

Through Your Eyes

Author not credited

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

Contents

Chapter 1	7
Chapter 2	10
Chapter 3	13
Chapter 4	16
Chapter 5	19
Chapter 6	22
Chapter 7	25
Chapter 8	28
Chapter 9	31
Chapter 10	34
Chapter 11	38
Chapter 12	41
Chapter 13	44
Chapter 14	48
Chapter 15	51
Chapter 16	54
Chapter 17	57
Chapter 18	60
Chapter 19	63
Chapter 20	66
Chapter 21	69

Chapter 22	72
Chapter 23	75
Chapter 24	78
Chapter 25	81
Chapter 26	85
Chapter 27	88
Chapter 28	91
Chapter 29	95
Chapter 30	98
Chapter 31	101
Chapter 32	104
Chapter 33	107
Chapter 34	112
Chapter 35	115
Chapter 36	118
Chapter 37	121
Chapter 38	124
Chapter 39	127
Chapter 40	130
Chapter 41	133
Chapter 42	136
Chapter 43	139
Chapter 44	142

Chapter 45	145
Chapter 46	148
Chapter 47	151
Chapter 48	155
Chapter 49	158
Chapter 50	161
Chapter 51	164
Chapter 52	167
Chapter 53	170
Chapter 54	173
Chapter 55	176
Chapter 56	179
Chapter 57	182
Chapter 58	186
Chapter 59	189
Chapter 60	192
Chapter 61	195
Chapter 62	198
Chapter 63	201
Chapter 64	205
Chapter 65	208
Chapter 66	211
Chapter 67	214

Chapter 68	217
Chapter 69	221
Chapter 70	224

About this edition

This StoryPDF reading edition contains the complete English text, with its original paragraph and section order preserved.

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Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I got the inspiration to write this book when the COVID-19 outbreak started to hit my country. I just imagined a love story that grows amidst the virus outbreak, but I realized later that this storyline could be a sensitive issue to those who are affected. So, I changed the name of the virus to make it fictional and diverted the course of the story from what I originally created in my mind.

"Red, can you please spare me a box of face masks?"

I frowned at this message from a friend as I opened my messenger app. I crossed my leg over the other as I slumped over the couch in our physician's lounge as soon as I finished writing orders. I was already exhausted from those non-stop admissions. It was already past three in the morning when I returned to the quarters, and yet, all the ER beds were still full. Others were even helping themselves into the chairs while waiting for vacancies in the medical-surgical ward.

"Why can't she just go to the nearest pharmacy or medical supplies outlet?" I grumbled to myself as I opened another message, shaking my head for this nonsense stuff. Having scanned my other unread messages, I shifted to YouTube Channel to watch my favorite music videos.

Just as I was halfway through my first video, a message notification popped in, and in a few seconds, another came in, so I hurriedly opened it. To my dismay, it was another annoying asking-for-help messages to facilitate their mask procurement.

"Dr. Red, is your hospital still selling masks?"

"Of course."

"If you don't mind, please spare me even just one box."

Soon, the succession of similar messages alarmed me. I reached over the phone and connected myself to the Central Supply Room.

"Sir, good morning. Dr. Red here. Can you please charge to my account twenty boxes of masks?"

I heard him gasped and giggled before he replied, "Doc, I'm sorry. We are no longer giving out masks except for staff on duty. All companies are not accepting orders anymore, so if we continue selling out, we wouldn't have enough for our needs."

"What?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I then began to understand why I received those many desperate messages asking me to spare them a box. The people must have gone frantic in buying masks.

True enough, I opened my Google browser, and the alarming newsfeeds about people's panic buying of masks, Vitamin C, hand sanitizers, and bottles of alcohol greeted me. As a person who doesn't care about reading news, even if news portals were buzzing loudly about the same headlines that went around for almost a month already, I was shocked to see posts from social media that masks were no longer available anywhere. Posts about long lines of people queuing up in pharmacies to buy masks had gone viral and online sellers of N95 or plain earloop masks were enjoying their price hike.

I made another cup of coffee as I browsed through the headlines about the Bronc X virus. I opened one and learned that at that moment, the death toll from the outbreak in Sama island increased to hundreds, causing a worldwide threat.

Bronc X virus had originated in late 2019 in Sama, an island in the southwest region of Philippine territory. The source of the virus was still unknown but the epidemic started in this place. Being a famous destination swarmed by tourists from all over the world, the status in this place had caused the fast spread of the virus to more than 300 countries worldwide. It then led to more than a thousand deaths in the Philippines alone, forcing retailers and travel operators to close stores, cancel flights, cruises, and warn investors about the inevitable financial crisis. To prevent the spread of the virus, thousands of people across the world had been placed in quarantine, especially those tourists coming from Sama Islands, and those people they were having close contact with.

My thoughts were still on those infected children and those quarantined travelers when a friend of mine, who was also a resident physician, appeared in the doorway.

"Red, have you saved a box for your family?" she asked, and through her worried looks, I could tell that she was also concerned about the shortage of masks.

I shrugged my shoulders off and stretched out my palms open. "Duh! Our existing infectious diseases here are more threatening than that. We don't even wear masks all the time even if we know that 70% of the air we breathe contains *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*."

Mycobacterium tuberculosis is one of the species of pathogenic bacteria that also appeared as a serious worldwide health problem. It is an airborne bacteria, causing an infectious disease that primarily affects the lung.

"Yes, it's true. Our measles outbreak was also deadly, but since this infection is a worldwide threat now, we should also take precautions, especially if we have children and elderlies in the house. School administrators even require children to wear masks."

As soon as my friend left, I leaned my head on the backrest and closed my eyes. The caffeine in my third cup of coffee no longer did its task in keeping me awake. I still had a few hours to complete before I could finally leave and spend the rest of my day off.

Just when I drifted into sleep, having vivid dreams about the earlier events in my duty, a frightened voice, and a hand that shook my shoulders vigorously, woke me up. I opened my eyes but gathered my brows right away, hoping to show her that a simple tap could wake me up. I was sure I did not sleep well because I just had a boost of caffeine in my system.

"Doc, wake up!" "What is it, this time?" I asked in a lazy tone.

"Doc, I'm sorry to wake you up soon. I know you're already exhausted, but we have a Bronc X virus suspect here."

I sprang to my feet at the mention of the virus. My eyes flew wide, and all my grogginess slipped away. I reached for my white coat and instructed the nurse to hand me the PPE. It stands for Personal Protective Equipment like gloves, goggles and glasses, gowns, head covers, masks, respirators, and shoe covers to protect one against the transmission of germs through contact and droplet routes.

"Give me the history," I asked while slipping into the set of protective gear; and she, assisting me in donning my gloves and in wearing my gown.

"A 30-year-old businessman, single, and on his vacation leave."

I didn't know why, but I got amused when she stated the word 'single'. It should have meant nothing because we always take notes on the history and personal details of every patient.

"What else," I proceeded, concealing the tickling sensation I foolishly felt inside. It was so silly of me.

"He went to Sama a month ago, four weeks after the declaration of the outbreak."

"Was he quarantined?"

"No, doc."

"I wonder how he escaped from it," I thought hard. As far as I knew, the government is strictly imposing the rules of quarantine.

"He is a wealthy businessman, doc. When he dropped on one of the destinations, he came here via his private chopper."

Before I entered to check him up, I looked at him first through the glass that separated the isolation room from the central ER. Dear skies, his tall and lean built captured my eyes. I stared at him to get more of his features, but for what seemed like mental telepathy, he turned in my direction and noticed me. I stepped back when he also stared at me, and for a moment, our eyes locked.

Chapter 2

All of a sudden, there was chaos among the staff in the emergency room. They ran to and fro, wearing their N95 face masks in a snap of a finger. Those vigilant watchers of the waiting patients at the ER started to panic. They began to ask questions while putting themselves, as well, into their protective gear. Some sprayed alcohol on themselves, almost emptying the contents of a bottle in just a single use. Some of them even wanted to cancel their admissions and go home right away, or transfer to other health facilities.

"Everything is under control. No need to panic," I heard someone from the infectious control department addressing the crowd, standing tall from the nurses' counter. She had power in her voice, however, the glints of fear reflecting in her eyes betrayed her inner feelings.

"What's happening?" someone from the watcher's lounge asked as he slid himself into the main ER's entrance.

"Someone came over here for a consultation. Just because he is a foreigner, the people from outside think he is infected with the virus. We already assessed the said patient and we, as the health care team, do think otherwise."

She may be lying or not; she only intended to calm down the public and stop them from creating false reports and unnecessary panic. None among the patient's family had access to the isolation room anyway, and it was too early to put a verdict on the suspect. After much convincing, the tension eased down, and everything was back to normal.

Foreigners were mostly misjudged because most of those who got infected were tourists from other countries. The locals were not willing to spend the dollar value imposed in that tourist spot since there were lots of magnificent beach resorts all around, offering a much lower price.

I went to the isolation room in a different route, away from the prying eyes of the patient's watchers. Somehow, I took a step back when I finally stood by the door, drawing a deep breath to calm my racing heartbeats. Who would not get scared when finally, you're thrown armless into the real battle?

I turned the knob open, and the moment our eyes met, I felt my heart got stuck in my throat. I didn't know why; it was so silly of me again. I knew it was not from the scare I felt towards the virus but from the way his gaze pierced into my soul. Of course, it was the first time I met him, but why did I feel seeing him in my dreams before?

"Good morning, doc!" I heard him spoke, and his deep and resonant voice sent butterflies into my stomach.

I stared at him and my foolish self, suddenly, lost the energy to remove my gaze at him. I began to do a quick mental reassessment of myself. Just when did I start to become stupid in front of a gorgeous man?

"Good morning, Mr.?" I asked, expecting that his name would be as handsome as he was.

"Sean...Sean Grey." Before I could blink, his lips twisted into a delicious curve, intensified by the spark in his eyes. Dear heavens, I was too ready to die with him if, at that moment, he would graze his lips on mine.

"I'm Dr. Red, Red Nelson, your physician-on-duty today. Now, may I ask, Mr. Grey, what prompts you to come here?" I began to do my duty but my eyes were on his lips. He must have noticed my craziness because I saw him swallow hard before he replied. Perhaps, my sticking eyes, like leeches on a skin, distracted him.

"I was one of those who went to Sama Island a month ago."

"It's already a month, isn't it?" I asked; a load of worries dispelled right away from my heart with my initial conclusion that he was not a suspect for the virus infection. The incubation period was only one to two weeks before the signs and symptoms start to manifest. Cough, fever and red patches all over the body were the cardinal signs and airborne transmission was how the virus spread itself.

"Yes, but I'm getting paranoid when I learned that a lot of tourists are tested positive of the virus."

"After that, have you gone back to Sama Island or traveled to countries where the virus is on outbreak?"

"No."

"What else prompted you for a check-up?"

"I have a cough."

"Describe your cough, Mr. Grey."

"It's dry and persistent like every time I got my asthma attack."

"Are you having a breathing difficulty?"

"Not anymore. I had my puff."

"Do you also have a fever?"

"Not yet."

I laughed hard at his answer. This man was not only stunningly handsome but was shockingly coward and paranoid. He threw me a puzzled look but I ignored him. How would I explain myself? I walked over to his side, placing the diaphragm of my black stethoscope into the quadrants of his back. I then stepped in front of him, bending a little as I also listened to his lung sounds. He stared into my eyes as I did my ministrations on his chest, almost tempted to place both of my palms instead. The loud sound I heard was not the rales or crackles from any of his lobes, but the loud thuds coming from my heart. He was as healthy as an ox.

"Go home, Mr. Grey," I said as I mentally scolded myself for acting so silly. It was not my first time to have a male client, nor my first time to touch a handsome man. Yet, I couldn't understand why I was acting this way as if I was running out of a man. I had a handsome boyfriend who believes he was mighty and powerful as a king.

"Why do you send me home? Aren't you going to test me if I am positive or not? Aren't you going to treat me?"

"You are as silly as I am, Mr. Grey," I mumbled foolishly, speaking softly to myself. I was too late to realize that he heard me because when my eyes fell into his face again, I saw his brows turning up.

"What did you say?" he asked, his confused gaze turned into a spark of amusement.

How I wish I could tell him I was crazy to feel this way. I was never a believer of love at first sight, not until this moment when this stranger before me, affected me in a way that makes me question my mental health.

"I mean you are as paranoid as me. Look at me now, wrapped in this troublesome protective gear, thinking that you are infected with the virus," I explained laughing but not over what I said, but for my craziness.

I began removing my shields, including my goggles and my mask before I spoke to him again. "Mr. Grey, just continue your maintenance medication for your asthma. I'll give you an antihistamine for five days but you may consult your doctor if symptoms get worse."

"Give me your number," he said, with all the seriousness my mind could imagine he could do. I looked at him dumbly and my mouth fell open.

"My number?"

Chapter 3

My shift finally ended after a few hours Mr. Grey left the hospital premises. I gave him an antihistamine for five days but encouraged him to consult his physician if symptoms persist. I took a shower before leaving, planning to dive into my bed as soon as I arrive home. It had been a long shift, and all I wanted was to sleep for another 24 hours. I was already in my third year of medical residency training, specializing in Internal Medicine. I planned to pursue a subspecialty program, also known as fellowship training, and perhaps, I choose either Cardiology or Infectious Diseases. I was already a few months away from completing my residency, but still, I had not made up my mind yet.

I took another shower as soon as I arrived home. I didn't want my boyfriend, Eric, to blame me if he ever gets sick. I was already tired of his foul mouth as I was becoming more and more worthless in his eyes. Yes, he had reasons why he looked down on me. He rescued me from the pit of financial hardship as a result of my father's death during my fourth year in college.

My mother died when I was three, and I grew up devoid of motherly love. I envied those classmates whose mothers came during Parents Teachers Association meetings because my father could not. He worked as a ship captain, and a few years after my mother died, he came home every year, not to our house, but to his other woman. Yes, he visited me. He even pampered me with money, with beautiful clothes and everything a teen want.

My friends even envied me because I had everything. I had a fat bank account, and I always hang out in expensive coffee shops. They thought all these material things I was enjoying made me truly happy. They were all wrong. There are some things money can't buy. If I had to choose, I would have preferred to enjoy a simple life as long as I wouldn't live alone in dormitories and boarding houses near my school. I already lived in dorms ever since I was in elementary. I had a nanny to take care of my things and my school uniforms, but I only enjoyed her company during weekends. I treasured her as a family because she did those responsibilities my mother should have done. Yet, she died when I was in high school, making me totally independent when I entered college.

Unlike those depressed teens, I did not squander my money except for my expensive lifestyle. I never went out with my friends at a club, though I spent dinners with them sometimes. I instead loved to study and burn my candles in coffee shops and enjoyed the feeling of being praised for excelling in the class.

Living the life of a lonely princess ended when my father died. Aside from the money in my bank account, he left me with almost nothing except for a house and lot, which I only stayed when my mother lived. When my nanny died, father had it rented but entrusted the monthly rental

collection to his other woman. She never gave me a share of it and even spent the last penny of my father's bank savings. I sold the house, even if she objected, knowing I had the sole right as my father's daughter.

However, my money did not last long. I took medicine after I graduated from my pre-med course, which was a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. The high cost of the course itself plunged me deeper into financial hardship. I sold my expensive things, but still, it couldn't cover my entire financial needs.

I met Eric during my last year in medical school. I hang out with a friend at that time as I was getting tired of crying inside my boarding house. I spent my last money with our two cups of coffee but cried hard afterward, grieving over my loss as I started to feel pity for myself. Her cousin came over by coincidence, and that's how I knew Eric as a businessman. He was the son of the biggest shareholder of a famous university, but at a young age, he started to build his own company.

Perhaps, my friend noticed Eric's attraction to me, because she left us alone to talk. As emotional as I was, I started crying when he asked me why I looked sad. Getting conscious of the people's eyes on us, I accepted his invitation to talk more at the hotel he was staying in.

I was too innocent then, not paying attention to the risk of being with a man inside a hotel's suite. He comforted me and promised to take care of my tuition, and all that I need to complete my fourth year in medical school. He even told me to shoulder everything until I would become a full-fledged physician but with a condition to live with him as his mistress. The desire to finish my course and my financial setbacks left me with no choice. As a medical student who had thick books to study, I could never take part-time jobs. Aside from that, I am not used to working for a living, the disadvantage of being a pampered child.

That night, he took me to his home and from then on, lived with him. He provided a decent roof under my head, a fatter bank account, and expensive stuff. I paid him with my body. He was sexually insatiable, and I felt that in those few days I stayed with him, I was already rotting like an overripe banana.

I was still on my reverie as I lay awake on my bed when my phone vibrated. I was too tired to pick it up, aside from being annoyed at having my thoughts interrupted.

"Red? Why on hell does it take you so long to answer my call?"

"I'm sorry I was asleep."

"My time is precious, Red. Don't you dare to delay any second that I have."

I felt hurt again. Eric dominated over me as if I was a whore. I never felt loved at all, not even during our sex, where most men say sweet nothings. However, I had to accept my fate. He bought me with a price.

Chapter 4

"See you at the Amara Hotel tonight, 7 pm. Don't be late."

"Alright."

Throughout those five years we were together, I learned to submit myself to his plans and decisions. I never questioned him though sometimes, I felt suffocated. I even accepted the fact that if he brings me to any function, it's not because he wanted my company but because I was like a trophy for him to show off. He was always far from the man I knew every time important men in his social circle surrounded us. He became the gentleman that he never was, sweet and caring like a thoughtful sweetheart. Sometimes, I even wished there would be more events to attend.

I set my alarm clock to three hours before the event. It should be enough for my preparation, knowing that Eric was so meticulous. Perhaps because his call disrupted my train of thoughts, I drifted into a dreamless sleep as soon as my head hit my soft pillow...

I was in a boat, enjoying the sceneries around me. We were already sailing near the borders of the Pacific Ocean when suddenly the captain stood in the midst of us, gesturing for us to give him our full attention.

"I would like to inform all of you that one of you here is tested positive for Bronc X virus," announced the captain, whose face I could not figure out clearly.

The rest of us shuddered at the announcement, grabbing the next moment our scarves and tied it around our faces. Some pulled out from their bags their bottles of alcohol and sprayed it into their hands and arms.

"No need for that," said the captain, his lips twisting into a sardonic smile as he watched everyone's reaction. "All of you are already infected with the virus as well."

"Who's the carrier of this malady?" shouted one of us, angry and scared at this pronunciation of our doom.

"That man! He escaped from the cruise ship to get rid of the quarantine," said the captain, hurling his fingers furiously at the man behind him.

I followed the direction of his hand, and my knees wobbled in surprise upon realizing that the accused man was none other than Mr. Sean Grey. Drops of tears soon spilled from my eyes as my heart wrenched in pity for him. It then occurred to all of us, that because there were ten of us in

this boat, the government would no longer allow us to go home. Whether we liked it or not, they would force us to stay until our last breath, depriving us of the chance to say goodbye to our loved ones.

"Let's throw him to the sea! He's bringing curse into our lives," snarled one of the men, throwing his fiery gaze at all of us.

"No, " I protested, "remember, no one wants this. No one ever wants to die," I begged. The threatening deluge of tears at the back of my eyes burst like a gushing river from a mountain.

"Shut up," roared another man, "if you don't want us to throw you out with him."

The men then sprinted forward and seized Sean like he was some wild boar on a forest. I stared at him with a heavy heart, and he looked back at me with begging eyes. What happened next was faster than I could figure out, and the next thing I saw was the men, casting him out of the boat and into the angry waves. Sean's eyes never left me until the waves plunged him into the sea.

"No! Sean! No!" I called out his name until my voice became too hoarse to speak, and until my tears dried out.

"Red! Red!" a harsh and vigorous shaking woke me up. The dream was still vivid in my mind even if my eyes flew wide, meeting Eric's angry face. I blinked to erase Sean's image, my heartbeats rapping on my throat.

"You're here," I commented, looking into his eyes, not expecting him to be here. He had a wardrobe in his office, and a room as comfortable as this one in the house.

"Who is that Sean you are calling in your dream?" he snarled, and I frowned in embarrassment to know that I called out his name.

"What?" I also raised my voice to deny his existence, but his fierce and piercing eyes, boring into my core, told me I couldn't outwit him.

I sat up and yawned, trying to ignore him. It was only a dream, and why would he fuss so much about it? Though I felt unusually and foolishly attracted to Mr. Grey, I only met him once, and perhaps, I'll never meet him again.

"Red, I'm warning you. If I find out that you are fooling around with someone else, I will not have a second thought of throwing you out of my life! Even if you shed bloody tears, I'll never take you back!"

Eric walked out of our bedroom and slammed the door so hard that I got afraid the hinges and screws, whatever were there, would disconnect from the doorframe. I closed my eyes and covered my ears with my hands, anticipating a hard blow on the floor that never came. I scrambled on my

feet afterward, running to the bathroom for fear that Eric might finish ahead of me and that he would be barking at me again. I was just too tired to hear one again, too humiliated already. In the next hour, I was already standing in front of our full-length mirror, making a final check on how I looked. It was when Eric slid in the doorway and looked at me from head to toe. I held my breath, not wanting to hear his complaints about a bad makeup, or my jewelry not meeting his taste.

"You look beautiful," he commented, and I sighed, but then he added, "make sure to grab the attention of the host. When opportunity strikes, encourage him to invest in my business."

I cringed, feeling slapped a million times with the reality that in our five years, he never considered me a part of him, of his activities, of his business. He was only using me. I looked down, trying to conceal the hint of humiliation painting in my face. Either he was dumb or just insensitive, he continued to talk, not noticing the hurt his words had caused me.

"The host is launching Laminae, Inc., a branch he opens in the country. His name is Mr. Grey."

Chapter 5

I felt my blood rushing in the wrong direction when I heard Mr. Grey's name on Eric's lips. My heartbeats thumped erratically, and I started to feel afraid that Eric would sense my reaction. I turned away and pretended to grab my bag, heading out of the room ahead of him.

"Red, have you heard me?" I heard him asked before he grabbed my arm. I turned to him and raised my brow, pretending I didn't get his point.

"My goodness, Red, can't you be so stupid just for once?" Eric yelled into my face, and I stepped back in fright, even if he already did this to me a thousand times.

