look at me as a hypocrite if I say things happen for a reason. Being a Sindy Kate taught me a lot of things. I became matured from being a brat or a black sheep because of my choices. And that poor choice also changed my views in life. And not all the time, you can depend on someone even if it is your family. One day you have to decide and stand on your own for you to grow. That's one of my life lessons. Thank you."

"Please, can I ask a question?" It was Austen who yelled and stood up. Everyone laughed at him.

"Sure." Westley smiled.

"Thanks, Harry. I'm kinda intrigued by the love interest of Sindy in the story. So, if this man is based on the man she met, is he this introvert? I mean, is he for real? For someone as beautiful as Sindy, she could have men filling in line to be with her. What's so special about this guy Collin? I'm so jealous, man."

The audience laughed at him again. "And how far do you go for love."

"Thank you. That's my brother, anyway. Collin has a choice. Like he chose to be vegan. He chose his passion for art over managing their empire. He chose to drink sparkling water over the finest wine. He chose a simple life over luxury. He's that kind of man who you rarely find nowadays. And he chose to be with someone he had a connection with despite how messy Sindy's life had. He saw the real woman behind Sindy Kate. He never judged the choice she made. Those are only a few lists

I could give you on how special Collin was. How far I should go for love? If men traveled to the moon, I'd willing to go beyond."

The crowd applauded. And I thought I was the luckiest man on earth. My heart was thunderously beating inside my chest, and I could feel it was soaring high. Then I realized her answer was from her heart. She still cared about me.

I raised my hand. I wasn't exactly expecting I would be called. Then the air shifted around the venue. Westley's gaze landed on me, and I could see the shock on her face. Her eyes somewhat twinkled with anticipation, surprised, and longing mixed all together.

"Yes," she simply said.

I grabbed the mic offered to me without breaking my gaze. I could feel everyone's eyes on me, but I didn't give a damn about them. I focused solely my attention to Westley.

I took a deep breath before I spoke. "I read the book like maybe three times or more, which never happened to me. For one, I'm not much a fan of an autobiography novel, but now I take it back because, from the moment I read your book, I am your biggest or maybe your number one fan."

The audience chuckled.

"I know the real Collin is one piece of an asshole. Sorry for the word choice. I just thought it was a perfect adjective for him, but aren't we all are sometimes? We screwed things up, and Collin had his moments, and the lucky lad reconciled with Sindy Kate. Don't you think the real Collin deserves a second chance, deserves his happiness as well? Since Sindy Kate is based on your life experience, then you can't disappoint your readers. You can't leave them hanging with what exactly happened after they kissed, can you, Westley? I mean, Harry. As your number one fan, I strongly suggest that you should write a sequel. I am sure your fans would love that."

Tired and determination should not be mixed, but this was what I felt right now. I was a few fans away before I could have my book signed. My question and my speech earlier were cut off with gushes and yells in excitement from the audience erupted. They were more excited to know what happened to Sindy and Collin's romance.

Finally, after a long tiring hours, I was in front of Westley. She just took the book and didn't even lift her gaze to look at me and ask for my name like she did to everyone. She opened the first page, then she stilled and chuckled the moment she saw the note I stuck in earlier.

And as for me, my tongue was stuck inside my mouth. I couldn't even tell my name while she was waiting patiently for me. I was jittering, scared like shit that she would not give me a chance at all.

Finally, she smiled, and her gaze flew up at me. I just caught the love blazing in her eyes—it was enough to answer my question, and I could live with that.

“Do you also want a selfie, my number one fan?”

I didn’t realize I was just standing there longer than I should have until someone nudged me to move.

Then Westley wrote something down and gave my book back.

“Yes!”

Epilogue

WESTLEY

“YOU DON’T HAVE to do this.” It was our twelfth destination in four months tour with the Linton private jet. It wasn’t that I was complaining because spending time with Clyve was the best time of my life.

When he asked me for a dinner date during the book signing, I knew it was the first of so many, and who was I to say no when all I could think was him every time I fell asleep and woke up every morning for weeks.

When I thought he gave up on us, I was wrong. He’d been plotting with Austen the whole time.