"What do you exactly want me to do?" I sighed as I responded, having realized I overacted my denial.

"You must grab a chance to talk to him or, better yet, dance with him!"

I nodded but I added, and his reply increased the sense of humiliation I felt inside. "And you won't get jealous? Wouldn't this be a problem between the two of us?"

He looked at me with disdain, laughing scornfully in the next moment. "Jealous? With you? Who do you think you are? You're just one of my bought possessions, Red, and I could throw you away anytime I want."

"Eric," I turned and looked at him, drops of tears gathering around the corners of my eyes. "Don't get too hard on me. I might get tired of being hurt and insulted."

I cringed at the sudden change of his expression. His eyeballs almost popped out in anger, as his face turned blood red. I swore I saw his hair stood out, his teeth grinding in a fury. "After what I have done, you have now the guts to talk back and threaten me like that, you ungrateful brat?"

"I-- I'm sorry," I quickly apologized, not wanting to ruin his mood further when we were still going out. He might throw his lousy temper at me in front of his social circle, and I might get embarrassed further.

All the way to Amara Hotel, he just wouldn't stop reiterating his litany of all the things he had done for me and of how ungrateful I was. His endless ranting seemed to split my head into two as I got irritated with it. Even when we were on the elevator going to the function room, he still kept on nagging and cussing me for how stupid I was in going against him. My patience was then slowly wearing out. Five years was enough to allow him to trample down on me and to give him another year would already be so stupid on my part.

He did not notice that someone entered the elevator as his mouth was still full of contempt leashing out on me. I looked down and pretended to ignore him, wishing that the person who joined us would think that he was referring to someone else. It somehow lessened the shame I am feeling at that moment. I moved my eyes sideways to get a glimpse of the man's reaction, but to the sudden death of me, the person standing with us was none other than Mr. Grey!

I bet Eric himself might not be able to recognize him because he was still in jeans and a white, collared shirt. His scent got into my nostrils, and in my side vision, I stared at his chest and down to the lower part of his body. Oh, dear, he was so gorgeous!

I suddenly felt fine tremors on my skin, and I felt like fainting in too much shame when I also noticed his eyes on me. The hospital staff held high respect for me, and I was sure Mr. Grey had even seen it, but in Eric's eyes, I was just a rag. I closed my eyes and wished I could fly to the 20th floor! I was still murmuring my silent wish when I heard Eric's voice, slamming my self-worth to the ground.

"Stupid woman, do you want me to drag you out?"

I heard Mr. Grey groaned softly, perhaps due to displeasure. The more I felt ashamed that I wanted to flee from this building and hide forever. I rushed out, and Eric grabbed my arm, the impact almost sent me to the floor! Damn him, my last thread of respect was already thinning out.

As soon as we entered the function hall, eyes turned in our direction. I heard gasps, and I assumed it was because Eric's attractive features caught their attention. Not to boast around, Eric was stunningly handsome in other's eyes, but for me, his beauty was never appealing. If only he were that attractive as Mr. Grey, perhaps, I would ignore his dirty mouth. Probably, I would adore and worship him.

Somebody approached us, and I could tell right away that he was also of the business circle Eric was in. His grin was broad as he slapped Eric on his shoulder, reaching out a hand in the next moment to shake with me. I smiled as I accepted his hand.

"Eric, you're not only rich and handsome, but you also have the best luck of finding yourself a goddess. Would I have the honor of knowing her name?"

"Such a compliment," I replied with a smile then added, "Red Nelson, sir, and you are?"

"Tim Cruz, of the Cruz Group of Companies."

I gasped inwardly at the information. The Cruz Group of Companies was in all corners of the country, featured daily in tabloids and magazines and broadcasted daily in business segments.

"Tim Cruz!"

All our eyes turned toward the direction of the husky and delicious voice my mind had ever registered. His eyes were on me, drawing a wide grin on Eric's face and causing my heartbeat to go into a frenzy. This was precisely what he wanted, to use me as a bait to catch big investors.

"Here comes the pillar of international businesses and the gorgeous man behind Laminae, Inc., Mr. Sean Grey!" Mr. Cruz chuckled as he moved his eyes between Mr. Grey and us.

"Thank you for the introduction, Tim, but may I also have the honor to know the gentleman here and the beautiful lady?" Mr. Grey looked at me with a teasing smile, and I was both relieved and happy that he was so kind enough not to let Eric know that we had met a few hours ago.

"The honor to introduce myself to you is mine, Mr. Grey. This humble gentleman in front of you is Eric Martela, of Martela's Group of Companies. The beautiful lady here is Red Nelson."

Mr. Grey held out his hand to me, and butterflies in my stomach put me on the ninth cloud after feeling nauseated with Eric's insincere compliment. He didn't even say I was his girlfriend.

I accepted Mr. Grey's hand, and an awkward smile broke out on my face. The feeling of touching even just his hand was already enough to make me die a happy person. I looked at him, and he also looked back, his gaze sticking into the back of my mind.

"When are you tying the knot, Eric?" Mr. Cruz asked, and I held my breath and curled my toes in waiting for his answer.

Without any hesitation and to my relief in watching Mr. Grey's reaction, he answered. "Marriage is not our thing."

Chapter 6

"I mean, we are doing well in five years, so I guess, a piece of paper does not make any difference," added Eric when he, perhaps, sensed that we got dumbfounded.

I smiled and nodded, but tried hard to conceal my embarrassment and sense of shame. I felt rejected, unwanted, and undesired.

"It makes a great difference if you were to ask me, Eric. One of the best days of my life was when I walked down the aisle with the woman I love," Mr. Tim Cruz pointed out, and I swore, I saw Mr. Grey smirked and threw a scornful look at Eric.

To my added embarrassment, Mr. Cruz turned to Mr. Grey and solicited for his idea. "Sean, what is your opinion regarding this?"

All I wanted at that moment was to faint and not wake up forever when he glanced and cast me a look of pity.

"I have the same view as you do, Tim. When the right time comes, I will ask her hand for a marriage," seconded Mr. Grey while his eyes stayed on me. Right at that moment, the last straw of my reluctance to leave Eric had lifted off. Someday, I would be able to repay him with money if all he cared about was only that.

Another businessman approached us, and soon we separated. Eric found himself another business colleague, earning himself another praise for having me in his life. I then wondered why Eric had not seen me as others did, and I started to question my self-worth. If I happened to be in a relationship with somebody else, would he also treat me like how Eric did?

I was lost in my reverie when my phone vibrated. I pulled it out from my purse and checked the caller's identity. It was an unregistered number, and I knew it wasn't from the hospital where I worked. It's neither from my patients because I never gave my private number to any of them or their family members. The call disturbed me, thinking it could be an emergency, so I decided to give a ring back. Before my call went through, a message notification popped out. To my relief, it was the same number as the one who had just called a few seconds ago.

I felt like dying when the message went this way, "Nice meeting you, Dr. Red. I wish to grab more time with you tonight. Sean Grey."

Glancing at Eric, who got hooked to their discussion, I replied. "Thank you, Mr. Grey."

His reply came right away. "May I have a dance with you later?"

I was flying to the moon then but I sank back the next moment, afraid that Eric might be furious. Then, I remembered Eric's instruction before we came here. He said I should make sure I would grab Mr. Grey's attention, so what else could make me happier tonight?

"I'd be happy to," I replied, and instantly came the raptured feeling I so longed to feel.

After a few minutes, the program started, and so the formal launching of Laminae, Inc. The word shock was an understatement when a slideshow presented all the businesses of Mr. Grey. He then came up next and elaborated on the presentation, which earned him gasps of appreciation and rounds of applause. If I considered Eric a successful businessman, he was just a speck against the achievements of Mr. Grey. I then understood why Eric was willing to sell me to him, and it was sadly because of his greed for more wealth and fame.

Dinner followed, and we seated ourselves at a table. Soon after that, came the ball. All bright lights turned dim in a moment, and soon became a kaleidoscope of multicolored lights. Romantic music from the orchestra started to flow, and the men who brought their dates for the night hurried to the dance floor. Perhaps, I got so hooked on watching them swaying their bodies to the rhythm that I didn't notice Eric's absence. He neither asked my permission nor gave me a little amount of respect by telling me about his plans for tonight. All of a sudden, my eyes flew wide in seeing Eric across the dance floor, holding a woman's waist. Despite the dim lighting, I could still figure out that he was flirting with the woman because I saw his hand moved across her back and lingered on her behind.

Though a few minutes ago, I made a firm decision to find a way to leave him, seeing him now in another's arms, still consumed me with pain and jealousy. Big drops of tears began to trickle down my cheeks. In the next moment, I lost my self-control, and I started to sob. I never knew it could be this painful. My heart felt like it was run over by a heavy object. I was glad the music was loud enough to muffle the sound of my stifled cries, just as how thankful I was, as well, for the dim lights that veiled my tears.

I soon forgot about the deal I made with Mr. Grey. My mind was on a total mess. I felt emotionally battered with the sense of rejection, worthlessness as a person, and dignity-stripped as a woman. I was not sure if I could ever stop my tears the moment the music stops, and I also could not tell how long I would be able to endure.

Right then, I decided not to let Eric see I was hurting, nor let him know I was crying. It was the only sense of pride left in me. I remembered some people said that the best revenge we could give to a cheating partner is to let them feel we are not affected. That leaving us for someone else is not our loss, but theirs.

I wiped my tears and dabbed a pressed powder on my cheeks. I then bent down and applied a new layer of lip color. Just as I put my kit back in my purse, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned and looked behind my shoulder, and my heart leaped instantly at the sight of who was there.

"Mr. Grey," I mumbled softly, as I suddenly felt nervous. He was no longer the patient I met but a prominent worldwide figure.

"May I have a dance with you?"

Chapter 7

As if the music conductor knew that the most important figure of the night approached the dance floor, the music instantly turned into the most romantic strain I ever heard. The moment he placed his hands on the small of my lower back and me on his shoulders, my world began to spin. The sound of my heartbeats competed with the loud sound of the percussion instrument hammering on the background.

"You're so beautiful without the white coat on," Mr. Grey commented after he ran down his eyes on me. I felt like wax then, melting against the glow of his gaze.

"Thank you," was all I could mutter after letting out a faint and awkward smile. I was no longer the dominant doctor I was, knowing that I was in his territory.

"How are you and Mr. Martela?"

The question sent shivers down my spine, and it brought back the pain I was trying to push back inside. I couldn't look into his eyes, so I kept staring at his chest, hoping he wouldn't notice my reaction.

"We are fine, Mr. Grey," I lied, of course. He smiled at me and then swayed gracefully, dragging me gently along with his sideward and backward steps. Before I realized his motive, I saw Eric swaying with the woman a few steps away from us. He didn't seem to notice me because he looked so engrossed in flirting with the woman he was dancing with.

I winced in pain and turned my head away. How could Eric do this openly? If he couldn't care less that he was hurting me, he should have cared about what his colleagues might think of him.

"Would you still say the same?" I heard Eric spoke, and I turned to look at him reluctantly.

"It doesn't mean anything, Mr. Grey, just as how I agree to take this dance with you," I reasoned out, and he smirked, telling me with his expression that I couldn't fool him.

"I'm in the business world for so long, Dr. Red, and I am already familiar with the dirty tricks of some business colleagues."

I blushed, ashamed of being caught. I felt guilty then, being the pawn Eric cast on him.

"I will never share my woman with others just because of some business-related interest. And I will never hurt her in the name of a business." Needless to ask, I knew what he was referring to.

"Mr. Grey, can I go back to my seat now? I want to use the bathroom," I made an excuse because I knew that in the next moment, I wouldn't be able to hold back my tears.

He must have noticed the crack in my voice because he nodded. "I'll take you to my private exit."

Without waiting for my reply, he held my hand as he led me to the far side of the room. We stopped in front of a lift, which I presumed to be the one he referred to as his private exit. He then pressed a number on the wall buttons I never cared to know at the moment. I didn't even notice when the lift stopped until the door opened to what looked like a living room.

"The bathroom is on your left," I heard Mr. Grey's vague voice, but because I was already sobbing silently again, I just nodded and ran to its direction.

I cried my heart out once I was inside. All the humiliation came back as I began to recall how I was losing my pride as a human and my integrity as a woman. The worst part of it was that Mr. Grey tried to point it out to me. If he, whom I had met twice only and had noticed it, how much more for those people around us? They even had no idea that every time we argued, Eric would always threaten to throw me out of his life until my sinking self-esteem convinced me as well that I was worthless.

As crying proved to be a therapeutic way of releasing one's heartaches, I felt better after shedding the last drop of tears from my eyes. I washed my face and dried it with a paper towel, applying a thicker layer of makeup afterward. Cosmetics has its ways of projecting a fake image, and so I came out fresh as if I hadn't poured out a bucket of tears.

"Better?" Mr. Grey greeted me with a worried smile as soon as I stepped out. He was already on his white undershirt though he was still on his slacks.

I just responded with a generous smile as I stood in front of him, confused about what to do next. I was wondering if I should sit down with him or go back right away to the dance hall. To think, I was only asking to use a bathroom and not to sit down and chat with him.

"Please sit down," he said as if he had read my mind. He then stood up and held my hand, guiding me to sit down across him on the couch. Eric had never shown such kind of respect and gentleness this way, though, in all fairness, he was generous with money.

"Eric might already be looking for me," I snapped as the thought occurred to me. Glints of fear and worry must have registered into my face because the next thing I saw was the frown in Mr. Grey's face.

"I doubt it, Dr. Red. Wait until he calls you. Don't punish yourself by returning to the dance hall and watched him kissing someone else."

Mr. Grey proved himself right because I then received a text message from Eric. "Don't wait for me. Just go home ahead. I saw you with Mr. Grey a while ago. I hope you didn't forget what I told you."

I was already used to this scenario. We had previously attended too many events, but we always arrived and went home separately. Every time he got engrossed in talking to someone, I always went out and waited for his next instruction at a coffee shop. I hated to look like a fool, waiting for him unnoticed until their discussion ended.

He was also used to this. He never even once doubted that I would cheat on him and spend time with one of his colleagues like tonight. Perhaps because he knew that he had already succeeded in stripping me off from my self-worth and pride.

"Is it Eric?" I noticed how he no longer addressed him formally.

"Yes."

"Is he already looking for you?"

"No. He tells me to go home ahead. So, thanks for the kindness, Mr. Grey. I have to go now. I still have work tomorrow."

He frowned, and I understood this must be because I dismissed him too early.

To my relief, he nodded, but his next words surprised me. "I'll take you home."

"No, thank you." I shook my head in protest. It was too much to ask him that. He was not just some familiar business partner of Eric but was a significant figure in the business world.

"I insist," he said with an air of authority that I couldn't dare to argue.

The trip home was silent until he broke it with a statement that made me cringe in shame.

"Dr. Red, I do not mean to interfere, but I never like how Eric treated you ever since we were at the lift. Save your pride as a woman. Give yourself back the worth you deserve."

Chapter 8

It had been some weeks already after that first, and last time Mr. Grey dropped me off at home. When he gave me that piece of advice, I responded with just a smile. I couldn't pour out to him all my heartaches because I didn't want him to think that because he was richer, he was better than Eric. And besides, we were still strangers who just got to know a little about each other. We were neither friends. Eric's shame was also mine because it also meant I was too stupid to allow him to trample my worth and pride.

My mind was all set up. I would be leaving him. I was just waiting for the right time, and I would be breaking it to him gently. I was then slowly taking my distance. Oblivious to him, I was able to purchase my townhouse. After duty, I no longer went home. I just went there sometimes, but I wouldn't take long. I just told him I was accepting another job as a company doctor and slept at the doctor's lounge. It didn't seem to be a problem because he didn't argue with me about it. He didn't even ask the name of the company I was working for.

One morning, I was admitting a case of 30 years old, male, with complaints of chest pain radiating to the back. He was having a cold sweat and breathing difficulty, so my team and I moved like a flash of lightning. The nurse-on-duty immediately hooked him to an oxygen inhalation, inserting an intravenous line afterward. I then gave them my orders for the medication to start while scribbling it down on the patient's chart. Only after he was ready for transfer to a regular room that I was able to go out to have my breakfast.

"Dr. Red," I heard someone calling out my name as I hurried toward the hospital's coffee shop. I looked over my shoulder, and I almost stumbled when I saw who was coming towards me.

"Mr. Grey," I stuttered a little since I never expected I would see him this morning.

He caught me up even before I was able to blink. "Breakfast?"

"Yes." Dear heavens, my heart went wild again as I looked up to him.

Mr. Grey grabbed a menu list at the counter before he led me towards a table beside a glass wall. He asked me to choose a meal, and I picked up a breakfast set for both of us. After the waiter collected our order, he stated right away his purpose in visiting me.

"Dr. Red, I need a company doctor for Laminae, Inc., and of course, the first person that came into my mind is you."

I stared at him, gaping at what he said, and before I could answer, he added. "I know you are applying for the said position at a certain company, but I want you to be in Laminae."

I was surprised at how he happened to know about my application for a company doctor. I never told anyone about this, not even my closest staff in the current hospital where I was working.

"How do you know about it?" I asked seriously, and his chuckle came as his answer.

"It's not important anymore. What I need is your answer to my proposal, Dr. Red. Please, think about it."

I smiled and got lost in my thought as we began eating. I was thinking hard if I should accept his offer or not. Since I was already looking for one so that I wouldn't live forever in a lie, I considered taking it. I was about to tell him I was accepting his offer when he cut me off and told me to give myself more time to consider it.

We talked more about trivial things, and we both ended up laughing hard. He started to make jokes, not realizing that in the process, our personal reservations thinned out. If not for the urgent call from the ER again, we wouldn't have separated earlier.

"I'm sorry to cut you off, Mr. Grey," I apologized. We were still in the middle of an interesting topic when I had to dismiss him off.

"I understand, but can we call each other by our first names?" Mr. Grey looked at me straight in the eyes, and like a magnet, his gaze pulled my eyes into his.

"Sure," I grinned.

Mr. Grey walked with me back to the ER, and just as I stepped inside, a post-graduate intern sprinted towards me. "Doc Red, it's a couple in the middle of their coitus when suddenly, the woman had vaginismus."

I frowned the moment he finished speaking, and I started to feel empathy towards the woman. What could have happened that triggered this punishment on them?

"How are they able to get here?"

"The male partner called up to ask for help, and so our responders went to the hotel where they were staying. The responders scared the woman further, making it impossible to pull out."

"I see," I answered softly as my mind started picturing them out in a heated sexual activity only to be disrupted when the woman's vaginal walls suddenly clamped the thing inserted between her thighs.

"Give the woman one ampule of..." I gave out a verbal order, picking the patient's chart at the same time, and began writing stat orders.

Vaginismus is a condition wherein the woman's vaginal muscles squeeze anything inserted in it, such as a tampon or a penis. Most of the time, the reason is unknown, but in most cases, it's related to a woman's stress or anxiety over pre-marital sex or a forbidden relationship.

After scribbling down my orders, I walked towards the cubicle and pulled the curtain aside. As soon as it made way for my entry, I saw a man and woman facing closely towards each other, a blanket covering their naked bodies. My eyes then fell on the man's face, and my heart began to hammer in painful thuds.

I rushed out of the ER, using the same passage Sean and I passed through a while ago. Just as I began to wail, I got surprised when I saw that Sean was still there. Seeing that I was on the verge of breaking down, he pulled me close to him, providing a shoulder to cry on.

"What is it?" Sean asked as he rubbed my back to comfort me.

I sobbed louder when I felt sympathy for my emotional heartbreak, mumbling Eric and my friend's name.

Chapter 9

I did not know how long I was crying on Sean's chest. He did not say a word but did not stop stroking my hair and my back. Knowing somebody cared and understood your heartache was such a nice feeling that my crying spell took longer. After what seemed like an eternity, I pulled my self up and looked at him with a faint smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Grey."

"Sean. We already agreed on this."

"Ah, yes," I chuckled, feeling awkward.

"I need to go back. They are already looking for me," I said as I looked around, ignoring his complaint. I sighed in relief when I realized we're standing on a corridor that only ER staff were using. I pulled my phone out and saw unread messages. I then opened the one from my fellow physician-on-duty.

"Doc, Red. don't worry. I'm taking over. Mr. Martela asked if you are on duty but I told him you are accompanying a patient who transferred to another institution."

I smiled at Dr. Mimi's thoughtfulness, but I grumbled at Eric's stupidity. As his partner, he should have known if I was on duty or not. His question only gave away the status of our relationship, and I felt ashamed. In my third year of residency, some of the ER staff had already seen Eric during those times he picked me up. However, I smirked at the thought that he only did it every time he wanted to have sex with me. It was those times, perhaps, that no one else was available for him. I already knew about his sexual relationship with others, but the knowledge was less painful than seeing his manhood stuck in my friend's cunt.

"Where are they now?" I replied.

"Up in their room already."

"Has he pulled out already?" I asked, and goosebumps spread all over me. It was awkward to ask, but I couldn't wait to know. I couldn't wait to attack them and tell Eric I'm leaving. Now, I already had a valid reason to do it.

"He has, but since they are both sedated, we transferred them to a regular room."

I turned my attention back to Mr. Grey. I knew he had read my exchange of messages with Dr. Mimi.

"S-Sean," I said, stuttering due to a sense of awkwardness, "you may go now. Thank you so much."

"You sure you're okay?"

I nodded, and he rubbed my back once again. "Tell me if you need someone to talk to. Do what is right," he said. Those few words were enough to tell me what he wanted to say.

When I went back to the ER, there were already many patients waiting for their turn. I felt relieved then, though I knew these colleagues of mine respected my privacy. True enough, no one dared to ask me except for Dr. Mimi, who gave me updates on their status. The medication I ordered would induce sleep, and my friend's vaginal wall would then open up and release Eric's shaft. Dr. Mimi also ordered a relaxant, not only to calm down Eric's stress but to hasten up the release of his tortured penile muscle. I almost laughed at the thought of it, but a pang of pain washed over me.

I got busy then, checking up and admitting a couple of patients until I was able to cater to everyone under my scope of duty. I then asked a post-graduate intern to check Eric and her other woman. Though I didn't get the title of being his wife, sleeping with him in his bedroom for five long years, gave me the right to call his flings as his other women.

"They are already fine, doc, and both of them are awake already," the PGI reported after checking on them.

I heaved a deep sigh and decided it's time to face them. I asked the PGI to go with me, and we went up. While on the way, the PGI already told me that someone came in to process for their discharge, thinking perhaps, to avoid me. I smirked inwardly. Why didn't they go to other hospitals instead?

But I also thought that the reason could be about confidentiality. The people here knew Eric, and he expected them to respect him, on my behalf. He was right, then. No one talked about it, and no one looked at me with accusing or scornful eyes, even when I dropped by the nurses' station.

The moment the traitors both saw me, I couldn't describe the guilt and fear in their expression. If my friend had a choice, she would never have wanted to see me. I saw the color leaving her face and the fine tremors of her lips.

"How are you both doing?" I asked, trying hard to show no expression as if what happened did not affect me at all.

"Red, I'm so sorry," came Shirley's apology, even before I started to confront one of them.

"Red, it's not what you think. We were both drunk during..." Eric started to justify, and I raised a hand to stop him, looking at Shirley, who was sobbing already. I did not want to hear his lies - it only heightened my hatred against him.

"It's not the right place to talk about this. I'm just checking to see if you're both fine."

Eric laughed like a fool and came forward to hug me, but I stepped back and pushed the PGI to my front so that I would be standing behind him.

"I know you are so understanding, babe. You know I can never imagine a life without you."

I felt like throwing up in hearing him. I did not see the Eric anymore who slept with me at night, but instead, a demon right in front of me. I managed a smile and replied, "You're wrong. You can never imagine a life without them."

I stressed the word 'them' to remind the only best friend I used to know that we were not the only women in his life. He could purchase a truckload of them if he wants. What hurt me most was the fact that even my best friend, whom I loved as myself, betrayed me behind my back.

I turned my back on them and went out of the room. To my surprise, I was not hurting as much as I was a few hours ago. Eric and my best friend were not worthy of my tears. A beautiful future still lay before me, and I shouldn't waste my time over insensible things. Yet, human as I was, I couldn't get away with it, no matter how much I wanted to.

The following morning, I went to Eric's house, my home for five years, to pick up my important things. I left those expensive things he bought me, such as bags, shoes, sets of dress, and laptops. I wanted to show him that those material things were not important to me. If I had to choose, I would rather live a simple life in a happy home than living like a princess in an empty mansion.

I asked the guard to call a taxi. I did not want his car anymore. He could sell it if he likes, it's all up to him. I was about to step inside the taxi when two expensive cars stopped in front of me.

Chapter 10

Eric rolled up his window and threw me a confused stare. All of a sudden, I lost my courage to say it personally to him that I was already leaving. Not because I had hesitations, but because I did not want to hurt myself anymore. I knew he would start insulting me again and remind me how ungrateful I was.

"Eric," I greeted him as soon as I was done placing some of my things in the passenger's seat. It was not much anyway because I already pulled some of it every time I dropped by.

"What happens to your car?" I was right. He didn't notice the absence of my things, even in our bedroom. Either he was too busy with my best friend, or he just didn't care about it. I was used to it, anyway.

"It's safe from scratches here. Long hours in the hospital's parking lot is too risky."

"I won't mind. You can have it fixed anytime."

Oh, really. What makes him so gentle today?

"Thank you," I said, giving him a pursed smile. "Eric, I have to go now."

Eric stared at me and chuckled afterward. "You sure you don't want to talk to me about Shirley?"

I shook my head and didn't say a word. Yet, the pursed smile in my lips didn't save my tears from clouding my vision. To save me from an emotional outbreak, I bid him a quick goodbye then slid into the waiting taxi. Eric didn't seem to mind anyway. He dismissed me easily without raising an argument.

Just as soon as I asked the taxi driver to go, my eyes fell unconsciously to the other car that stopped behind Eric. I saw the driver opening the hood, perhaps checking some trouble with the engine inside. Yet, as we moved past them, I noticed the window rolling down. To my surprise, I saw a familiar face grinning at me. Before I could take my eyes off him, my phone vibrated. It was from Sean.

"Stop right there," Sean said. "I'll take you wherever you want to."

Just because I was stunned, I got lost for word. Eric did not even offer the same thing to me, although I was glad he didn't. I only returned to my senses when the taxi driver called my attention that a car was blocking our way.

"Ma'am, do you know who's in that car?" the driver's anxious voice jolted my attention.

I did not have to answer the driver anymore because Sean walked to us and knocked on the passenger's door. I opened my bag and pulled out paper bills from my purse, handing it to the driver after making an apology.

"Let me take your things." Sean's wide smile greeted me as soon as I opened the door for him. His charm captivated me again that I was no longer able to refuse. I only realized how I looked silly when I felt his face close to me. He was reaching over for the bag I placed beside me.

"Is this all? Or, did you put something else in the trunk?"

I looked at the driver, and somehow, that look made him go out from his seat and picked up my things for me. Sean followed him anyway without waiting for my answer, so I was able to take a deep breath before stepping out of the car.

"Here, sir." I heard the driver speaking to him as he showed him my things. "Shall I place these bags in your trunk?"

"Yes, please," I heard Sean replied before turning back to me. I just stood a few feet from the taxi, watching them with a slow processing mind. Who would ever think that a famous billionaire would be carrying my things?

Ushering me first into the comfort of his car and sitting right next to me afterward, made me more uncomfortable. This had become more personal, I thought, having me in his car. If his sudden appearance and his presence overwhelmed me, his next move stunned me further.

"Easternville Block 7, 10th house," Sean said, instructing his personal driver where to go. It was the address of my new place. How did he know about it? Is he stalking on me?

I stole a glance at him, but I met his amused smile instead. I was tall, but he was still much taller than me that I had to tilt my head back to be able to see his face.

"I already expected that you would confront him first thing after your shift. So, I planned to wait outside, in case he would be violent. However, I did not expect that it would end up easier."

I gazed at him tongue-tied. He seemed to know so much about my private life. I did not say a word, but I knew he followed my eyes as I glanced at the driver. I would never start a scene with another unwanted audience, especially his driver. He nodded and smiled, giving me that tender look again.

The rest of the short trip was silent. The moment the driver pulled to a stop in front of my gate, I did not have to invite Sean into the house because he carried all my bags. His driver followed next, bringing what seemed like boxes of food. Sean took it from him and placed it at my dining table. And contrary to what I expected, I heard Sean dismissed his driver and the latter left, leaving Sean and me alone with each other.

"Can we have breakfast first?"

I glanced at the boxes on top of the table and smiled. "Thanks for bringing it, Sean. You must have expected that I have nothing here except water."

"I know. That's why I also bought some instant foods and beverages." I stood gaping at what he said, but he stepped closer and hovered over me--chuckling while placing a hand at my shoulder. Dear skies, I felt I could faint at any moment. I had never felt this way with Eric.

I got an excuse to get away from him as I suggested to open the boxes and spread the food on the plates. I also heated the cups of coffee he bought before mixing up the cream and sugar for the two of us. Sean sat across me, and we started eating our breakfast silently. I was about to sip my coffee when a hand grabbed mine that was holding the cup. I looked up with a puzzled expression.

"You have to sleep well. No coffee before sleeping." I held my breath for a second, as I felt my heartbeats racing. I didn't need the caffeine anyway. His presence was enough to boost my energy.

ama, an island in the southwest region of Philippine territory. The source of the virus was still unknown, but the epidemic started in this place. Being a famous destination swarmed by tourists from all over the world, this place's status had caused the fast spread of the virus to more than 300 countries worldwide. It then led to more than a thousand deaths in the Philippines alone, forcing retailers and travel operators to close stores, cancel flights, cruises, and warn investors about the inevitable financial crisis. To prevent the spread of the virus, thousands of people across the world had been placed in quarantine, especially tourists from the Sama Islands and those they had close contact with.

My thoughts were still on those infected children and those quarantined travelers when a friend of mine, who was also a resident physician, appeared in the doorway.

"Red, have you saved a box for your family?" she asked, and through her worried looks, I could tell that she was also concerned about the shortage of masks.

I shrugged my shoulders off and stretched out my palms open. "Duh! Our existing infectious diseases here are more threatening than that. We don't even wear masks all the time even if we know that 70% of the air we breathe contains *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*."

Mycobacterium tuberculosis is one of the species of pathogenic bacteria that also appeared as a serious worldwide health problem. It is an airborne bacteria, causing an infectious disease that primarily affects the lung.

"Yes, it's true. Our measles outbreak was also deadly, but since this infection is a worldwide threat now, we should also take precautions, especially if we have children and elderlies in the house. School administrators even require children to wear masks."

As soon as my friend left, I leaned my head on the backrest and closed my eyes. The caffeine in my third cup of coffee no longer did its task in keeping me awake. I still had a few hours to complete before I could finally leave and spend the rest of my day off.

Just when I drifted into sleep, having vivid dreams about the earlier events in my duty, a frightened voice, and a hand that shook my shoulders vigorously, woke me up. I opened my eyes but gathered my brows right away, hoping to show her that a simple tap could wake me up. I was sure I did not sleep well because I just had a caffeine boost in my system.

Chapter 11

"I'm used to this. I can still sleep," I smiled awkwardly.

"No. Drink milk, instead. I also bought a little."

"What-"

"Wait."

He cut me off, only to make me wait. Yet, when he came back, he already had two bags in his hands. My eyes got wide when he pulled out a big can of milk. Standing to take it from him, I giggled.

"Thanks, Sean, but I'm not a baby anymore."

"The babies are not the only ones who need a good rest. Adults, also. And milk contains melatonin, a hormone that induces sleep. You're the doctor here."

I raised both my hands, still giggling. "Okay, okay, I'll drink the milk. I don't need another lecture. What else do you have there?"

I stood up next to him as I opened the two bags and looked at what he got there. I shook my head in amusement when I saw that those foods were even enough to feed me for three months: nuts, chocolates, cookies, noodles, drinks, and many others.

"Thank you so much, Sean. You're making me fat."

"A little more fat is sexier," he grinned, and the sparks in his eyes tickled my heart again.

"You're impossible." I didn't know how to reply to that anymore.

"You need to hurry up and go to sleep."

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Not at all. It's just that I want you to sleep as soon as possible. Your job is exhausting."

If it was flattery or just his thoughtfulness, yes, I was moved. If only Eric had half of this attitude, perhaps, I wouldn't leave him. I'm a woman who always keeps a sense of gratitude.

"Thank you," was all I could say. A sense of melancholy crept into my heart again.

"If you're done, you may go to bed now. I'll arrange these foods on your cupboards before I go. Send me a message when you wake up later."

"What? Does the famous Mr. Sean Grey clean up a table?"

"You won't believe it, but I only hire cleaners in the house every other day. I even do my laundry sometimes when I'm not busy. I cook my meals and clean up my dishes."

I stared at him with an open mouth. My admiration for him grew higher. Eric...my goodness, why shouldn't I leave him alone? Why do I always compare him to Sean? How they run their lives is not my business, and why should I bother Eric when he can afford it?

Gazing back at my stunned demeanor, Sean reached out a hand and pinched my nose. "Now, go to sleep. Let's talk later."

I went to my bedroom as Sean wouldn't stop pushing me to go to sleep. I changed into my sleepwear, did a quick feminine routine, then slipped into my bed. While I was waiting for my lids to pull down finally, I let my thoughts wander over to Eric. Is he still at the house now? Or, is he with Shirley? What are the things that made Shirley more special to Eric? Why couldn't he give his heart to me?

Drops of tears run through my cheeks, drenching my pillow. I didn't know that betrayal hurts this much. Even though Sean's presence thrilled me and lifted my mood a while ago, now that I'm alone and in the middle of the four corners of my wall, the pang of pain started to creep again.

My thoughts then drifted back to a time in the past when Shirley and I first met. We came from the same university in college though we took different courses. She took up business administration while I took my pre-medicine course. I was at the coffee shop at that time, the usual place I hung out.

"Hi, Miss! Maybe you'll be interested to see my brochure?" Shirley sat across my table after she handed me her cosmetic brochure.

I looked at her and smiled. I'm not fond of using any cosmetics from a product dealer because Eric was very particular with the brand I was using. Of course, I was his trophy, so he always wanted the best for me. The praises I got were always his pride. I scanned the pages with a feigned interest so as not to hurt her. Finding nothing that caught my interest, I politely handed it back to her.

"I'm sorry, Miss. Maybe next time," I said, smiling.

"My name is Shirley. It's alright, maybe next time there will be something you will like," she smiled back at me while she put back the brochure in her bag.

"You know what, I like people who love to do business," I said. There was something in her eyes that made me reluctant to let her go empty-handed.

"Because I have to. This is the only way to finish my studies. I don't have parents to support me or any family member."

That was how our friendship started. Because we were both orphaned, I was the best person to understand her. Since I had money already, I trimmed on my expenses and gave it to Shirley. When she finally graduated in her business course, I asked Eric a favor to let her work in his company.

"Let her come to the office tomorrow," he said, and in my happiness, I kissed him hard, sending us both into a passionate encounter in the bed the next moment.

I dozed off to sleep with the image of Shirley in my mind. She was smiling at me; her beautiful face reflected the golden rays of the sun behind her. She stood tall and sexy, wearing an expensive set of clothes this time. I was happy for her; she's now living according to her dream. She got promoted to a higher designation because she was good at what she did. She graduated with high honors and recognition, after all.

Chapter 12

Sean slowed down as we were about to enter the basement entrance of a tall building in one of the famous parks of the city. He did not tell me where we were going; he just diverted our conversation into some trivial topics. I put my head forward so that I could take a look at the whole facade-- from top to bottom. Built of tinted glass and silver steel framework in a contemporary design, its mirrored glass panes reflected the lights of the lamp posts and the night view of the surroundings. It wouldn't take more than just a glance to tell that the building was a work of elegance. What caught my attention next was the bold, silver signage enclosing the beautiful landscape that glittered against the evening lights.

LAMINAE, INC.

"So, this is your building?" I asked, looking at him with awe.

Sean chuckled and threw me a glance. We were already descending towards the basement parking lot that required his focus. "Not only mine, but I also have business partners."

"You're so humble, Mr. Grey," I smiled, looking away. There was something in the way he smiled or chuckled that made me feel tickled.

"What I am saying is true, it's just that I am--"

"The principal shareholder," I finished it for him, and he smiled.

"You are one of my business partners," he said, making me squint.

"What?"

"You heard me, right?" His tone was serious, and he was not smiling either.

"I know because I will be working for you. Your business is nothing without your subordinates."

Sean dropped the subject by giving me a nod before he turned off the engine. "Come, I'll take you up."

I didn't wait for him to open the door for me. He's not my suitor, nor a boyfriend. He just, perhaps, wanted to befriend me because he witnessed how Eric treated me. Suddenly, a thought occurred in me. Why did Sean do all this kindness to me? Was Eric's treatment on me the only reason why he made friends with me? I didn't realize I was standing outside the car, holding the door. I was lost in my thoughts as my mind searched for the reasons for his kindness.

"Red?"

I shot him an abrupt glance as I returned to my senses. "I'm sorry."

"Shall we go now?" he asked, looking at my hand that was holding the handle.

I chuckled at how silly I was while closing the door. "Sure."

Soon, Sean and I stopped in front of a door where signage told me that it was the doctor's clinic. So, this was his plan--to show me my working space. I opened the door with a smile twisting on my lips. A row of four wooden desks, the first one having a glass paperweight that had my name on it, greeted my eyes. Behind each desk was a black, swivel chair. On its left sides, were single high shelves containing laptops in its middle compartments. In front of each desk, there were also two matching wooden chairs facing each other.

I went across the room on the right side with Sean behind me. There was a vast, multi-compartment shelf where I could place my books and other gadgets such as a glucometer, nebulizer, sphygmomanometer, pulse oximeter, and many others. I opened the door beside the shelf, and I found out that it was the door leading to the assessment room where I could check the clients privately. Adjacent to the door was also another room where there were about six beds. Those were for the workers who would feel ill during their working hours.

"This is very nice, Sean, very well-arranged," I commented, as we were walking towards the door.

"I'm happy you like it. If there are some things you want me to add, please tell me. Then, I'll introduce you to the staff once you start to work. For the things you need here, we also have a purchasing officer to do the work for you."

"I see." I was about to go out of the main entrance when he stopped me.

"On your left, Red," Sean said, pointing to the door on the left side, in between the four rows of desks. I walked towards it and opened the door.

I gasped at what I saw. It was the medical staff lounge. There was a kitchen bar, a sala set, a QLED TV set, and a personal computer. On one side, there were also two rooms--one for the nurses, and one for the doctors. Each room had three single beds, placed against the walls.

"So, this is where I'm going to stay. I like it here, Sean. It seems that you provide everything for the staff."

"Yeah, nurses have their break. They can cook, heat foods, watch TV, whatever. Yet, during working hours, they must be on their special assignments if there are no clients."

"The boss is strict," I chuckled, closing the doors behind me. We were already heading out of the lounge.

"Because the boss also works hard, having two workplaces at the same time."

What does he mean by that? I asked myself, pulling my brows as I stared at him.

"You will be the boss here, Red. You may start hiring doctors who will occupy the three desks per shift. Choose your nurses and other staff-- those whom you think you can establish a good working environment."

"Thank you, Sean," I smiled, grateful for the special task he assigned me. It meant I was in control, and I could avoid a toxic environment.

He nodded and smiled. I suddenly realized that there were three beds for the nurses and three beds for the doctors. Since a single shift has eight hours, so it meant that those three beds for the doctors would be assigned to the three who would be rotating for the whole 24 hours. It also meant I wouldn't be staying here and that my task would be more on management. Anyway, I had my desk where I could work.

"What's on your mind?" Sean must have noticed that I was lost in my thoughts again.

"I am just thinking about starting the interview on my next day off."

"That's fine."

I smiled again as I turned to face him, blocking his way. I just wanted to thank him for saving me from making more lies. And the favor I got from him was too special, and probably, too much.

"Thanks again, Sean. You're saving me from making lies. And if you'll ask what I mean with that, I'll explain it on the way."

"Hungry?"

"Yes."

"I still have one room to show you, but we can have our dinner there."

I gathered my brows at what he said, but I didn't say anything. "What is his trick?"

Chapter 13

Sean and I went out of the clinic. I thought he was going to show me his office, but to my surprise, we turned right to a corridor next to the clinic. I noticed that along the length of that corridor, there were only two doors, and there were no signage attached. We stopped in front of the first door, and Sean opened it. He held it open for me, and I gasped in awe as I stepped in. Expensive furniture and appliances graced the mini living room, enhanced by the modern ceiling and lighting design.

Behind it was a partition wall, separating the kitchen and the dining room. On the other side was another door, and I could tell without asking that it must be the bedroom. Though the room was not painted with pink or red, and that its shade suggested a general preference, I could still say it was more of a feminine design. I then began to question Sean's personality. Ever since I knew him, I never heard him mention a woman. He even didn't invite someone to be his partner during the inauguration of this company.

"How do you like this room?" Sean's voice broke into my train of thoughts.

"Very nice and elegant."

"You like it?"

"Of course."

Sean smiled and led me out of that room. We entered the second room, and to my surprise, it almost had an identical design to the first, except for the shades of the ceiling and the walls. I guess it was the masculine version.

"It's time for dinner, but I'm sorry I can't take you out to a restaurant. Eric is a prominent person, and people recognize him. We might be making an interesting headline."

"I understand. I won't forgive myself if ever your name will be linked to mine," I said, too sorry for myself for starting to feel comfortable around him. A sense of humiliation must have registered in my expression because Sean's next words were a little odd.

"Sulking?" he said chuckling. "Red, I don't mind at all. I never mind at all. I am just worried that you are not ready to face issues."

"I'm not, and I mean it," I smiled and threw him a glance, pretending I was not affected.

Sean did not repeat anything until we entered the mini dining room. There were lighted chafing dishes on the table and a set of serving plates and cutlery. He then pulled out a chair for me while

he seated across from me. On the glass wall across us, we could see the view in that part of the city below.

He placed food on my plate and filled my bowl with soup, something Eric never did for me. It was always me who served him because he felt he was entitled. He also poured an iced tea on one glass, and water on another glass.

"Sean, is your girlfriend a businesswoman also?"

"Hmnn...why?" he smiled and looked at me.

"Just asking." I wanted to tell him that she's so lucky to have found someone as thoughtful and caring as him.

"I'm not going to talk about who she is and what her social standing is. What matters most is that I love her for whoever she is."

I couldn't understand why, but I felt a pricking pain inside my heart. It was still improper to say I was hurting, just because I had already started to like him. The reality was that I was still hurting for Eric, and it would still take a while to heal. I liked Sean, yes, but it was just a pure admiration, or should I say, an infatuation in its early stage. And infatuation is not love.

"She lives in Sama Island, and she is the reason why I was there."

"Sama Island? How is she?" My tone was a little higher because Sama Island was where the Bronc X virus originated.

"I don't know. I send someone to check, but he still has no news of her until now. I just don't know how, not where, to find her."

I stared at him, gaping at what he said. I may not say a word, but it didn't mean I was not intrigued. Two questions started to haunt me, and that included why he didn't know how to find her, and what could be the reason why she ran away from him.

"I'm sorry, Sean. How I wish I could help," I said, and he chuckled.

"You have your tangles to unravel."

I continued to eat silently while I began to feel sorry for myself. Perhaps, I already had the answer to my question as to why Sean offered me all this kindness. Maybe, he wanted to forget her, and that he needed someone to help him divert his attention. On the other hand, our friendship would also help me a lot, but it was too risky on my part. Too dangerous, because I might fall in love. And I would start all over again.

"Red, the first room is yours, and I suggest that you stay there. You may hire someone to take care of your house to maintain it. I can help you with that."

I stared at him in surprise, trying to delve his reasons behind. Just this morning, he bought a lot of food, and now, he's asking me to stay here? What was the reason behind the quick change in his decision?

"Of course, I'm not expecting that you will agree with me, but if ever you'll change your mind, it would be your home." Sean then reached for my hand and placed the bunch of keys in my palm.

I stood up. I was about to tell him that I already wanted to go home, but I stopped when he spoke ahead of me.

"Go back to your room and check what changes you would like to suggest. Whether or not you will decide to stay here, it is still your room if you're around."

"Alright."