“You did not enjoy, did you?” Pain and disappointment crossed his face.

“Are you kidding me?” I rounded to his side. “For four months, my life with you is perfect. This is what I always wanted, to be with you where ever destination brings us together. I love every second of it, Linton. You know I even enjoyed just lazily cuddling with you on the couch.”

“I just wanna make it up to you.” He closed the gap between us and kissed me on my lips. “And I thought, maybe you could finish writing the sequel.”

I had not told him that I was done writing, and he was about to read it in the cabin. “I promise you will love it. For you, Mr. Linton.” I sighed deeply as his smell assaulted my senses, and my skin tingled with fierce anticipation as his fingertips traveled further on my thigh.

A few months ago, I would have never expected this to happen. If Clyve didn’t visit the cabin, I was probably the same person as I was. If our fates weren’t intertwined, though it bound to happen whether I was there and Clyve was at the other part of the world, I might still be that cam girl, the Sindy Kate.

The jet arrived. Keene picked us up from the airport. And what I couldn’t believe was him dating his nurse, and they looked cozy together. He looked great, still on his maintenance, but far way better than before we left for his treatment. I thought love and attention made his recovery quicker.

“Wow! A lot is going on here, mate,” Clyve said with eyes filled with amazement.

The two cabins were the same, but there was a two-story B&B at the center, and there were a few cars parked around, vacationists sitting on my favorite place where I spent my first night with Clyve and Keene.

"The cabins have been busy for days. Yours just vacated yesterday," Keene said as we followed the guy who brought our luggage to the cabin.

"I'm happy for you, Keene." I kissed him on the cheek.

"Thanks." He grinned, stole a glance at Linton. "I'm happy for you two. Maybe you can sign our copy."

"I can't believe you bought another copy. I already sent you one with my autograph, silly. I'll sign it later, okay?"

* * *

"GOOD TO BE back." The cabin still looked and smelled the same; the finest wooden scent and the ambiance, and this was where I wanted where I had so many memories here in just a few days, and this was where my life had utterly changed.

Maybe one of the reasons why Clyve brought me back to this place because this place was special for us.

I threw myself to the bed while Clyve was propping his hands on his narrow hips. Every time I looked at him, I couldn't help but be grateful for how lucky I was to have a man like him who always made me his top priority.

Since we get back together, he never missed making me feel loved, and never missed a day without telling me how much he loved me. And, god, I loved him more than the word love itself. And there was nothing a better gift to yourself than having someone who loved you back despite your dark pasts and flaws.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Then I should blindfold myself."

"What a pretty damn good idea." He crawled up to the bed and settled on top of me. "I still remember the first time I kissed you and made love with you in this bed. I thought that was the best decision I ever made. Sleeping with you and being inside you was the best feeling in the world."

Our lips met together, but his lips were immobile. "Our first kiss was not here."

Then he sighed into our lips. "I know, but it always feels like the first time. I love you so much, Westley."

"Same."

He broke the kiss, and I could feel he was staring at me that had my breathing held. When I opened my eyes, we looked at each other in the silent conversation for a few seconds, reading each other through our souls.

“Look up.”

I did as he told me, and I thought that was the most exquisite item I’d ever seen. *How come I didn’t notice it when I entered?* Wow! The image of me naked in bed, asleep, in this same bed, the same and the very first night where we shared our desires and emotions. I was exposed, even the piercing on my nipple stood up, yet it didn’t look intrusive.

It was perfect.

I could feel every emotion, hard work, and sweat he put into it because it perfectly and beautifully created like those Renaissance arts. His masterpiece and it rendered me speechless.

“It meant to be for our eyes only. The most priceless art I’ve ever have, and I wanna share it with you.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off of his painting, given that it was me in there, said breathlessly, “I’m honored.”

“The honor is mine, Westley.” He looked at me in the eye, and I could see the brewing emotions in there. I loved everything about this man, but what I loved the most about him was that he never concealed how he felt about me and everything. “I’d like to make us official. *Official.*” What’s that supposed to mean? “Marry me, Harriet Audene Westley Bloom.”

“God, I love you so much more, Clyve Clifford Linton.”

* * *

The End