I left and went back to the room that Sean told me as mine. I had already seen the dining room, so I went into the bedroom. My eyes fell on the bed right away, and its location gave out a romantic vibe. It was close to the glass wall, overlooking the bustling city below. Far across the horizon were the dark silhouettes of the mountain, making me imagine what the morning view be like.

I returned to the second room to tell Sean that I already wanted to go. He was not in the living room, so I went back to the kitchen. I then got awed at what I saw. Sean was there, washing the chafing dishes!

Before I found my words to say, my phone vibrated. It was Eric calling, so I answered it. I wanted to know if he already noticed my absence.

"Red, where are you? I called the hospital, and they told me it's your day off."

"I'm at work," I said, and I'm glad I was quick to think of a good answer.

"Work?" I realized that he never listened when I first lied to him. That I would not go home because I had another work. Or perhaps, he just didn't care.

"Had I not told you that I am accepting a new job as a company doctor?"

"What?" he snarled, and I soffed.

"What's wrong? There seemed to be no problem when I first told you about it."

He sighed, but his long barking came next. "Red, do I make you starve? Do I make you run out of gas? Is there still any brand that you like that I have not approved?"

My tears were already dripping when he ended his litany. With the courage I had already mustered, I replied.

"Eric, why do you tell me all these things when I don't want to hear it anymore?"

Chapter 14

There were a few seconds of silence before he spoke again. "Come on, Red. What do you mean by that?"

It took me a while before I replied. I didn't want to hear him ranting at me anymore. I then heard sounds of opening and closing of doors, and pulling and pushing of drawers.

"Red, what do you mean by these empty closets and drawers? I don't see white coats here anymore."

"Just when did you learn to check my things, Eric? Just when did you take your eyes off other women for you to see my missing things?"

"Red, you're exaggerating things-"

"Am I? When you seduce every beautiful woman, including my best friend?"

"Come home! Let's talk about this."

"My home is somewhere else already, Eric. And I am not sorry. Whatever was there between us, it's over. I have a list of all my expenses, including my tuition, and all those fancy things you give me. Just give me time, and I will return every penny you spent for me-- with interest."

"Red-"

"Yes. You don't need me as I am. Don't you remember your constant reminder that you can throw me out of your life anytime you want? Well, I'm making it easier for you. I left a few days ago already. I am even surprised that you discover it earlier than I expect."

I heard him slamming a table and some noise after that. I could see him in my mind, swiping a table and kicking a chair in anger. I knew him very well when he got angry; he always smashed or threw anything his hand could grasp. Yet, he never went to the extent of lifting a hand against me. There were those times when he grabbed and pulled me in anger, but he never used some force, like slapping, to hurt me. However, humiliating words are more painful than those wounds a scourge can inflict. It leaves scars in the mind that no balm can ever remove.

Sean was already standing by the partition wall when I looked up. I could tell through his soft gaze that he heard a lot of what I said. He slowly walked towards me, keeping my eyes in his gaze. My tears ran faster when I felt his sympathy in that expression, making me throw myself right away into his arms.

Placing my head in his chest after he led me to a couch, I poured out my humiliation and pain through a loud and bitter cry. I couldn't tell how long did I weep. I just couldn't flush all those bitterness I harbored for five long years through a single gush of tears.

Just when I calmed down, finally, my phone vibrated again. I threw Sean a glance, and he nodded. I hesitated for a moment, but Sean's tender gaze at me was his cue that I should listen to what Eric wanted to say.

"Eric."

"Let's talk. Please."

"I'm at work."

"Then tell me where you are and I'll come."

"Non-workers are not allowed."

"Then tell me I am your-"

"Sex partner? Paid roommate? What?"

"My goodness, Red. Tell them I am your husband. We're together for five years already and we made love almost every day. What difference does that piece of marriage certificate make?"

"It matters to me, Eric. You know why? Because it is a vow of lifetime commitment, of belongingness, of emotional security."

"Then let's talk about it."

"You're already late, I'm sorry."

"Red, this is unfair!" He was already shouting.

"Eric, I have already warned you, that I can also get tired of your insults and threats. And I have also told you that when I give up, there's no more turning back." I also shouted back.

I heard him sigh, and a few seconds of silence followed. When he spoke again, his voice was already soft.

"Red, don't I deserve a formal breakup if that's what you want?"

I looked at Sean, and he nodded again. Eric was right. He took me out from despair when I felt the world turning its back on me. It's only fair that we should have a proper talk, now that I decided to end it up.

"Okay. I'll be there."

"Tell me where you are and I'll pick you up."

"No need."

Sean offered to drop me at Eric's place, but I refused. I didn't want Eric to think that I had this courage because I was already seeing another man. I booked a Grab car, and in a few minutes, I was already at the door of the house I used to call home for five years. I slowly turned on the knob. Part of me was afraid that Eric would hurt me physically, and the other part of me was ready to accept whatever may happen.

Eric was already standing in the living room; one hand was leaning on the upper backrest of the couch. He was on a sleeping robe. Probably, he just woke up when he called. I stopped when I met his eyes. I got scared of that sharp and dark gaze, it burrowed deep into my soul. He then walked slowly to me. And when he was already a few inches away from me, he placed both his hands at the door, trapping me in between.

Maybe because I have already prepared my mind for this, I managed to stay calm. My heartbeats no longer hammered against my chest, as I waited for his tongue to lash me out with stinging words. However, he did not say a word. He bent his head down instead and took my lips in a hot and fiery kiss. I did not resist, but I remained standing like a statue--devoid of any emotion. His mouth moved to my neck, then down to my sternal path. I surprised myself for not reacting to his touch, even when his hands slid under my bodice, cupping and squeezing my two, soft peaks.

Sensing my blunt reaction, he looked into my eyes, which I returned without a blink. I saw the change of his expression, which I believed was one of hurt and defeat. Suddenly, he pulled me close to him and enclosed me in a tight embrace. What came next was something I did not expect. He broke into a sob.

Chapter 15

"I'm sorry, Red," he said in between his sobs, "I'm really sorry."

I chose to keep silent because I already made up my mind. If I would reply, he would only try harder to convince me. Tears were always my weakness, and I was afraid I would give in if he continued his drama. I couldn't define what I was feeling for him because his unrestrained tongue would always ruin every sprout of affection that I had for him.

Those five years I chose to endure was more of my way of paying him because I owe him my profession and my existence. It was never difficult to love him--he's sweet if he was in a good mood. He's generous to my wants and needs, and he always wanted the best for me. He bought me an expensive car, surprised me with signature stuff, and gave me access to his bank accounts. He never questioned, nor complained whenever I went out of the line and spend for something irrational.

Yet, his weakness was his short temper and his endless nagging. Every time I start to fall for him, his tongue would always destroy it. All I could remember was the humiliation and my battered human ego. Maybe because he could easily release his anger through an outburst that his mood would also quickly improve. Unlike me, who kept my emotion to myself, I had allowed my pain and humiliation to pile up until I had nothing left for him.

"Red, please tell me that you'll stay," he begged, lifting my chin so I could look straight into his eyes.

I sighed before I answered. "Eric, when you feel it in your heart that you're finally with the right woman, you would never let her go. And I know I am not that woman because, from the very beginning, it never occurred to you that you will keep me for a lifetime. You always keep it in your mind that you would throw me out of your life when the right time comes."

"I said it because I was angry, but I did not mean it."

"It's always there in your subconscious mind."

"Red--"

"Eric, I can't thank you enough for everything that you have done for me. I will be forever grateful for it. Why not give my best friend a chance? Why not try giving her your full attention?"

"Red, we're both drunk when it happened!" His voice was not loud, but he was stressing every word. However, I did not want to hear about it anymore.

"Let's give ourselves some space for a while. If we would realize that we still need each other after that, then we're meant for each other."

Eric's expression changed from a pitiful look into an angry and domineering one. His eyes were so sharp that anytime, I felt it could blow some fire and brimstone.

"Red, if we can't talk this out, it's up to you. Don't ever come to me in the future, and beg for my pardon. If you leave this house now, don't ever think of coming again. I'll strip you off from all your finances. Let's see how well you can bear with just a resident's meager salary."

He stormed out of the living room and climbed upstairs. I wished he would see the cards I left in our bedside table. I was not that shameless that I would still take advantage of his fortune even if I were already leaving. When I heard the sound of a slamming door, I slowly turned toward the door and left.

It's finally over between us.

I booked for a Grab car to take me home the moment I got outside the gate. I almost couldn't see the screen because my tears started to blurred my vision. The moment I got the booking, I leaned my back on the lamp post. Soon, my shoulders rocked as I broke into a painful sob. I did not care if there were passers-by or people were walking on the streets. I could no longer wait to heave out the load that was occupying my chest.

Scenes of Eric and me during our happy moments flashed in my mind. Images of us in a heated love session followed. His smiles as he hanged my medals of achievements during my graduation, his proud march every time we attended parties and functions, and his frown every time he disliked the things I bought, came next. He's such a part of me. And it hurt that it had to end with no sense of gratitude in my heart, but hatred. It hurt that he couldn't love and treat me as his own. Because if he did, he wouldn't have torn my sense of pride and dignity. He would have valued me as someone he couldn't live without.

"Red?"

I jolted when Eric's voice pierced into my ears. I looked up and met his already soft gaze. He pulled me close to him and kissed the top of my head.

I hate the fact that he was like that. How easy it was for him to break my heart, only to act as if nothing happened after a few minutes.

"Wait for me here. I'll take you to where you are working or where you are staying. I'll give you the space you ask if that's what you need."

Before I could reply, a car stopped in front of me. I did not mind to check if it was the plate number of the Grab car I had booked. I sprinted towards the car, and before I opened it, I turned and faced Eric.

"Thank you, but the Grab car has already arrived."

To my surprise, Eric did not insist. He just watched me getting inside the car. I gazed back at him with tears falling from my eyes, and before I closed the door, I left him my parting words.

"Eric," I said, pausing for a moment to smile at him, "thank you, and goodbye."

I closed the door, and I covered my face as I broke into a sob again. It hurt like hell. It hurt like I was pushed into a seafloor. I didn't even look at the driver. He knew anyway where I was going--it's part of the booking. However, I jumped at my seat when the driver's hand suddenly pulled me close to him.

Chapter 16

My eyes flew wide when my eyes fell on the driver. I realized how lost I was in my heartbreak that I didn't even look at the plate number of the car that picked me up. I then got worried about being unable to cancel my booking, thinking about the driver's wasted time and fuel. However, the wide grin that broke in his face eased my guilt.

"Don't worry, dear. I was already there when the Grab car arrived, and I took care of him."

I sighed in relief before I answered. "Sean, how come you're here?"

"I just presumed that you might flee from Eric."

Sean laid his tender gaze at me while reaching out for my hand. I just smiled back at him, although the corners of my mouth curled forward, tempting me into another episode of crying moments.

"Let it go, Red," he said, giving my hand another squeeze. And I did as he told me.

To give me a bit of privacy, Sean turned the engine on and sped off to somewhere I couldn't care less at the moment. I returned to reality when he pulled over and turned off the engine. I did not look at him, too ashamed to show my messy demeanor. The next thing I knew was that the window on my side rolled down, and the crisp and cold breeze caressed my face.

"You need to breath out," I heard Sean spoke, and I turned to look at him. He just smiled and glanced outside, so I followed his eyes. What met my gaze was the tranquil garden landscape, highlighted by giant trees, spreading its wide canopies of thick foliage. Feasting my eyes on the serenity of this place, I, somehow, felt peace inside. I had too much crying already, so I guessed the splendid view of the environment completed the release of the load I carried inside.

"Do you want a walk?"

I nodded. I need not ask him for his intention of bringing me to the park. It would be too cruel to refuse a walk under the starry skies on such a beautiful night. He handed me a surgical mask, seeing that I didn't care to wear one. The case of those infected with the virus was already increasing within and across the globe.

"Red, if you don't mind, may I ask a few questions about you?" Eric's voice broke the long silence between us as we strolled across the cemented path amidst the vast stretch of the well-trimmed grass.

"Sure."

"Do you have relatives in the city?"

"I don't know. I was never close to any of them. My father never talked about his family."

"You mean you don't know about where he came from?"

"Yes, topics about his family was a taboo."

"You don't know that his family roots are in Australia?"

I stopped and looked at him. How did he know about my father's family? And why was he interested in it?

I saw the smile disappeared on Sean's lips. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I was sure I saw a glint of guilt in his eyes—that kind of look when you're caught doing something terrible.

"How did you know about it?" I stared at him with furrowed brows.

"Because most of the Greys originated from Australia."

"What? Are you talking about me, Sean?" I snapped. Was he in his right mind?

"What did I say?" He chuckled, but that guilt in his face heightened.

"You said that the Greys originated in Australia."

"It's true."

"Sean, I'm not a Grey. You are."

He scratched his head and bit his lip. He could have laughed and corrected his mistake. Yet, he did not. His expression showed something else—he was hiding something. And that was about my family.

"Sean, tell me. How do you know about my family?"

He looked away before he smiled and answered me. "I'm sorry. Probably, it is in my mind that someday you would be a Grey."

I gathered my brows closer as I looked straight in his face. He looked back at me with those eyes that quickened my heartbeat. However, he could no longer erase my suspicions at him. Would I be a Grey? By becoming his wife?

He reached out a hand to brush the strands of hair away from my face. Then he held me at my shoulder and began walking again.

"Red, can you tell me about Eric?"

I shook my head and stopped again in front of him. "No. Tell me about my family."

"Some other time, Red. I want to know about you first."

So, I was right. He knew about my family. My heartbeats thumped louder, and I didn't understand why. Why did I suddenly feel that it was a huge matter?

It then occurred to me that there must be a mystery behind my father's refusal to talk about his family. I wouldn't wonder about my mother because, as she said, she was an orphan. She also mentioned that she and my father first met when they were both in college. And aside from that, there was nothing more. It's only now that I regret not knowing many things about them.

"My mother died when I was three, and dad left me in the care of my nanny. Dad and I seldom see each other because every time he comes down from his ship, he was always at his other woman's home. However, he showered me with material things and a huge bank account. When he died later, I ran out of savings, and Eric rescued me. That's all."

I stopped again and blocked his way. "It's your turn."

"Not yet. Tell me about Eric and you."

"No. I don't want to talk about him yet. You know why? Because I also see my best friend's face in every mention of his name."

"How long are they into the relationship?"

I no longer answered as I continued gazing at him. I placed my hand akimbo and demanded, "It's your turn. Sean. If you don't talk about your family, then tell me about your girlfriend."

"Calla?"

"Whoever is she!" I rolled my eyes, and he laughed.

Chapter 17

SEAN'S POV

I got nervous when I realized I could no longer hold the truth. This was my purpose of seeing and getting close to her, so I must break it to her gently. I promised to a man so dear to me, so, the time had come that I must honor my words. Even if I already broke it a long time ago.

"She was one of those people I met in Sama. It all started when my curiosity gripped me once again. Somewhere in the outskirts of the island, there was a mysterious place where nobody was allowed to enter. The whole perimeter was fenced, and the gate was always closed. One time, I peeped into its hole, and I saw a beautiful lady walking towards the gate. I did not run away. I even told her the truth about why I was standing there when she spoke behind the barrier. I did not realize that she saw me through her security camera."

"Then?" Red replied, and I got amused at how she easily got intrigued with my story.

"She told me to meet her at the secret entrance by the shore."

"Then?"

"I went there after sunset, and she was there, waiting for me. She then brought me somewhere I could not figure out because it was dark. After a short introduction, I learned that she was lonely and alone, hungry for a companion. She refused to tell me anything about herself, aside from her name. I respected her for that."

"What were you talking about then?"

"We didn't talk much, and I could not explain why I did not insist. Perhaps, I was so drawn to her mystery."

"If you did not talk much, what were you doing then?"

I chuckled at her somewhat pure innocence before I replied. "Of course, we did nothing else but made love the whole time."

I saw her wince a little before she looked away and spoke again. That was a sensitive and personal topic that I shouldn't have brought up.

"But why did you seem to say that you lost her?" she asked, after being overwhelmed by my confession.

"The last time I went to Sama Island, she no longer met me at the shore. I took a vacation so that I could wait for her every night, but she did not appear anymore."

"What happens to the people you send to look for her?"

"Zero progress, so I let them stop. I realized I was spending time on someone who could never be mine. After all, I knew about it from the start. Perhaps, it's my attraction to her mysteries that made me misconstrue it as love."

"Do you think she's a human being?" Red's eyes darted sharply at me, her expressions scared.

"She's real to my touch." I laughed, assuring her I didn't make love with a ghost. I could still remember that her breasts were soft and full, and her love nest was warm and dripping. Yet, she was just a part of a dream, in an unreal world.

Red and I sat on a bench after a long walk around the park. She easily got lost in her thoughts, perhaps pondering about my revelation. While still holding her hand, my thoughts also went back to the real reason why I was there in Sama Island.

"Here's the investigation result, sir," Philip, my private investigator, said as he handed me a few sheets of paper and some old photos.

I gave him a quick stare before I looked down on the paper. I didn't find him suspicious, and his sincere expression told me he was doing his job seriously.

"Mr. Albert Nelson had taken fifteen flights toward Sama Island and that coincided his fifteen yearly off-ship vacations, five years before his death. As per my investigation, he stayed with a woman named Bianca Rivera. Some reliable sources told me that the couple had a daughter, and her name is Calla Rivera."

I looked at the blurred, old photo of the family. Their daughter seemed to look at me with her beautiful eyes, while her hair hung loosely over her shoulders. She looked like in her early twenties, and her tucked-in blouse under her jeans accentuated her perfect shape.

"Are you sure she is his daughter?" I asked. I could never afford to make a mistake. A single error would ruin the whole legacy my old man worked so hard for.

"That is still under investigation, sir. I'm still working on the access to all her records."

I nodded, but my mind started to analyze the high probability of her being Albert's daughter. He was legally married to Juliet, and their relationship was out of the society's norm, so Calla should be using her mother's maiden name.

"Okay, go ahead, Philip. And please go deeper."

The following morning, I was aboard my private plane. The moment I landed at the airport, I instructed my hired driver to bring me directly towards that remote part of the island where Bianca Rivera lived. Philip gave me detailed instructions as to the location of her place and some minor details about her. After a few minutes, the car pulled in front of a fenced, white-painted Bungalow house. I did not waste a second. I stepped out of the car right away and pressed the doorbell outside the gate. Soon, a woman in her early fifties opened up for me.

"How can I help you, sir?" the woman asked, but her eyes scanned me from head to toe. She was not Bianca; I was sure of that. Her features in the photo were still vivid in my memory.

"Good morning, madame. May I talk to Miss Bianca Rivera, please?"

"Come in, come in," the woman said, as her hand ushered me inside the house.

"Thank you, madame. You have a beautiful house," I commented as I looked around the neatly-decorated living room. My eyes then fell on a sleek, wooden ship replica on top of one of the shelves. It only confirmed that I was in the right house. Albert Nelson was a ship captain, and replicas of the ship wouldn't surprise anyone if he knew his profession.

"I'm not Bianca. I'm her housekeeper, although I am also her cousin."

I stood up and extended a hand to her. "Nice to meet you, madame, but I am here to see Miss Bianca. If you don't mind, may I know where can I find her, please?"

"She seldom comes home, young man. She's already living in the city, five years before her common-law husband died."

I felt frustrated to know that while I spent a fortune to come to this place, Miss Bianca was just living close to me in the big city. The housekeeper wasn't taking precautions at all. She gave me Bianca's address, as well as her contact numbers. Due to her kindness, I asked her to buy breakfast for us but let her keep the big change. My extended stay had a purpose. After I would establish a rapport with her, I would then ask about Calla Rivera.

Chapter 18

SEAN'S POV

"Madame, while you cook our breakfast, may I go out first and see the beautiful sceneries outside?"

"Sure, young man. Not far from here are our beautiful shores. You can have your driver bring you there."

On our way to the shore, my eyes caught the strange sight of a restricted area that had several "No Trespassing" signboards on the long stretch of galvanized steel chain-link fence. What amazed me was the rows of giant trees inside the lot that it appeared like a man-made wood from outside view. We were on the outskirts of the island where no one would ever expect to see a small forest like that. Mangroves were expected near the foreshore lands but not those species.

I asked my driver to stop as we passed by a wide, steel gate. I got out of the car and walked toward it--curious about what's inside. My eyes then grew wide to see a beautiful house in a contemporary 2000 house design. It looked eerie as it stood like a haunted house in front of the wood. There was even no sign of life inside.

Just then, someone suddenly came out from nowhere and was walking towards me. I blinked many times to convince myself that I did not see a ghost or a fairy. My heart was on my throat. She was wearing a white cotton dress that outlined her perfect shape-- its hem blown harshly by the wind, revealing her white undies. Looking at her beautiful face and her perfect demeanor, I started to believe that I was enchanted.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice sounded melodious in my ear.

"I'm Sean Grey. I'm looking for Miss Calla Rivera."

She stopped and stared at me through the hole in the gate. I wondered what she was thinking, but my heart leaped when, finally, she spoke.

"I'm the one you're looking for. Meet me at the entrance by the shore after sunset."

"See you then, Miss Calla."

She just gave me a thin smile and walked away without a word, leaving my jaw dropped open. She walked gracefully, and I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her. When she completely disappeared from my sight, I went back to the car, frustrated. The day was still too long. I could do nothing about it, so I just returned to the house of Miss Bianca Rivera. The housekeeper must have finished preparing our breakfast by then.

"When was the last time Miss Bianca came home, madame?" I asked with half a mouthful of fresh Tanguige stew. I always loved the sour taste of tamarind fruit on the soup, as well as its toppings of fresh, leafy vegetables.

"I couldn't remember anymore. Calla's boyfriend funded some business for her, and it's going well." I stared at her, and she gasped, covering her mouth.

"Why am I so talkative?" she murmured, but loud enough for me to hear.

I chuckled and appeased her. "It's alright, madame. I didn't even know them personally. I just come to see Miss Bianca for some business matter."

The housekeeper smiled as she drew in a deep breath. "My Calla is a beautiful girl. And beautiful girls are always blessed."

I looked at her and swallowed my mouthful of fish without chewing first. If that beautiful woman behind the gate were indeed Calla Rivera, then my strange excitement would have no place.

"Madame, where is Calla now? Why is she blessed? The way you describe her makes me more curious." I asked, pretending an innocent expression.

"Young man, she would be more blessed if she found you first because you're young and handsome."

I laughed. This woman is funny, I thought. "Do you mean her boyfriend is old and ugly?"

"No, he is also handsome and powerful."

She shook her head and giggled. I wanted to choke her for delaying her answer. I was already dying to know where Calla was at the moment, although I already knew the answer. I just wanted to know further about her, and why she was there at that eerie place.

"Madame, we haven't introduced ourselves yet. My name is Mark," I offered my hand for a handshake though it looked funny. We had been talking for a couple of minutes now, but we never cared to introduce ourselves. Not until this moment where I felt her useful for my investigation, so I might as well win her favor.

"Mark?" she repeated, and I nodded. I was telling her the truth. I am Sean Mark Grey.

"My name is Cynthia, Calla's aunt. They entrusted the care of this house to me." Her smile was full of pride and a sense of accomplishment.

"They are so lucky to have you. Look, the house is neat and clean. Very well-maintained." My praises for her were not lies; even the kitchen floor was as shiny as a clean mirror.

"Thank you, Mark," she giggled shyly.

"As a reward, I will give you a jewelry set," I said, pulling out next from my pocket the set of earrings and necklace I prepared for Miss Bianca. I always have that in mind that if you want a favor, you should give it to them first.

"What? These are mine? Never in my life had I own a set of expensive jewelry!"

I chuckled as I watched her becoming teary-eyed. "That's also for giving me a warm welcome and for your kindness, madame."

"Mark, thank you so much." She began to sniff in her silent tears as she clutched the pieces of gold jewelry into her chest.

"My pleasure, madame. By the way, can I possibly meet Calla in person?"

Her happy expression suddenly dropped. "I don't know anymore where she is. I even presumed that she's locked up by her young and handsome boyfriend after being caught in an affair with an old, rich man."

"Do you know their names?" Being in the business world for several years already, I knew a lot of prominent people. And that young and handsome businessman could be one in my circle of friends.

"Eric Martela."

Chapter 19

SEAN'S POV

"What?" I froze for a while as I stared at her with my pulled up brows. I may not know him personally yet, but I had already heard about him as the brain behind the Martela Group of Companies.

"Yes. The young and handsome man is Eric Martela. His family owns universities in the big city. You know, he loved my Calla so much. He even provided everything she wanted, including her education. Yet, one day, she replaced him with someone more powerful than him."

"Do you think she can do it?" I held her gaze for a while, unable to believe my ears. Yet, she looked back at me straight in the eyes, wearing a sincere expression on her face.

"She grew up with me as her nanny. And ever since she was a child, she always dreamed of becoming famous and influential. I am afraid that her ambition would ruin her forever."

I felt sick at the confession of Madame Cynthia. I adored Calla at first sight, but her revelation sullied my impression on her. I knew I shouldn't judge her according to what I hear. Even hardened criminals are given the right to a fair trial. Yet, the way her aunt described her--that she gave up her relationship with Eric for someone more powerful, made me apprehensive about seeing her. Nevertheless, I still went to the beach that afternoon. I no longer had difficulty in finding the entrance because I looked for it ahead, after I left their house.

The sky above the horizon greeted me with its orange-crimson hues and streaks when I arrived at the place. The sea was already grey as the sun was slowly hiding behind the horizon. The whole surroundings reigned in total silence except for the dominating sound of the slapping waves across the shore. There was no one else around, aside from my bodyguards, who followed me on a separate car wherever I went and me.

As soon as the darkness wrapped the earlier colorful sky, Calla appeared at the entrance with still her white dress on. Without greeting me first, she threw herself at me, and soon, her shoulders rocked as she broke into a sob. I hugged her with lots of questions running in my mind. Why did she cry? What kind of life did she live after breaking out from Eric? Why did she trust me so easily?

When she calmed down later, I tried to talk to her and asked her some questions. I wanted to know the cause of her enigmatic behavior. Instead of answering me, she cupped my face, and to my shock, she drowned my lips in a deep and hungry kiss.

"Calla-" I tried to stop her, but her hands crawled to the hem of my shirt, pulling it out through my head.

"Calla-" I caught her hands again, but her kisses went wild until my will to resist from the temptation died down. With my dulled thinking process, my hands then found its way under her bodice until it fondled her full, soft peaks. Before I realized it, we were both stripped naked, and our hands and lips explored each other's private territories.

"Sean, you may wonder why I trusted you so easily. I have already seen you in magazines and TV programs. And I won't wonder why you are here. The rich and famous always spend their free moments in this paradise."

"Calla-" I tried to open up a discussion between us, but she raised a hand and covered my mouth.

"Don't speak. Don't ask anything about me except my name. I would never hold you responsible for what we are doing now. And don't ever get emotionally attached. You're not allowed to fall in love with me."

Calla was my first, and I must admit that the pleasure would make me find her again. I wanted more of her, as much as she likewise wanted more of me. In those seven days that I was there, I came to see her every night. I didn't mind my bodyguards anymore; I paid them anyway. Yet, I had to pay them twice the amount of their salary for exhausting them at night.

I wondered why Calla didn't seem to mind. What kind of a woman in her right mind would become insensitive to her surroundings, knowing that there were other men around? Even if she prohibited me from knowing more about her, the mystery I found in her made me seek a doctor's advice.

"It could be stress-related. Perhaps, she's into an illicit love affair. Or probably, a certain life event triggered her to become sexually-compulsive."

"Is it an illness?" I asked.

She's a psychiatrist and a close friend of mine who first came to my mind when I got so troubled about Calla. I couldn't sleep, so I called her in the middle of the night.

"It's too early to say that. She may be just a liberated woman. You need to know the person better before we could jump into a conclusion."

"I see."

"Or, it could also be about yourself."

"Me?" I snapped in disbelief. Why did the blame shift suddenly on me?

"It looks like you're a stranger in the city and that the lifestyles of those city dwellers are something new to you."

Maybe she's right. I was too busy with studies and business that I did not have time to waste on women and parties. No woman seemed appealing to me until the day I met Calla. I didn't know what kind of spell did she cast on me that I got addicted to her. She was in my thoughts all day after taking our separate ways before the daybreak. My failure to persuade her to tell me about herself made me feel I was ineffective as a man. I was supposed to extend my leave from work until I would succeed. Until she would open up to me. However, she broke my plan.

Chapter 20

SEAN'S POV

"Sean, I would no longer be able to meet you for a long time," she told me after our heated session in the sand. I was holding her close to me as we laid by our side.

"Why?" I placed my elbow in the beach mattress to raise my head and look at her.

"Please, don't ask. We already agreed on this."

"Why? Your boyfriend is coming home?"

She did not say a word, and I took her silence as an affirmative answer.

"What about us, Calla? What will happen to us?" I raised my voice, but that didn't conceal the desperation in my tone.

"There's no us, Sean."

"But Calla, I know it's too early to say this, but I am a hundred percent sure that-"

"That you love me?" she laughed hard after she finished the sentence for me.

"What's funny?" I snapped. What could be so funny in putting an end to this beautiful thing that happened to us?

"There's no such word as love, Sean. If there is anything between us, that is called L.U.S.T."

"Calla, I'm serious."

Calla pinched my nose before planting a kiss on top of my head. I just stayed in my position, admiring her beautiful physique under the moonlit night. To my frustration, she stood up and grabbed her clothes. Before I could stand up, she ran to the secret entrance, and before closing the door, she called out to me. "Goodbye, Sean."

I was caught off-guard. It was already too late when I ran after her. She already closed the steel gate, and I did not dare to make a scene. I understood that she hid something and crashing off her territory might put her in danger. I could never forget what her aunt Cynthia told me that she left Eric for someone more wealthy and powerful. Probably, her current boyfriend owned this place, and maybe, he hid her there.

Is her boyfriend a married man? I asked myself as my gaze bore through that steel barrier between her and me. I could feel she was still there, listening to every movement that I made and observing my every reaction.

I finally left the place when the sun started to peep behind the black-and-grey horizon. Perhaps, she was right when she said from the very beginning that I should not involve my emotion. Now, I am paying the price for not heeding to her warning. My drooping shoulders were as heavy as my heart as I made my last glimpse on that fence that separated Calla and me. And I got afraid that it would be forever. She was just using me in easing up her loneliness while I considered her as the most beautiful part of a dream that I wouldn't want to wake up.

While leaning my back at the car, my phone vibrated. I pulled out my phone from my sling bag and checked the caller's name. It was Philip.

"Sir, I'm sorry-" I could picture Philip in my mind clenching his fists as he took his courage to tell me, perhaps, about his discoveries.

"Philip, what is it? It will help me if you're going to tell me the truth."

Sir, Miss Calla Rivera is not the woman you're looking for."

I stared into my phone with curved brows. He couldn't be wrong! I took a slow, deep breath to conceal my disappointment. I took a long vacation to fulfill a dying man's wish, only to be informed that she was a mistake.

"Miss Bianca Rivera was previously married to another man before her relationship with Mr. Albert Nelson. And Miss Calla Rivera is their daughter."

I tossed my head on top of the backrest of the car. I had promised my dear old man in his deathbed that I should not fall in love over the wrong person. It may be a difficult decision, but I owed him my whole life.

"Then, who?" I asked, followed by a sigh of frustration.

"Her name is Dr. Red Nelson. She's currently in her last year of medical residency at TAG Medical Center."

I felt I was in deep trouble. How could I fall for her when Calla took my heart already? I betrayed my life rescuer, the man who made me what I am today. I could not scold Philip for giving me a false report. I was even grateful that because of him, I finally felt how it was to fall for a woman. What I did not want to happen was the fact that I was breaking a sacred promise.

"Sean, you should find her. I would be the happiest if you wouldn't be too late in finding her. I want to see you both as husband and wife as soon as possible." This was the statement of the man I adored so much, ringing again in my ear like a broken music player.

Ever since I graduated in college, this imperative statement had already become a law in my heart. I accepted this with my whole heart because my sense of gratitude was overwhelming me. I believed that our lives could be directed to the goals we set in our minds. Aside from the power of mindset, I am also the type of person who knows how to keep a sense of gratitude.

"Philip, tell me more about her. Hurry up."

Before he answered me, messenger notifications beeped continuously from my phone. I checked it out, while my ears were still inclining to what he was going to say. Several photos of a beautiful woman greeted my eyes. Her eyes were gentle, and her facial expression was soft.

"Sir, she is Dr. Red Nelson." He said, and I stared into the photo. Those pair of eyes that looked back at me seemed to speak through my soul.

"Mr. Nelson always went home to Bianca every time he stepped down from his ship. He only spent a few days with her daughter making Dr. Red an independent person. Her nanny was the one taking care of her until she died. And according to reliable sources, Dr. Red got into a great financial setback a few years after her father died. To save her from the pit of financial hardship, she came up living with a prominent businessman."

My heart raced as he ended his statement. I couldn't understand why I felt terrible.

"Who?" I asked, holding my breath. I seemed to know the answer.

"Mr. Eric Martela."

Chapter 21

SEAN'S POV

"Phillip, please include Mr. Eric Martela and Dr. Red in the invitation to the launching of Laminae, Inc. But before that, give me details of his business ventures, personal background, and the status of his relationship with Dr. Red."

I placed back the phone into my sling bag as my thoughts wandered to the woman who helped Eric Martela forget the heartaches Calla caused him. Dr. Red must have possessed better qualities than Calla because he stayed with her for five years already. What I wanted to know if, until now, his heart still belonged to Calla. He funded her education, and now, she's a few months closer to become a full-fledged physician.

My heart ached at the thought of this. I was already too late. I had failed the one who gave his full trust in me. The woman whom he wanted for me couldn't be my wife anymore. Mr. Eric Martela already owned her. I was supposedly ready to fake an emotion until I would make it, but I was five years late. How would I ever face my most respected Mr. Thomas Grey?

"Sir, where would you want me to take you," my personal driver's voice floated in my ear as my eyes finally riveted on him. I did not realize that I got so lost in my thoughts.

"To the house of Miss Bianca," I answered. Now that Phillip told me about Dr. Red, I wanted to know more about their stories.

I bought something for Miss Cynthia when we passed by a restaurant. I was silently hoping that with the gifts I was giving her, she would open up to me. Women love gifts, and gifts open the windows of their hearts. I needed to know their stories because it would help me accomplish my mission.

"Sir Mark, I'm happy that you're here again. Please, help yourself to the couch." Miss Cynthia's wide grin gave me instant hope as she greeted me excitedly at the doorway.

"Thank you, madame. Where will I place these?" I showed her the packs of the restaurant's special dishes, including some of their desserts. Madame Cynthia's smile grew wider upon seeing it, though it showed some hint of her awkwardness.

"You should not have bothered, sir. It should have been me who has prepared something for you. I'm sure you would love our island's special dish."

"Wow, that's good. Next time," I smiled, assuring her of my next visit, "I am not going to miss it. And I would also bring you some delicacies in the city."

"You should tell me when you are coming back so that I can prepare."

"I will."

Our conversation turned into a pleasant one as Madame Cynthia talked about how the Sama Island turned into a tourist spot. It started to get on the limelight when the Martela's developed hotels and beach resorts in one of the areas of the island. They invested massive amounts in advertising the place until local and international tourists flocked in. More investors came in as the news of these pristine beaches circulated globally.

"So, you mean, madame, that Calla and Mr. Eric Martela met in one of their beach resorts here?"

Madame Cynthia's face lit up with a smile before she answered. "Absolutely. Calla applied as a fresh fish supplier to their business establishments in order to support her studies in college. And because my Calla is a very attractive girl, Mr. Martela fell on her. He supported her studies until she graduated with her degree in advanced education."

"You know, madame, I really wish to see her in person," I told her with a deceptive smile. Of course, I couldn't tell her that we already met and that we had made love every night that I was here.

"Sure, sure. When she comes home, I will tell her about you. So, you should leave your number to me."

"Sure," I grinned, opening my sling bag right away. I let her dictate her number and gave her a ring afterward.

"Here, I already saved it. If my Calla gets bored with the old man, then maybe she will consider you," she uttered with a mischievous grin, not realizing she had been tactless. What kind of man would like to wait for a woman who was in a relationship with an old man?

I felt uneasy. Making love with Calla was the most magical thing that ever happened in my life. Our kind of meeting was something unexpected and romantic, but thinking that she's now hooked to someone old but powerful made me uncomfortable. Yet, deep in my heart, I wanted her, and I couldn't care less who she was.

"Sir Mark, since you are so good to me, I would like to tell you her secret. If one day you will finally meet Calla, and you see that she's not your type, do not look directly at her eyes."

"Her eyes?" I repeated, wondering what sense there was in avoiding her eyes.

"Yes," Cynthia looked straight at me, collecting my full attention. "She can win any man she fantasizes through her eyes."

"What do you mean?" I asked, not realizing both my hands were gripping the edge of the table as I glued my eyes on her.

To my frustration, she smiled and shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir. This is not the right time to tell you about it."

I screamed deep inside. I was debating whether or not I should tell her it was the right time for me. I had stared into that beautiful and gentle eyes of her many times. And I loved staring at her every time I was moving inside her. I had loved watching it turning upward as I brought her to the clouds of ecstasy.

What is this I am feeling right now? Is this love? Infatuation? Or, am I just bewitched?

Perhaps, the best thing to do to be able to understand what I felt was to make a distance. Time and distance have their ways of placing things into better perspectives. Probably, I could forget her this way. And I would shift my focus on Dr. Red Grey, I mean, Dr. Red Nelson.

Chapter 22

SEAN'S POV

"Sir, Dr. Red is the physician-on-duty today."

Philip reminded me about this three times already today. It had been a month since I left Sama Island. To forget Calla, I focused on the launch of our new branch in the city. Laminae, Inc, was Asia's leading supplier of hospital supplies and equipment such as medical scanners, ultrasound machines, hospital or home care full-electric beds, and many others. Every machine and equipment one could see at TAG Medical Center, where Dr. Red worked, had the logo of Laminae, Inc. in it because the principal shareholder was Thomas and Albert Grey (TAG).

My mom was Sir Thomas Grey's private massage therapist. Ever since I was a child, mom would always let me accompany her to Grey's residence for the couple's daily massage sessions. Their only son, Albert Grey, who was most likely thirty years my senior, would also entertain me with his computer games, or any of his ball games such as basketball or tennis. I always remembered him as a kind and good-natured man.

My father succumbed to his illness at an early age, so our bread and butter was my mom's daily fee from her massage sessions with the Greys. Other friends and acquaintances also hired her, but when Mrs. Grey's wife died, Sir Thomas offered my mother an exclusive contract as his massage therapist. As far as I could remember, Mr. Grey suffered from chronic lower back pain and numbness. He refused to take any muscle relaxants or pain relievers, so the only way he could sleep was through a massage before bedtime.

I noticed that a few years after his wife died, he took my mom with him every time he had business travels. I was so used to her means of living, especially to the Greys, where she had daily appointments, so I didn't give it any malice. I understood that because of pain and loneliness due to the loss of his wife, Sir Thomas's illness worsened. Aside from that, his need for sound sleep for his health was as important as his business.

My mom later transferred me to an expensive school where one of the Grey's drivers would take me back and forth to school. Mother said it was because Sir Thomas wanted to reward me for my diligence in school. I maintained my standing as the recipient of the highest academic honors despite our poverty, and that pleased the rich man. A few weeks later, we moved into the Grey's residence for the reason that she could leave me to the household helpers every time Mr. Grey had some out-of-town appointments.

One time, when I arrived home, I saw Sir Thomas and his son in the garden. They seemed to be arguing on something because their glaring eyes and their flushed faces said so. Their loud voices also scared me, so I hid in the garden's gazebo. I could not cross the path towards our servant's quarter that was on the other side of the garden because they would see me. I did not want to interrupt them. My heart pounded hard when I heard their heated argument.

"I never expect that you could do this to mom," Mr. Albert Grey loud confrontation pierced into my ears. His lips were trembling and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Dad, how long have you cheated on her? Tell me."

"Albert! How dare you accuse me of such a thing? God knows I did not. I honor your mother as your mother and my wife," Sir Thomas also defended himself with an equally loud voice.

Sir Albert's mirthless laughter rang against the silence of the garden, causing my heartbeats to accelerate. "Really, dad? What do this woman and her son doing here? You won't adopt them for no reason at all."

"Don't speak ill things against them, Albert. They are not as filthy as you think. They are worth to be respected because they are living noble lives. I invite them out of compassion and because of their loyalty to us."

"It's not about loyalty, dad. It's because you're giving them special treatment."

"They deserve it. If we're giving out charity funds to foundations, why not them who have served us for years?"

"Giving is not a problem at all, but I see those sparks in your eyes every time you look at that woman. I see how happy you are every time you are with her. And you deny that to me?" Sir Albert's voice was already quivering as he threw his accusation to his father.

"If you see something special in the way I treat them, there's nothing wrong with it. Your mother has already passed away-"

"So, I am right. You're falling in love with that woman! And you're willing to forget mom because she gives you that erotic massage that drives you crazy."

"Albert-"

"Dad, I can never accept that you have already replaced mom. You have to choose between me and mom, or that woman and her son."

"Albert, you have gone too far!"

"So, it means you can't throw them out of our lives. They win, alright," he yelled before storming away from his father.

I shuddered at the realization that my mom had become Sir Thomas's woman. Sir Albert had all the reasons to get angry. I understood the gap between the rich and the poor, just as oil to water. Yet, I was hurt. The harsh reality of our existence hurt so much. I swore at that very moment that I would bring a difference to our life, whatever it may take. Someday, no one would ever look down on us.

My eyes widened when I saw Sir Albert came out to the garden again. He was already pulling out two trolleys with his two hands. Sir Thomas stood frozen to the ground, too shocked to utter a word. He only called out and ran after him when Sir Albert was about to close the door of the car.

I knew later from mom that Sir Albert fled out of the country and that Sir Thomas could not find him no matter how much he spent for the search. Many years after, he finally knew why he couldn't find him. Sir Albert changed his name to Albert Nelson, and he boarded a cruise ship that later inspired him to shift his studies and become a ship captain.

Chapter 23

SEAN'S POV

I looked at Dr. Red's photos as my driver brought me to the hospital where she worked. Finally, I would be meeting the daughter of Mr. Albert Grey. Calla was a mistake, but she had stubbornly occupied a part in my heart. I did not meet Dr. Red right away because I was hoping that time would help me take off Calla from my mind. I have promised Sir Thomas to win her heart if possible, but meeting Calla first, defeated our plan.

I got off from the car the moment my driver pulled over the parking lot. I couldn't wait to see Dr. Red, partly because I wanted to know my reaction when I would finally see her in person. I was hoping that her presence would also bring me a spell, a more effective spell than what Calla was using. Of course, this was only my presumption, but what would I think after being told that Calla could win any man's heart if he looks into her eyes?

When I glimpsed a shadow by the window of the isolation room, my heart pounded loudly against my chest. Just as I expected, she peeped at me through the glass window. Even if she was totally-covered from head to toe, I could still figure out her beautiful face. I understood why the triage personnel placed me in an isolation room. It's because any man that had travel history, especially like me who also had complaints of respiratory illness, should be considered as a suspect for the virus infection.

I stared into her eyes, foolishly wishing that somehow, Calla's spell would be reverted to me. Instead of me and any other man falling for her the moment we looked into her eyes, may this time, it would be Dr. Red to fall in love with me. One quick stare from her and our eyes locked.

"Good morning, doc!" I greeted her, drawing her eyes on me. I knew I was a fool to think that a piercing gaze would make her attached emotionally to me.

She stared at me, and I felt triumphant. I knew she was melting in my gaze, and it made her feel uneasy. To my surprise, it seemed that I had succeeded in winning her through my eyes, just as how love at first sight does. She was looking at me as if she was seeing a gorgeous man for the first time!

"Good morning, Mr.?" she asked, and her voice was as beautiful as she was.

"Sean...Sean Grey." My lips twisted into a delicious curve, and I saw her eyes glowed. She then smiled back, and I stared at her lips, imagining how it would feel like in my mouth.

"I'm Dr. Red, Red Nelson, your physician-on-duty today. Now, may I ask, Mr. Grey, what prompts you to come here?" she asked, but her eyes were also on my lips. I swallowed hard before I replied. I never expected that my stares also seemed to affect her.

"I was one of those who went to Sama Island a month ago."

"It's already a month, isn't it?" she clarified; a load of worries seemed to dispel right away from her heart with her initial conclusion that I was not a suspect for the virus infection. The incubation period was only one to two weeks before the signs and symptoms start to manifest. Cough, fever, and red patches all over the body were the cardinal signs, and airborne transmission was how the virus spread itself.

"Yes, but I'm getting paranoid when I learned that a lot of tourists are tested positive of the virus," I answered with a wide grin, hoping she hadn't caught my pretense in coming here.

"After that, have you gone back to Sama Island or traveled to countries where the virus is on outbreak?"

"No."

"What else prompted you for a check-up?"

"I have a cough."

"Describe your cough, Mr. Grey," she said, and her addressing me in my name got me tickled in my heart. Hoping that soon, I would be calling her Dr. Grey.

"It's dry and persistent like every time I got my asthma attack."

"Are you having a breathing difficulty?"

"Not anymore. I had my puff."

"Do you also have a fever?"

"Not yet."

She laughed hard at my answer. Probably, because I sounded paranoid, I threw her a puzzled look, but she ignored me. She walked over to my side, placing the diaphragm of her black stethoscope into the quadrants of my back. I felt nervous in front of her as she bent a little to listen to my lung sounds. I stared into her eyes again, as she did her ministrations on my chest, almost tempted to place both of her palms, instead. I hoped she hadn't heard the erratic thumping of my heart.

"Go home, Mr. Grey," she said, and I got unhappy that my moment with her soon ended.

"Why do you send me home? Aren't you going to test me if I am positive or not? Aren't you going to treat me?" I protested, trying to buy more time.

"You are as silly as I am, Mr. Grey," I heard her mumbled, speaking softly to herself. She perhaps did not realize that I heard her because she looked away in shame, as soon as she saw my brows turning up.

"What did you say?" I asked, my confused gaze turned into a spark of amusement.

"I mean, you are as paranoid as me. Look at me now, wrapped in this troublesome protective gear, thinking that you are infected with the virus," she explained, laughing but not over what she said, but for her craziness.

She began removing her shields, including her goggles and her mask before she spoke again to me.

"Mr. Grey, just continue your maintenance medication for your asthma. I'll give you an antihistamine for five days, but you may consult your doctor if symptoms get worse."

"Give me your number," I said, with all the seriousness I could muster. She looked at me, dumbly, and her mouth fell open.

"My number?"

Chapter 24

SEAN'S POV

Though Philip had gathered details about her private life, Dr. Red did not realize that I used her phone in tracking where she was. I also investigated Eric's whereabouts, his business circle, and business ventures. Not to boast about my status, Eric was still far away in his business standing compared to mine. Sir Thomas had already expanded his business globally before he passed down the legacy to me.

The inheritance I received from Sir Thomas was not without condition. It may sound weird, but the will and testament state that Sir Thomas's assets and properties would be temporarily mine and would be under my management until I would be able to find Sir Albert. However, before Sir Thomas stayed in his sickbed, we were able to trace down the location of Sir Albert Nelson. He was the captain of a cruise ship that sailed across Asia's best tourist destination.

Unfortunately, when Sir Thomas succeeded in bringing him home again, he was already in a state of hepatic coma. He had liver cancer. He could no longer tell us if he was married or if he had children. The only consolation on Sir Thomas's part was that he was able to give him an honorable burial in an expensive estate.

After the burial, Sir Thomas called me in his study. He was already walking with his cane, but his mind was still as sharp as he was in his forties. Before I could even knock, he opened the door and let me in. I got nervous. I was afraid he'd give me another great responsibility because I was afraid I'd fail from his expectation. I owed him my success, and mine and my mother's good life. My mother may not have married him, but he adopted me. Her refusal of the marriage proposal strengthened his faith in us that we were not after his wealth.

"Sean, do you already have a girlfriend?" I almost got tempted to burst out and laugh at his first question. I was expecting an earnest discussion, but his question proved me wrong.

"I'm serious, son."

I stopped chuckling when I saw that he did not smile at all. He was, indeed, very serious.

"Don't worry, dad. If ever I decide to marry, I would set up a prenuptial agreement-"

"Sean, Sean, it's not what I mean," he reached out for my hand that was resting on his desk, so I stared at him and gave him my full attention. I realized his subject may be something very important.

"Dad, I have no time for love yet," I said awkwardly, answering his first question. My mother raised me up as a grateful individual, so when Sir Thomas entrusted me with his businesses, I worked hard on it. I wanted to prove to him that he got the right person. I was not after his wealth; my reputation as a trustworthy person was more important to me. Providing me and my mom a good life was already enough. It was even something that I was willing to return for a lifetime.

"If you're not in love yet, then it's good news."

I nailed my eyes on him, wondering what he was trying to point out.

"Son, the shipping company's accounting department informed me that part of Albert's monthly salary was forwarded to his daughter and to a woman. What I don't know yet is his relationship with this woman. I also had reports that Albert got married, but his wife died after three years."

I was not as shocked as he expected. I was already expecting that Sir Albert may have got married and that he may have children. It's no big deal for me. I was never coveting Grey's wealth. I was even more than willing to hand over the wealth to the right person as soon as I would find them. My mother raised me as a nobleman.

"I promise to look for them, dad," I assured him honestly. I wanted him to rest from worries and make sure that his legacy would be passed to his children.

"Sean, I know I could not thank you enough for all the things you do for us, for the company. But promise me one more thing, son. Look for my granddaughter, and if possible, marry her."

I almost choked when I heard the older man. What if her granddaughter is already tied to a relationship? What if she is married?

When I got speechless, Sir Thomas added. "I don't know how you would do it, but promise me you will do everything to win her heart."

I felt tickled every time our conversation played on my mind. I even told mom about it. Before I would forget to mention it, she remained as Sir Thomas massage therapist. The latter proposed to marry her, but my mother refused. There should be only one man in her life, she said, and that was my late father.

"Sean, do what Sir Thomas asks you to do." I could not believe my mother supported him instead, and not me. What if her granddaughter does not like me?

"Sir Thomas's wealth is the product of his sweat and blood. He may not be able to say it straightforwardly, but he couldn't allow it to get wasted. He trusted you, and your marriage would assure him that it would still be you who will run the business. I also understood his fear that his granddaughter may not be business-inclined."

My mother was right, so I swore to do as he requested. I let Philip start his investigation right away after Sir Thomas entrusted the search to me.

"Sir, Dr. Red is setting up an appointment to see a real estate agent."

I snapped back to reality when Philip's voice broke my reverie. "Real estate agent?"

"Yes, sir. I talked to the agent, and I learned that she's planning to avail a townhouse."

"Call her, Philip. Tell her to assume your unused unit at a meager price."

"What if she will ask why?"

"Then tell her we need the money."

"What if she wouldn't pay it in cash?"

"Then tell her that you need to move to another place you so have to sell the unit."

If only Dr. Red knew that the property she was buying was hers. And the unit Philip offered her in Greenville was next to mine.

Chapter 25

RED'S POV

I asked Sean for one more round around the park. His revelation about Calla was suffocating me. I felt so silly for misinterpreting his kindness towards me. Perhaps, if only he had romantic intentions on me, I would supposedly move on faster from my breakup with Eric. Yet, this man was only seeking friendship or companionship, and probably, someone to talk to. But why me? Why not those elegant women around his business circle?

"Sean, I'm really wondering why you are good to me. And why do you offer me the slot in your company?"

"Let's say it's like at first sight." Sean smiled and tilted his head to look at me. He was much taller than me, so I had to raise my head to see his face.

I melted again in those eyes, so I looked away and shifted my gaze on the path ahead of us. "Red, would you mind if I make a request?"

I stopped walking and looked up. "What kind of request?"

"Request for friendship."

"Sure, why not?"

"But I'm a selfish kind of a friend. I make friends one at a time," he said, glancing at the scenery ahead of us. Giant trees appeared in rows, and the lamp lights dimmed against its thick foliage.

"What do you mean?" I asked. His request seemed strange.

"Do you have many close friends?"

"No. Only Shirley. I have a good relationship with my colleagues, but they remain in the hospital setting. I was hesitant to make friends with anyone because I was afraid Eric might not like it."

"I want you to be my exclusive close friend if you don't mind," he said as he turned around and blocked my steps.

"I don't understand, Sean." I protested. I sensed that it was not only about plain friendship, and I wanted to make it clear from the beginning.

"Because, Red, I want our friendship to develop into something special soon."

I got taken aback at what he said. It was such an odd request. It seemed he was sure that he would still like me in the future.

"What if you won't like me anymore as your special friend in the future?"

"It won't happen, I assure you. If only it wouldn't be shocking on your part, I would have proposed marriage directly."

"What?!"

"Yes, Red. I'm serious. I want you to be my wife in the future."

"Sean, you're impossible," I laughed and did not leave my gaze at him. I didn't expect that this man thinks like a child. How does he view about marriage--a computer game?

"Red, am I too difficult to love?" he asked in a sulking voice, and I felt guilty. He held my chin, and his sad eyes pierced into my soul.

"Of course, not." Who would say no against this kind, romantic, and stunningly handsome guy?

"So, do you think we could work our relationship in the future?"

"I don't know, Sean, I'm afraid to promise something I am not sure I could keep."

Sean held my shoulder as we began walking again. "Red, how about helping you to forget Eric? Consider me as your new boyfriend. I wouldn't expect that you will love or like me. I will not demand affection. I will be willing to wait."

I stared at him. I could never understand why he seemed so possessive of me. I didn't know why he appeared to secure the future and see to it that I will not go to someone else.

"Sean, are you sober?" I asked, facing him and inhaling his breath. To my surprise, he held my nape and sealed my lips in a hungry kiss. He only stopped when I was gasping for air.

"Have you tasted alcohol? Red, I don't drink, nor smoke."

I got lost for words. I got dizzy of that sudden and possessive kiss. "Sean, what about Calla?"

Sean chuckled, but I saw a glint of bitterness in his eyes. "I felt so drawn to Calla because she was my first, but as she said, there is no relationship between us. Only memories of that sexual encounter that couldn't be misconstrued as love. Sex can be done without emotions involved, but since it was my first experience, that explained my initial feeling."

I nodded, but I felt sorry that I was not his first. I wouldn't have been insecure in thinking that in his heart, there was Calla, but I was a few days late.

"What does that nod means?" I heard Sean chuckled, distracting me from my mental argument.

I looked at him, unsure of what I agreed. Our last topic was Calla, so I was nodding to his explanation about their status. "About your status with Calla."

"Then how about being my girlfriend? As I said, I wouldn't demand anything except having me as your only close friend."

"Even female friends?"

"Even female friends."

"Why?"

"Because we are still about to work on our relationship. I want to be your only confidante as of the moment, your consultant, your adviser, and your companion. When the result is good, only then can you have a female friend."

"How about you?"

Sean's mouth curved into a wide grin. "Of course, there will be only you. You will accompany me in all my social functions, in my meetings, and everywhere I go."

I nodded again without saying a word. This agreement came too fast. A few hours ago, I was still grieving over my breakup with Eric, and now I am thrilled by this unusual relationship.

"So, that nod again means that officially tonight, we are a couple."

I did not protest because I realized I needed someone to help me move on from Eric. Aside from that, I felt strangely attached to him from the very beginning. I didn't know if it was because he was physically attractive or because he was good to me. What I knew was that I felt comfortable with his presence.

"Red, I have read an article saying that one of the secrets of a happy relationship is touch. Touching produces a love hormone in our body called oxytocin. It helps sustain a feeling of deep attachment to each other."

"Sean, what exactly do you want to point out?" I chuckled. I could already guess what he meant.

"I am just asking permission to hold and kiss you even if you still have no feelings for me. So that we will have a sense of attachment."

"You talk like you're not doing it yet." I rolled my eyes and looked away. The taste of his lips was still on my mouth.

"It's stealing and unofficial yet. So, I want to ask it formally."

Sean blocked my way again, placing both of his hands on my shoulders. He then bent down and brushed his lips on mine. I then felt my blood rushing to my temple as my heartbeats accelerated. To welcome him, I opened my mouth, and he claimed my lips like a bolt of lightning, even before I could take a deep breath.

Chapter 26

RED'S POV

I asked Sean to bring me home after we kissed. I felt so awkward in thinking how fast have we come to this stage of a relationship. I barely knew Sean except for those facts he revealed during the inauguration of Laminae, Inc. Who would ever believe that I got into a whirlwind romance with the man who wrote the success of this giant company?

"We're here," Sean extracted me from my mental trail as soon as he parked in my garage. I did not wait for him to open the door for me because I already got used to getting out on my own ever since I was with Eric.

Sean had come up with me as I stood fumbling with the keys. He took it from my hand and picked the door key in less than a few seconds.

"Red, don't do it again."

I gathered my brows as I threw him a side glance. "What do you mean?"

"You should wait for me before you step down from the car."

I smiled at his thoughtfulness but did not say a word. I hope he would be the real gentleman he seemed to be.

"I don't want my friends and acquaintances to say I am a tyrant."

"You're not?" I teased him. Eric wore the same image when he first brought me to his house.

"Ouch, it hurts," he squirmed and made a long face, pretending he was indeed hurt. "Mother used to remind me that I should take good care of women like fragile pieces of glass." The door clicked open so I waited until Sean opened it wide for us. I held back my comment about his mother until we could sit down and talk about it. I dropped myself on the couch after placing my shoes on the rack. Sean also removed his shoes and sat beside me.

"Tell me more about your mother," I asked, hugging the bear I placed on the corner table beside the couch.

"My mother moved to Australia when he married my father. However, he died early, leaving my mother alone in fending for herself and me." Sean let out a faint smile and there was a glint of sadness in his eyes.

I tilted my head and placed it on top of the bear's head, while my arms were wrapping around the bear's body. My eyes were glued on him.

"She worked as a massage therapist, and one of her clients is Mr. Thomas Grey, one of the famous business tycoons in the country. Later on, our connection with him paved my way to becoming a Grey."

"Wait. Your mom married Mr. Grey later on?"

"No, but Sir Thomas adopted me."

Did he adopt him without the marriage? It sounded odd to me.

"Why didn't they get married?"

I didn't hold back my curiosity. We were on the get-to-know-each-other stage, and therefore, I shouldn't hold back what I had in my mind. There must be a beautiful love story existing between Sean's mother and Mr. Thomas Grey. Yet, perhaps, her mother was apprehensive because of the possible tension within the family members. It was a common scenario, and therefore, it wouldn't raise any doubt.

"My mom closed her heart to any man." Sean chuckled after saying this. Of course, Sean expected me to have my own opinion as to why her mother did not grab the opportunity to be married to a wealthy man.

"She's praiseworthy," I said, surprising Sean. I admired her honestly for not taking advantage of the opportunity.

"Sir Thomas also deserves praise because even if my mother refused to marry him, he still insisted on adopting me legally."

"Really, Sean? Is Sir Thomas childless? Doesn't he have a family?" I got so intrigued by Sean's story, especially that of Mr. Grey.

"Sir Thomas had only one son, and his name was Albert Grey. Sir Albert also had one daughter."

Had. Past tense. "Have they passed away already?"

"Yes." Sean looked at me in the eyes, and suddenly, I felt a weight pressing against my chest. I scoffed inwardly. Why would I feel sad? Why did I become so melancholic nowadays? Was it because of Eric?

"Didn't you have any problem with his son, especially with the inheritance?" I wondered about this matter also, aside from the fact that he had the same name as my father.

"Not at all because he ran away from his father because of anger. He only came back when Sir Thomas forced him to go home. Unfortunately, it did not take long before he got into a hepatic coma. He had liver cancer."

The weight pressing against my chest was then constricting my breathing that I heaved a deep sigh. What a coincidence! My father also died due to liver cancer. However, I tried to hide my feelings by stretching out our conversation.

"Anger? Why? And how about his daughter?"

I saw Sean's change of expression when I threw him that series of questions. I suspected that it must be because of Sean's mother, not being accepted into Mr. Grey's family. Perhaps, Sean didn't want to talk about it because it's something shameful on the part of his mother.

I couldn't explain why, but I also recalled my father's anger toward his family. I even connected the emotion to our conversation. My father was stubborn. Asking about his family was a taboo. Even my mother did not know what his family background was, and I grew up without knowing who my relatives were. Sad to say, he died unreconciled with his family. If he did not have the heart to tell me that he was already dying due to liver cancer, I guessed he also didn't dare to inform his family about his illness. Probably, he stood on his pride to defy them even in his sickbed.

"Sir Albert could not accept that his father replaced her mom in just a few years after her death. That's what I overheard on that day that Sir Albert left. Sir Thomas was too kind to keep that from us."

"Was Sir Albert cruel to you?" I asked, my gloomy feelings inside started to grip me emotionally.

"Not at all. They were even away from the house when they last argued. He was careful enough to keep us from hearing them."

I sighed again. Then, I asked. "Sean, do you have a photo of Sir Albert?"

Chapter 27

RED'S POV

Sean's expression dropped when I asked for Sir Albert's photo. I wondered where I had gone wrong or what's with the question that made him react like that. However, he was quick to revert to his usual, smiling demeanor.

"I have it at home. Don't worry, I'll bring you home when you're ready."

I sat upright gaping at what he said. I could not understand why he seemed so serious in his treatment towards me. Our relationship had just begun and it would yet start at a working phase.

"Sean, why do you seem to take this seriously?" I asked the attitude he showed me was too good to be true. I could still count the days we were together by my fingers, and those meetings were all non-significant to build up a strong bond between us at such an early stage.

"So, it means you are not serious in accepting my proposal?" Throwing back a question as an answer may have silenced me but it did not wipe off all those unanswered questions I had in my mind.

"It's not what I mean-"

"If you are true to yourself then you can see my point in believing that if you can, others also can. And I, my dear girlfriend, also can."

"I know but-" I tried to explain, ignoring the fact that I still felt awkward to be called his girlfriend.

"Red, as I said, we are going to work this out together. The reason why I am successful at such a young age is that I am always sincere and that I am always looking at the bright side of everything, and I am taking things seriously. And positive thinking always does a miracle."

I looked down after I lost the argument. Perhaps, he was right. The current success of the whole TAG conglomerate was all because of his dedication and hard work. I then felt his fingers on my chin, lifting it up to look at him. He was already towering in front of me with his head bent down, meeting my awkward gaze.

"Red, promise me we're gonna work this out." I nodded, pursing a smile. All the courage I had a while ago to speak out everything that was in my mind blasted against his sincere and intense gaze.

"You have to sleep now. Tomorrow, you'll be starting the interview of your personnel in the clinic," he said, pressing his lips on my temple afterward.

"Alright, but do I really have to do it?" I slouched and pressed my back on the soft cushion of the couch's backrest.

"Yes, so that you can choose only those whom you want to be with."

I nodded again and slowly stood up to give him a hug. It was already getting very late and both of us needed the rest despite the surge of thrill that enveloped us as new lovers. My move surprised him but I saw the spark of happiness in his eyes. And I was not surprised when he held the back of my head again as he angled his face and covered my lips with his mouth. He then pulled my lower lip between his and gave it a gentle suck before he reluctantly released me.

"Goodnight, Red," he whispered against his shallow breathing. I knew he wanted more.

"Goodnight, Sean," I said, wearing a weak smile. I then walked him to the door, watching him leave reluctantly.

I woke up early the next morning and reviewed the credentials of each applicant. Sean had given me access to the company's website through email. I was surprised at the number of those applicants on such short notice so I had to pick a few to be interviewed. I send the list of those I picked back to the HR personnel to get them notified.

I hurried to take a shower before I went down to the kitchen to prepare my breakfast. Even if for five years I got used to a home where housekeepers did the chores, those many years I lived on my own had still helped me get readjusted back to independence. My mind was on the choice of food I would prepare while I stepped down on the stairs.

However, my eyes flew wide when I saw the curtains in the living room pulled to the side. The golden rays of the sun were already flooding the room in halos as it pierced through the heavily-tinted glass walls. The well-crafted landscape outside that bathed in the cool morning sunshine came into partial view and greeted my eyes with a refreshing afterglow. It made me feel a wonderful sense of freedom. Of being in control of my life once again.

I almost jumped and stepped back when I saw the door to the kitchen half-opened. I made it sure last night that all the doors of the house were closed. As I was debating whether or not I should go in, the door opened wide and Sean's captivating smile filled the door frame.

"Good morning, dear," he said as he approached me, placing a smack on my lips. I still stood pinned on the floor, wondering why he was there.

"Greenville Subdivision is one of the businesses of TAG, and this unit is supposedly mine, so that explains why I have the keys."

I stared at him but I got lost in my thoughts. Why did he know about my plan to purchase a unit? Why did he offer me the post as a company doctor? Why did he seem to know my plans?

"Sean, are you stalking on me?" I placed my hands on his chest while I glued my eyes on his gentle eyes. He also locked his hands at my lower back, enclosing me in a warm embrace.

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because I want you."

"When does this stalking started? When you saw me at the hospital?"

"No. A few months before that."

Goosebumps started to creep all over my body. Who is this man? Why is he interested in me? What is his true intention?

"When I knew you were a doctor, the company bought the hospital you are serving."

Chapter 28

RED'S POV

My mouth dropped open as soon he said it. It seemed that his intention was more than a man-woman relationship. Yet, I had nothing for a business tycoon to want after me. I neither had a family. I'm so alone in this world, and I felt so unwanted that even a mere friend deserted me.

"Sean, why? Who are you?" I stepped back to take a good look at his face, but he pulled me closer, tilted his head, and drowned my questions in his lips.

"Red, someday you will understand, but not now. Just fall in love with me, and all your questions will have its answers," he panted a little but flashed me a gentle smile that melted my heart again. I had decided then to stop asking and do a silent investigation.

He held my hand and pulled me to the dining table. The aroma of the freshly-brewing coffee filled my nostrils and had my stomach growling. Sean pulled out a chair and let me sit on it. He then filled two cups from the coffee maker and handed one to me. I also helped myself by placing sugar and cream into the cup.

"How much sugar do you like?" I asked as he returned to the table with a tray of food.

"One teaspoon."

I watched him placed down the food tray on the table. It had fried chicken ham, sunny-side-up eggs, toasts, and vegetable salad.

"Did you order that?" I asked.

"No, I prefer home-made foods."

I hang my mouth open as I watched him took out the plates from the tray. I couldn't imagine those hands doing things other than signing checks and documents.

"Haven't I told you before that I cook my food, clean the house and do my laundry?"

"I didn't take it seriously," I replied, remembering the things he told me about himself the other night. I just couldn't believe he did it and how simple he was outside the business world.

"From now on, get used to it. I'm not the one you think. I'm not even worthy of you." He threw me a glance before pulling back a chair across me. I followed his moves until he sat comfortably and began placing food on my plate.

"No. Don't spoil me like this. I might get used to it." I held his hand that held the clipper and pushed it back to his plate. Perhaps annoyed or frustrated, Sean placed down his hands at the table and looked squarely at me.

"Red, who am I to you now?"

"I might get used to it and might not be able to live without it," I explained.

"Let me be me. Allow me to do my way. Do we have it clear?" It was more of an imperative statement rather than a question.

I did not reply. It hurt me again in realizing that Eric never did it for me. I sipped my coffee and got lost in my thoughts as I went to the ref to get the cup of butter. I heard him saying something, but I ignored him.

"Don't put too much. I've already done it." He smiled as he also held my wrist, stopping me from opening the cup of butter.

"You did not tell me," I murmured before I walked back to the ref and placed back the butter into its place.

"You were not listening." He shrugged, and I noticed that his eyes were always following me intently, making me feel more awkward.

I chuckled to conceal my uncomfortable feelings; then, I began eating silently until I was halfway through my meal.

"Shall we be silent throughout the day?" I heard Sean speaking, and I glanced at him.

"As I said, I'll get used to it, so let it be." I smiled, and he stood up and walked towards my side of the table, then hug me from behind.

"Red, life is not unfair. You may be unhappy in some ways, yet, you are also successful in another way. Someday soon, you'll see that life has given you a great favor."

When he saw that I did not say a word, he continued. "Don't look at men as if they are all like Eric, nor look at the less unfortunate like they are all greedy. Some know how to keep their gratitude for a lifetime. Eric himself is not as cold and cruel as you know him. He has soft spots, and he also knows how to love unconditionally. Sadly, the woman is not you."

I furrowed my brows as I turned to look at him. In those few sentences, he implied many things beyond what I could grasp at the moment. I didn't have to wonder anymore why he knew a lot about Eric and me. Wealthy people have their way of finding things they wish to understand; they can well afford it.

"Who?" I whispered, "my best friend?" I directed at him a sharp look, not pausing for a blink until I got his answer.

"No. Red, do you still want to know? Does it still matter?"

"It does," I told myself silently while my heart was screaming inwardly, dying to know who was the woman who stole Eric and mine's time together.

I held his gaze for a moment, debating within myself if I were willing to know further. Sean was already my boyfriend, and it was inappropriate if I still showed my interest in knowing who owned Eric's heart. Knowing about her would not help me move on, and it wouldn't help either in the relationship Sean, and I was about to build. I shrugged my shoulder and decided to make it a part of my silent investigation later.

"Not anymore," I answered, turning my head back to the plate, where he couldn't see my reactions anymore.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, lowering his head beside my ears, hugging me tighter.

"For what?" I said, tears glimmering in my eyes. I began hurting again in realizing that the reason he was so cold to me was that he was in love with someone else.

"I'm sorry."

I then glanced at my watch and put down my spoon and fork. Sean also released me and helped me as I stood up.

"Go and change now," he said, wrapping his arm around my waist and walked me out of the dining room. When I was about to climb up the stairs, he stopped and urged me to go up by myself. I nodded and took two steps at a time. When I looked down to see him, he was already at the doorway to the dining room.

I went back to the later after changing into my working clothes, and I noticed that the table was already clean. I saw Sean closing the dishwasher, and I watched him getting busy the next moment in cleaning up the sink. This was my second time watching him cleaning up the kitchen, but I couldn't still believe he could do it.

He walked towards me as soon as he sensed my presence.

"I'll drive you to the hospital," he said, diverting my thoughts away from appreciating the way her mother had raised him.

"No," I shook my head, "you also need to prepare. I'll book a Grab car."

"Shall we start arguing again? Come here," he said while reaching for my hand. He then gently led me out to the garage.

In a few minutes, we were already in front of the emergency room. He held my chin and kissed me before he went down and walked to my side of the car to open the door for me. As soon as I stepped down, I caught a glimpse of a familiar figure standing at the corner near the ER's entrance. My heartbeats started to pick up as soon as I met his eyes.

"Eric?"

He did not answer me right away. His eyes followed Sean as he slipped back into his car.

"What does this mean, Red?"

Chapter 29

RED'S POV

"Why are you here?" I ignored Eric's question as I stopped in front of him.

"Answer my question first," he may not be yelling at me, but I could hear the gritting sound of his molars. His eyes also seemed to jump out of its sockets as he glared at me.

"You may think what you like, Eric, it's fine with me." I threw him a cold and fearless look, igniting more fire within him.

"I saw you kissing Mr. Grey. What else could that mean?"

"I do not deny it," I replied, giving him a bored look. I saw the surprise in Eric's expression. Never did he expect, probably, that a day would ever come that I would dare to stand and defy him.

"Did you leave me because of him? You have such wonderful taste. Why, Red? Had I not given you enough? Had I not granted your material wants?"

I scanned the surroundings to see if there were onlookers around. I didn't want to start a scene. I knew sooner he would be yelling at me in anger.

"I have simple needs, Eric. And you know that. It was you who chose everything for me, even petty things such as the brand of my lingerie. Anyway, thank you so much for that. You make me an elegant woman."

"I didn't know you're also a wealth sucker, Red. I thought you are someone different. You left me for someone wealthier and more famous."

He gripped my arm tightly, and his harsh breath fluttered the hair on top of my head. If we were at his home, I'm sure he would already strip out my clothes to show me how cheap I was. Cheap was the term he used in describing women who were after someone's wealth.

I walked away from the ER's entrance because I knew he would be shouting at me. I was also afraid of the consequence of ignoring him. I strode towards the parking lot, and he kept up with me. I stopped right in front of his car, and he opened it without the need to tell him that I wanted the privacy of his car for his outburst. I was not afraid he'd hurt me physically because he never did it before, anyway. He may have yelled at me and whipped me with his sharp-edged tongue, but he never raised a hand against me. Only that I could not guess if he would still be able to hold his restraints on me, now that he knew I was in a relationship with Sean.

I slid into the passenger's seat and waited until he opened the other door at the other side and sat beside me. The color of his face turned into a darker shade of red, and his expression showed a rising fury. I knew this place would restrict him from throwing his anger because of the small space.

"Speak!" he said in between his harsh and shallow breathing.

"Eric, deep within your heart, you know that I am not materialistic. And you know I could not afford to replace you with someone wealthier for some material reason. If it is not clear to you, I left because you never loved me, and that is all I supposedly need. I was only your trophy, someone to show off to your friends."

"I would have thrown you off if I didn't, and we would not have lasted for five years."

Tears fell from my eyes at his confession, but he was already too late. He had already hurt me so much that I could never take him back.

"If you did, you would not have cheated on me, and you would have valued me." I was already sobbing when I said this. I covered my face with my two hands to muffle the sound of my cries.

"If it's about Shirley, I was too drunk and horny when that happened. She doesn't mean anything."

"It's not only about women. You know very well what I mean. Who is she, Eric? Who is she who stops you from loving me? Who is she who stood between us in those five years we were together?"

"Who told you about her?" I stopped breathing for a moment--he did not deny her. I could never tell him that it was Sean, who revealed his secret to me. I pounced my two fists in alternate succession as I cried harder. She was a stealer of our happiness.

To my surprise, Eric did not get mad at my sudden attack. He pulled me instead to his chest and hugged me, stopping those punches I threw at him. He then whispered something in my ear that pronounced the meaning of my sobs.

"I'm sorry, Red. I was already hurting, and I thought I don't need to hurt you with her memories. I would be robbing you of the inner peace if you knew that I was in pain because of her."

"But you still hurt me with your coldness and indifference," I murmured against his chest, now drenching his shirt with my tears.

"I know." He rubbed my back while keeping his silence as I sobbed. I recalled all the bitterness and pain in those five years, watching him from a distance as he indulged himself in the company of other women. I also remembered his harsh words and his rough treatment, robbing me of my self-worth and pride.

"Tell me more about her," I managed to say it despite my apprehension. I knew there was no point in telling about her now.

"Our family owns a property somewhere in Sama island. I was still a new graduate when dad assigned me to manage our beach resorts there as my training."

I broke free from his embrace and leaned my back on the car's door so that I could listen to him fully. I was still sniffing in my tears.

"Then," I said, urging him to continue.

"Then, one day, someone applied as a fish supplier. I was attracted to her. I knew my family would be against her because of her social status, so I supported her studies until the time came for me to appoint her as one of the heads in the finance department. Under her management, the number of our beach resorts increased. The great breakthrough in travel and tourism that continued until these days started with her."

"And because she contributed much in the growth of our business and in the island's economy, I introduced her to my family."

"We first stayed together secretly until I introduced her to my family. I fell in love with her and gave her everything. One day, I caught her on the act of cheating with someone wealthier and more famous than me."

"Who is she?" I asked, and my heartbeats started to sound like a stick banging against a bass drum. I didn't expect he would reveal her name but to my surprise, he did.

"Her name is Calla Rivera."

Chapter 30

ERIC'S POV

I watched Red as she stepped inside the car after she refused my offer to drive her to wherever she was staying. I expected she wouldn't let me. What kind of a woman would give in at the height of her decision to leave a man who cheated her? As soon as the car disappeared from my sight, I went back to our bedroom. Half of me expected that Red couldn't leave and couldn't survive without me. She had already gotten used to the luxurious lifestyle I gave her for five years. After all, that's what most women want.

I opened all the closets and drawers except for that one I opened earlier, where she placed her white coats and scrub suits. To my surprise, all her expensive apparel, including her bespoke party gowns, were still hanging in one compartment. In the next cubicle, her sets of party shoes and sandals were also placed neatly in one column. I opened another shelf for her signature bags, expecting to see nothing left. To my surprise again, all those I bought for her from the first week we were together were all there--intact and complete!

I saw a note plastered on a wall. At one glance, I knew it was for me. "Eric, thank you for letting me experience these luxuries. You may either sell it or give it to your new girlfriend. I seldom used each of them anyway. I even kept the price tags of each purse and bag in its pockets. Tell me how much you have spent for me because I will return it to you on an installment basis in the soon future. In case you lost track of it, I have a list here. My bank and credit card transactions reflect everything."

I realized that Red left everything I bought for her, including her car. There's only one meaning for this, and that is the fact that Red doesn't want me for my wealth. She only took those things she brought when she first came to the house to stay with me, except for those white coats and hospital uniforms that she couldn't hand down to others.

I felt the pang of pain when I laid down alone on our bed the whole night. I wondered where she was staying. I couldn't remember either that Red had someone else. She was too submissive, even when I was too harsh in treating her. I may not have hurt her physically, but I was aware that my cold and cruel treatment cut her emotion deeper. If she were not beautiful to feed my pride, I would not have offered to rescue her from financial setbacks. I also need someone at that moment, because I felt the need to move on from Calla.

"Tess," I hollered at our housekeeper as I went down to the living room. She then came running to see me.

"Why didn't you tell me that Red is taking her things out? I could have done something to stop her before it's too late." I scolded her, but when I saw her confused and surprised look, I calmed down.

"Wh-what do you mean, sir?"

"Red is leaving us."

I walked toward her shoe rack, the one she used frequently, and saw that most of the shoes were missing. So, it dawned on me that she only brought along with her those that are old and worn out!

I then dropped myself on the couch and closed my eyes. My heart sank deeper than the cushion I was sitting on as the truth prevailed. Red was not like Calla at all. Her affection for me was pure and honest.

I regretted hurting the one who truly loved and cared for me, the one who was not after what I could give. My sense of remorse cut through my heart and conscience that I wanted her back into my life right at that moment. I knew her wound was difficult to heal, but I believed love could forgive. I knew she loved me, but I had wounded her feelings. What made it worst at that moment was the stifled sobs of Tess as she sat down on the dining table. The house was too silent that even the sound of our breathing was audible.

"Tess?"

Tess sobbed even louder as I called her name.

"I'm sorry, sir. She was so good to me. Life is lonely here without her."

I sighed. If she felt her loss that way, how much more for me? I made love to her every day, and I boasted her to my business colleagues for five years. Red had maintained the highest honor even in her Physician's Licensure Examination, and I was the proudest boyfriend around. Only that, I didn't give her my heart. Calla took it with her the moment she left me for someone more famous and wealthier.

I woke up early the next morning. I must be at the hospital before she would log in so that I could still talk to her. Red was always a punctual person so I made it sure that I would be there before she arrived.

I asked the guard, who was assigned to register every person who came in. He was also the one tasked to record all the plate numbers of those cars that passed by and those that parked.

"Is Dr. Red here already?"

"Not yet, sir," he answered with enthusiasm, having recognized me as Red's boyfriend.

"Are you sure?" I said, worried that Red might have done the trick and hid from me.

"Yes, sir. All who come must register and leave their numbers and address so that the tracing of those who may be suspects of the Bronc X virus would be easier."

As I nodded, I saw a sleek, black car approaching. It was one of the latest BMW models. As I fixed my gaze on it, I had the feeling that Red was inside. I didn't know why, but my instinct was right. I hid in the corner when I saw the silhouette of her figure through the windshield.

My eyes bulged out when the car stopped a few meters away from me. I saw Red sitting beside the man behind the steering wheel, and dear saint, it's Mr. Grey! My heart almost dropped when he bent sideways and pulled Red to him, enclosing her for a deep kiss.

Chapter 31

ERIC'S POV

My vision dimmed as I saw them kissing. Red was no different than Calla, after all. She also left me for someone more famous and wealthier.

"Red, what does this mean?" I asked, stressing my anger under my breath. If only we were at home. I would have yelled at her, or I would have kicked and punched the wall.

"You may think what you like, Eric, it's fine with me," she replied defiantly, a thing that surprised me. I knew her as a submissive girlfriend, and she never talked back at me every time I had a bad mood.

"I saw you kissing Mr. Grey. What else could that mean?" My eyes were already burning with anger as I looked at her fearless gaze. How could she change a lot in just a few hours after she declared our breakup?

"I do not deny it," she replied, giving me a bored look. I couldn't believe she could do this to me. Her actions made me a less significant person. More than anything else, she had admitted her relationship to Mr. Grey--the big catch I had courted lately to invest in my company.

In my pain and anger that she also left me for someone like Mr. Grey, I began accusing her of greed and of being insatiable, despite the plain truth that I had witnessed in my very eyes just a while ago.

"If it is not clear to you, I left because you never loved me, and that is all I supposedly need. I was only your trophy, someone to show off to your friends," she said, slapping the truth into my face once again.

"If it's about Shirley, I was too drunk and horny when that happened. She doesn't mean anything." I was such a fool to say this. I knew that even if it didn't happen, I should have avoided other women at all costs. This wasn't about the meaning of my actions, but the value and respect I should have given to her as my partner. We did all the things that a married couple do--it's only the absence of that legal document that kept us from calling ourselves as husband and wife.

I knew it was already too late to fix what was already broken, but still, it did not stop me from admitting the reason for my coldness and indifference.

"Who is she?" she asked, fighting to speak between her stifled sobs--her eyes glistening with silent tears. For the first time, my heart broke for her.

"Calla Rivera," I replied, watching her eyes popping out of its sockets. Her astounded reaction told me she knew who Calla is.

"Do you know her?" I got curious.

"No. I just can't believe that other than Shirley, there was another significant person in your life." She covered her face with both hands and started a muffled sob again.

"Red, I'm telling you this again. Shirley doesn't mean anything to me." I sighed, realizing how much I hurt her.

While I looked into her eyes, scenes of Shirley and me in that shameful night flashed in my mind.

"Sir, I'll be going ahead." I nodded, watching her turn to leave. I did not know why, but as I stared into her retreating back, her poise and body shape reminded me of Calla.

"Calla?"

Shirley stopped in front of the door. She was already holding the doorknob and was about to twist it open.

"Sir?" Shirley turned her head to look at me. Her puzzled look told me she was clarifying if she had heard me correctly.

"Nothing. I just see Calla in you." I let out a weak smile, tantamount to a sad look. I was not drunk to have this clouded senses, but I just realized that most of Shirley's physical features, resembled that of Calla. I regretted the fact that I had just seen her closely--my yearnings for Calla would not have been that bad.

"Who is she, sir?" she asked, leaning her back on the door. I stared into her body and imagined Calla's perfect shape in that same business attire she wore.

"Someone I have been missing so much for so long, but someone I also cursed," I replied without removing my eyes on her.

My statement probably had a sad tone that made her conclude I needed someone to talk to. She walked back to my table and held my gaze for some moments. Dear skies, all I saw in that gaze was Calla's beautiful face.

"Do you wish to talk about it, sir?" Shirley cast me those sympathetic look of hers, and the more I remembered Calla's beautiful and gentle gaze. Those eyes of hers always melted me that every time I drowned myself in her gaze, I always wanted to hold her forever.

"If you don't mind." Damn it, what's in that afternoon that suddenly got me emotional? Why did I miss her all of a sudden and long for her sweetness and her seductive caress?

"I'm here to listen, sir." I was sitting behind my desk when these exchanges happened. Shirley bade goodbye to me because I asked her to do something important. She was Red's best friend, whom I have given the favor to work for me. I did not regret it anyway, because, in such a short time, she had shown her brilliance and her management capabilities, just like how Calla did.

She sat down at the chair across me, waiting for me to tell my story. I stood up from my seat and pulled out a bottle of wine in my minibar. My office was so big that it had a set of couches, a small bar, a kitchen, and a bedroom. I proceeded to the ref and pulled out a pack of ice cubes, then to the cupboards to take out two wine glasses.

"Do you drink?" I asked Shirley as we sat down on the same couch with the wine and glasses in the glass table in front of us. We both settled ourselves at the edges of the seat, facing each other to talk.

"On some occasions, or when I go out with some friends," she answered, and I began to notice her trembling hands. In the corner of my eyes, I watched her throwing intense gazes at me that seemed like she had some hidden feelings for me. Her actions were common to most of the women I knew, anyway. I am one of the city's most famous business figures, after all.

"Do you go out to drink with Red?" I wanted to know if Red did some drinking escapades behind my back.

"No, sir. We only hang out in coffee shops."

Chapter 32

ERIC'S POV

I asked many things about her, her family background, and how Red and she became friends. She also answered in detail, and I listened carefully. We both laughed at some points, taking sips of the wine in our glass now and then. When Shirley started to flush, she also lost her apprehension bit by bit. She became more talkative, even telling me those things I shouldn't know.

"Shirl, what do you think? Am I difficult to love? Why did the woman I love left me?"

Her eyes widened as she looked at me above the rim of her wine glass. "Red and you, not in good terms?"

"We are fine, but she isn't what I mean," I chuckled, enjoying her startled reaction.

"You-you mean, you have some-somebody e-else? And she is the cause of all your drama tonight?" Her voice raised higher, and her words prolonged and stuttered.

"She's in the past, but she takes my heart with her." I let out a mirthless laugh as a wave of anger hit me again.

"Oh, no. That's bad. Why?"

"For someone more powerful and famous," she gasped, then shook her head as if she couldn't believe her ears.

"Where is she now?"

"With him."

"Did you have a chance to talk to her, and did she explain?" I was glad she didn't ask who the man was.

"No need."

She plastered her eyes on me as her thoughts wandered away for a while. Then she exclaimed, "Poor Red. She has your body but not your heart."

"She has my money. I give her access to all my bank accounts," I countered, justifying myself.

"Are you not suffering a loss then, related to her expenses?" she laughed, and the shifting of her eyeballs towards the side implied a sense of envy.

"She doesn't spend except for something important. But I decide for her. I bought her all those things a woman fancies--signature bags and shoes--all the best in this world."

"Wow!" she gasped, raising both her hands to her face. Then, she raised her glass to her lips and took a big gulp, emptying the content in three takes.

"You said you don't love her, but it seems you doted on her."

"Not at all. I just want to show Calla how wrong she is to leave me if all that matters to her are the worldly materials."

"What?!" her eyes almost jumped out of its sockets. And she half-emptied the glass I refilled for her.

"Yes."

"You love... Calla so much," were her slurred comment after her massive shock.

"Maybe. Shirl, I don't know if she's related to you, or what," I said, sticking my eyes on her.

She gathered her brows as she stared at me, processing what I said with her dulled senses.

"I see Calla in the way you smile, the way you look, and in everything you do."

She laughed, and its loudness, together with the temptation through her lips, stirred up some emotion deep in me. I moved and sat close to her, tracing the outline of her lips with my right, point finger.

"I wish you were Calla," I whispered as I continued to trace also the angles of her face, then down to her neck.

"I-I also wish I were... Calla," she replied, reaching out her hands and covered mine, joining me in my act.

"Do you also love me, Shirl?" I asked. Whatever answer she would give would surely have the influence of the alcohol that had started to intoxicate her senses.

"No-no, but I love your money. I cannot betray my best friend."

With the influence of alcohol, which I took in large gulps, I began to see more of Calla through Shirley. I replaced my point fingers with both of my hands, tracing down her body until it crept under her blouse. I knew those slow and sensual touches would ignite something in her, especially that the wine had already ruled her mind.

She gasped and closed her eyes as my fingers ran in a circular motion around her soft peaks. When the sense of pleasure started to dominate her, she arched her body and hung back her head, giving

me better access to herself. As she was only wearing a coat over a sleeveless top, it was easy for me to remove it. Before I could make the next blink, the straps of her bra snapped open. I pulled it away, and her two, full mounds bounced before my eyes.

I cupped those bouncy goodness right way, squeezing it fondly as I took her lips on mine. She also opened up and received my tongue as I proved deeper into her mouth. Everything went fast as desire possessed me until I found ourselves stripped from all of our clothing. I no longer took her to my bed; I just made it sure that I had locked the door.

Shirley grumbled as I stopped to close the door, not wanting me to stop. Her desire already consumed her, and I knew she was not herself anymore. There was a moment when my conscience held me, and images of Red flashed in my mind, but I ignored it entirely after I heard Shirley's moaning and groaning under my touch.

I went down further and feasted my eyes on her naked glory. I then positioned myself between her legs. Pulling her closer towards me, I did not wait any longer, and I inserted my rod-hard shaft between her legs. She moaned and tossed in intense pleasure as I first teased her with my light thrusts. As I felt her fluid dripping around the head of my shaft, I pushed forward in one hard thrust. She screamed and pushed me away, but I drowned her cries in my mouth. Sexual desire already ruled everything about me, and I became numb to her feelings.

As I felt her sense of pleasure seized her again while I sensually kneaded both of her breasts, I pushed harder and harder until I was close. I noticed that while I was moving in and out, she was getting tighter--even tighter than when I first entered her. I looked into her eyes, and beads of tears cascaded at the outer corners of her eyes.

"Why?" I asked. I couldn't understand why she cried.

"I'm so evil. How can I betray my friend?"

I sighed and turned to my side, only to get horrified when I couldn't pull out anymore. I felt like my dick was clamped by a shell, as her insides tightened around my shaft.

Chapter 33

ERIC'S POV

"Stop it, Eric," I said, turning my head away from him. I looked outside the window as images of Shirley sailed in my thoughts.

"To clear your best friend's image, I must admit that it was all my fault. I intentionally made her drunk. Earlier that afternoon, I heard reports about Calla, and I got a bad temper. She was the less threatening person around that I could project my anger with."

I did not complain anymore, nor I confronted him for how evil he was in easing his pain away through someone else, instead of me. There was no use to crying over spilled milk anymore.

"The reason why we were not able to disengage was that she became anxious when she thought about you. She was already hysterical, and I got scared. I had no choice then but to call for help from your staff."

I remained quiet, maintaining my gaze outside the window, but he knew I was listening. His confession cut my heart like a knife. Of all places, why did he choose mine? He saved himself from shame but not me. I could almost figure out the thoughts of my colleagues every time they saw me.

"I had to swallow my pride and bear the shame in coming to you. I was so afraid of publicity."

He chose to crush my heart rather than tarnish his image. I wondered if he ever fathomed the depth of my heartbreak the moment I saw them.

"Where is Shirley now? At your house?" I chose to ignore his self-centeredness by changing the topic but even my fingers were already trembling.

"I have her assigned at our branch in Sama Island."

I got lost in my thoughts as my mind waved up scenarios of them enjoying the pristine beaches of Sama island. I portrayed them in my mind, lying on the sand together. I imagined them kissing each other. He even could have these two ladies, one at a time. Of course, I did not forget that Sama Islands was Calla's homeplace.

"Don't worry, Red. I won't be seeing her anymore."

I turned to look at him. "If I had no control over those whomever you might want to be with before; I couldn't care less also to whatever you want to do with your life."

Eric then reached out for my hand and laid his begging eyes on me. "Red, I want you back."

I scoffed and said nothing, withdrawing my hand from his grip. If only he had apologized while my wound was still fresh, maybe it could have healed without any scar. However, he cut and pounded it over and over again until it got no hope of healing.

"Please, Red. I could not imagine life without you. Let's go home." His pleading voice was soft and hopeful.

"I'm sorry, Eric. I have committed to someone else already." I held his gaze and saw how his face dropped.

"You don't know who Mr. Grey is, Red. Don't get yourself deceived."

"I was once deceived, so what is there to be afraid?" I shrugged.

"Red-"

"It's my life, Eric. You're out of it."

"What could he buy that I could not?" he snapped. Eric was a proud man, someone who wouldn't be too happy in taking no for an answer.

I glared at him, my lips trembling in anger. "That's the problem with you, Eric. You always think that I want the whole world. If I have to choose, I rather live a simple life with real people around me. Money can't buy genuine happiness, I wonder if you know about that. If that's your mindset, then you can buy truckloads of them."

Eric closed his eyes and bit his lip. Probably, he realized his mistake but Eric was aggressive, acting in anger first before thinking about the consequence of his impulsive behavior.

"I-I'm sorry, Red. I'm really very sorry." He picked up my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it with eyes closed. I knew at that moment he was sincere.

"You may go inside now, but I want to let you know that I'm not stopping."

I let out a pursed smile before I opened the door and stepped out. I knew Eric chose to stay away because I wounded his pride.

"I'm also sorry, Eric. I can't take you back anymore."

I saw Eric drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He did not move and look at me even if I knew he heard the sound of a closing door. So, I left and went straight to the doctor's lounge, bearing the weight of a heavy heart.

I slumped at the couch, staring at the TV screen without seeing anything. My mind played the scenes that Eric confessed like a broken recorder. When the current show paused for the news break, I heard the newscaster mentioned Sama Island. I looked up as the place caught my attention.

"President Ric Abella refused to make a comment about the ongoing charges of a netizen that he had seen him with a beautiful woman in an indecent act. The post has gone viral overnight and reached *ERIC'S POV*

"Stop it, Eric," I said, turning my head away from him. I looked outside the window as images of Shirley sailed in my thoughts.

"To clear your best friend's image, I must admit that it was all my fault. I intentionally made her drunk. Earlier that afternoon, I heard reports about Calla, and I got a bad temper. She was the less threatening person around that I could project my anger with."

I did not complain anymore, nor I confronted him for how evil he was in easing his pain away through someone else, instead of me. There was no use to crying over spilled milk anymore.

"The reason why we were not able to disengage was that she became anxious when she thought about you. She was already hysterical, and I got scared. I had no choice then but to call for help from your staff."

I remained quiet, maintaining my gaze outside the window, but he knew I was listening. His confession cut my heart like a knife. Of all places, why did he choose mine? He saved himself from shame but not me. I could almost figure out the thoughts of my colleagues every time they saw me.

"I had to swallow my pride and bear the shame in coming to you. I was so afraid of publicity."

He chose to crush my heart rather than tarnish his image. I wondered if he ever fathomed the depth of my heartbreak the moment I saw them.

"Where is Shirley now? At your house?" I chose to ignore his self-centeredness by changing the topic but even my fingers were already trembling.

"I have her assigned at our branch in Sama Island."

I got lost in my thoughts as my mind waved up scenarios of them enjoying the pristine beaches of Sama island. I portrayed them in my mind, lying on the sand together. I imagined them kissing each other. He even could have these two ladies, one at a time. Of course, I did not forget that Sama Islands was Calla's homeplace.

"Don't worry, Red. I won't be seeing her anymore."

I turned to look at him. "If I had no control over those whomever you might want to be with before; I couldn't care less also to whatever you want to do with your life."

Eric then reached out for my hand and laid his begging eyes on me. "Red, I want you back."

I scoffed and said nothing, withdrawing my hand from his grip. If only he had apologized while my wound was still fresh, maybe it could have healed without any scar. However, he cut and pounded it over and over again until it got no hope of healing.

"Please, Red. I could not imagine life without you. Let's go home." His pleading voice was soft and hopeful.

"I'm sorry, Eric. I have committed to someone else already." I held his gaze and saw how his face dropped.

"You don't know who Mr. Grey is, Red. Don't get yourself deceived."

"I was once deceived, so what is there to be afraid?" I shrugged.

"Red-"

"It's my life, Eric. You're out of it."

"What could he buy that I could not?" he snapped. Eric was a proud man, someone who wouldn't be too happy in taking no for an answer.

I glared at him, my lips trembling in anger. "That's the problem with you, Eric. You always think that I want the whole world. If I have to choose, I rather live a simple life with real people around me. Money can't buy genuine happiness, I wonder if you know about that. If that's your mindset, then you can buy truckloads of them."

Eric closed his eyes and bit his lip. Probably, he realized his mistake but Eric was aggressive, acting in anger first before thinking about the consequence of his impulsive behavior.

"I-I'm sorry, Red. I'm really very sorry." He picked up my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it with eyes closed. I knew at that moment he was sincere.

"You may go inside now, but I want to let you know that I'm not stopping."

I let out a pursed smile before I opened the door and stepped out. I knew Eric chose to stay away because I wounded his pride.

"I'm also sorry, Eric. I can't take you back anymore."

I saw Eric drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He did not move and look at me even if I knew he heard the sound of a closing door. So, I left and went straight to the doctor's lounge, bearing the weight of a heavy heart.

I slumped at the couch, staring at the TV screen without seeing anything. My mind played the scenes that Eric confessed like a broken recorder. When the current show paused for the news break, I heard the newscaster mentioned Sama Island. I looked up as the place caught my attention.

"President Ric Abella refused to make a comment about the ongoing charges of a netizen that he had seen him with a beautiful woman in an indecent act. The post has gone viral overnight and reached more than two million views until it was taken down."

I bit my nail as the news hooked me. I imagined Eric's shame if his incident with Shirley leaked to the public.

"The incidence happened in one of the beach resorts of Sama Island where a netizen caught him making out with a beautiful, young woman who is reported as a resident of the island. The name and other details are held to protect temporarily the privacy of the concerned person."

Before the news ended, my phone vibrated. I took my phone from my bag and swiped the screen.

"Sean."

"Dear, I wonder if you have seen the news." Sean's voice lightened my mood right away.

"About what?" I smiled, glancing at the screen that had returned into its morning show.

"Our country's beloved president involved himself in a controversy."

"Yes, I just saw it. Why are you so affected?" I teased, keeping no malice at all.

"Honestly, I'm bothered. Can I see you?"

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Chapter 34

RED'S POV

"Honestly, I'm bothered. Can I see you?"

I chuckled at his request. He had just left a few minutes ago, and now he wanted to see me. We were not teens anymore to not be able to contain our excitement. Before I could answer, the door to our lounge opened. The ER nurse then peeped in and smiled as soon as I looked up.

"Dr. Red, you are requested to go to the chairman's office right now."

"What? Why?" I pulled my brows together as I asked her. Ever since I started to serve in this institution, I had never met the chairman. There was the HR Department anyway, and the chief of clinics.

"The executive secretary did not say anything else, doc."

I nodded and stood up to get my white coat inside my room. Our chairman was a doctor and I heard he didn't want to see us in our casual clothes once we were in the hospital premises. I wondered what he wanted from me. Though he only had the title of a chairman, we knew that he and his family solely owned the institution.

"Sean, I'll call you back. The chairman wants me at his office," I hurriedly put him aside, not even allowing him to say goodbye.

I walked down the corridors toward the separate building where the chairman held his office. My heartbeats were dubbing faster than my footsteps, ringing in my ears. I was really wondering why he wanted to see me. Did I do something wrong? Or, had the news about Eric reached his attention? Did it affect the image of the hospital? I didn't even think many people knew about it.

I took a deep breath before I knocked on the door. The secretary opened up for me and ushered me inside.

"Good morning, doc. The chairman is waiting for you," she said with a smile that calmed down my nerves.

I only replied with a smile because she proceeded right away to the next door that led to the chairman's office and held it open for me. I was yet from the doorstep when I saw the chairman nodding at me. His hair was already white, accentuating the wrinkles on his forehead and in his cheeks. Nevertheless, he still looked authoritative and respectable.

"Good morning, Dr. Nelson," he said, extending his hand to mine while bending his body over his desk.

"Good morning, Dr. Fabella," I greeted back, trying to let out a smile.

"Please sit down, dear," he said, gesturing a hand for me to sit down on the chair across him.

The loud thuds of my heartbeat almost choked me as I felt it striking my throat. His authoritative aura kept me more agitated.

"I'd be straight to the point, Dr. Nelson. As you may have known, I am the principal shareholder of this hospital for many years, but now I am selling my full share to my co-shareholder. I already have a few years left in this world and none of my family takes interest in this business."

I stared at him, wondering what he wanted to point out. Why would I care about shares and business? I didn't know a thing about that.

"Dr. Nelson, you're appointed to be my successor--the new chairwoman."

I froze in my seat and my eyes rounded as it stuck on him. He smiled at me and chuckled afterward, watching my expression as I was absorbed in and out of shock.

"Of all people, why me, Dr. Fabella?" It took me an eternity to fumble some words to voice out my confusion.

"Because we know your potentials and we believe in your capabilities. We have also reviewed your credentials and have found out about your academic and clinical excellence."

"Thank you, chairman, but running an institution is a completely different story. Not me, please."

Dr. Fabella watched me with amusement as I cast him my begging eyes. "Someone higher than me has the final say. My task is to inform you but the appointment comes from him and the board."

I shook my head vigorously. Whoever was that someone must have thought I had business and management skills. I wouldn't dare; I would die of shame in case I fail.

"How did it come up for all of you to choose me, doc? I know there are many others out there who are more capable than me, and that there may be many of them aspiring for this position."

"Dear, tell all of that to our boss. As for the screening, of course, we held evaluation sessions."

I could not believe my ears and eyes. I was still too young to accept this responsibility. I must talk to that one whom Dr. Fabella referred to as someone who had the final say.

"Doc, how could I meet this someone you call your boss?"

"I'll set the appointment with him, then my secretary will inform you."

My mind was in a mess when I left the chairman's office. That would mean I would be sitting on his desk if I would accept the responsibility. The thought shuddered me, sending goosebumps all over my body.

I remembered Sean, so I pulled out my phone from my bag and called him up. "Sean, I'm sorry for cutting you off."

"It's alright. How's your meeting with the chairman?"

I made an audible sigh before I answered. "He must be out of his mind."

Sean laughed, even before I could tell him about the whole story.

"Your chairman is a very capable person," he said after his wave of laughter. He said as if he knew him well.

"I know. I don't even expect he would make a stupid decision," I grumbled. He had no idea at all how he suddenly scared me with his news.

"Let's talk about that later."

"Okay."

I dropped the call as I already reached the emergency room. There were already a few patients who were lying at the beds, waiting for my arrival. The interns had already assessed them and took their history, while the nurses took their vital signs and hooked them to an intravenous line. I checked them all and wrote my orders on the chart. As I was about to write my signature on the chart of the last patient I attended, the siren of a coming ambulance had me staring into the emergency room entrance.

Chapter 35

RED'S POV

I saw the triage team stood up as soon as the ambulance stopped. The orderlies jumped out from the side doors of the ambulance, then open up the rear door. Soon, a feminine figure wearing a surgical mask emerged from the ambulance. As soon as the team took care of her, I finished up my order then went out through an exit door. I thought of going to the coffee shop to grab a non-coffee frappe for a refreshment. I needed it to cool down my mixed up and blazing emotions.

I walked straight to the counter since I already had in my mind the kind of drink that I would buy. All of a sudden, an arm wrapped around my waist, and I jumped in fright. I looked up and met Sean's wide grin, followed by a peal of soft laughter.

"You need to lessen your coffee intake. You jump unnecessarily," Sean said, kissing my temple after he earned my glare.

"Why are you here?" I asked while opening my purse to pull out some bills. "What do you like?"

He grabbed my purse instead, closed it, and handed it back to me. He then turned to the cashier, fully ignoring my questions.

"Make it two, please." He pulled out his wallet from his back pocket then pulled out a bill. Once he settled the bill, he held my hand and pulled me gently to a two-seater table.

"Sean, I can't stay long. A new patient has arrived," I informed him as soon as I sat down in one of the chairs. He also made his way across the table and sat down in front of me.

"Of course. You may go once we have our drinks."

"Sean, why are you here? I thought you had left already." I brought back my question.

"How's your talk with Eric?"

I froze as I realized that he may have watched us as we talked and that he may have seen me crying.

"Yes, dear, I was watching you. I proceeded to the parking area when I saw him through my rear mirror. Just before I could get out, I saw the two of you coming in my direction. It's then I realized that I parked next to Eric's car."

"He wants me back. He also confessed about Calla." I hid nothing from him. We already agreed on that matter from the start.

"And?" he asked, locking my gaze.

I scoffed and looked away. "Sean, once I say no, it's always no. I had already warned him many times about that."

He pursed a smile, but a glint in his eyes told me he was bothered.

"You're hurting about Calla?" I confronted him. I wanted us to be transparent with our feelings. We were still in an early stage, and both of us still carried the stigma of our previous relationship.

"I'm bothered about the scandal. I have this feeling that the woman the president is involved with is her." I was also bothered because he did not answer my question, but diverted it instead to another subject.

My eyes rounded as I was taken aback. If that's the case then, Eric's accusation that she left him for someone more powerful was true.

"What makes you think about that?"

"I also look into that post. And I have recognized the place."

I swallowed hard as I seemed to feel a lump in my throat. Of course, the place that his memory retained was his unforgettable woman where they made love. To fill in our silence, I voiced out what my mind was screaming to ask.

"You're hurting that there were two men who owned her before you?" I looked into his eyes as I asked him, trying to know the answer myself.

Sean reached for my hand and held it tight. "I hope that thought makes you jealous."

He was avoiding my question again, too clever to shift the focus of the question back to me.

"I feel sorry for her. I hope she had deep reasons for leaving Eric, other than the claim that she left him for someone wealthier and powerful."

I did not say anything anymore. I just allowed him to speak out.

"She's only inviting trouble into her life. Our president is a married man, and he has children. We no longer need someone to spell out the chaos that would come next."

I shrugged. "It's her choice."

"I'm worrying for you because that news would soon dig up her past, and your name will be brought up."

I stared at him as my mind ran through the possibility. Somehow, I couldn't see why he was bothered by it. Perhaps, Sean was able to read my thoughts because he suddenly spoke up.

"Let's cross the bridge once we get there."

The waiter then approached us with our drinks, so I stood up. If that patient who just arrived in an internal medicine case, I would be attending to her.

"I'll go ahead, Sean. See you at the office later. I will start interviewing the applicants."

Sean stood up from his seat and hooked his arm around my waist again. He then walked me back to the emergency room. As soon as he opened the door, I immediately caught the tensed expressions of the ER staff. The nurses, as well as the interns, stood on one side while a woman was some distance across them.

"Let me go. I'm willing to sign a waiver or anything that would document my wish to discharge against medical advice."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we receive a call instructing us to confine you until further orders from him," explained our junior OB-Gyne-on-duty.

"I know, but I have the right to decide for myself," yelled the woman whom I realized as the one on the stretcher because of the color of her dress.

When Sean saw that something was going on, he also stepped inside. His hand was still around my waist.

"What's going on?" I asked, and all eyes turned at us. I also noticed how their eyes fell on Sean and how those traveled to his arm around my waist. All of them knew that Eric was my boyfriend.

I looked at my friend, whose looks tell about her stress against the woman before her. She took a deep breath and gave me a desperate gaze. Then, I moved my eyes to the woman whose mouth hung open as she looked at Sean and me. I furrowed my brows as I wondered why she reacted that way, but my friend approached me and pulled me towards our lounge.

Chapter 36

RED'S POV

"The president himself called and instructed me to admit her in a suite room," the OB-Gyne-on-duty who was also my friend told me as soon as she locked the door. She was still panting in anger and frustration because the woman again insisted on going out. She had even gone hysterical.

"Do you know the president?" I snapped my fingers at my side; my voice a little louder than a whisper as I fixed my gaze at her.

"No, of course, but he asked to talk to any OB-Gyne around. He even told me to admit her under the best OB-Gyne in this hospital. Most of all, she instructed me to keep this matter confidential."

"What is happening to her? What is her name?" Her mention of the president made me suspect that this lady was the one involved in the scandal. Sean and I had just even talked about them.

But-

Is she Calla?

"Her name is Rya Sevilla," my friend's voice broke into my reverie.

I held my breath for a moment, then sighed in relief. "What's her chief complaint?"

"Nausea, dizziness--eight weeks AOG."

Eight weeks age of gestation means she was two months pregnant. And that period when the conception started was approximately the time when Sean had been with her in Sama Island.

The thought sent shivers down my spine, and I bit my lower lip hard, praying that this was only my presumption.

"She isn't Calla, right? She is Rya Sevilla." I recited this litany in my mind repeatedly, oblivious to the fact that my friend was watching me.

"Red, do you know the lady?" She pulled her brows and looked straight in my eyes.

I shook my head vigorously, realizing my transparency. "No! I'm just overwhelmed by the fact that she is the president's woman."

"Have you heard the news?" she whispered, her widened eyes showed her curiosity.

"It's on the news this morning." I shrugged, trying to pretend this news had nothing to do with me.

"I see." So, she also heard the news.

I pulled her out because I left my new boyfriend outside. I was still expecting resistance from the lady the moment my friend and I went out of the lounge. To my surprise, she was already on the ER bed on moderate, high back rest. Standing not from her was Sean. A nurse was also at her side, inserting an intravenous line.

Sean walked towards me as soon as he saw us coming out. He smiled at my friend before placing an arm around my shoulder. Guilty for not introducing him, I stopped. I cleared my throat, and speak out, facing everyone around. There were five nurses, three post-graduate interns, one housekeeper, and two orderlies.

"Guys," I called out, holding the upper right arm of Sean. Everyone responded right away and paused from whatever they were doing. The lady on the bed also looked up and watched us.

I glanced at Sean before running my eyes to everyone around. "Please, meet my boyfriend, Mr. Sean Mark Grey."

"Hi, sir!" all of them chorused as they cast us a shy gaze.

Sean looked back at me and smiled. He also pulled me closer and pressed his lips on my temple.

"Happy to meet you all, as well," he said, throwing me a happy and a romantic gaze before he looked at everyone.

"It's a piece of wonderful news, sir, Red." My OB-Gyne friend then reached out her hand to Sean, and the latter gladly accepted it. I knew that those piercing gazes the rest stole at us were mixed with questions about mine and Eric's status.

"Indeed. I'm the happiest."

My friend chuckled, but she rolled her eyes on me. I knew she was happy that I finally took steps away from Eric. I softly laughed, winding an arm around Sean's waist.

Somehow, my eyes wandered, and in my peripheral vision, I caught the lady's intense gaze at us. She hurriedly looked away anyway, when I looked at her directly.

Having no other patients left except for this woman, I pulled Sean away and brought him back to the direction of the coffee shop. I let the teasing atmosphere cool down first before resuming my work. We seated ourselves in a corner table, sipping our juice while chatting about the lady. It was still around ten in the morning, and the coffee shop was still quiet.

"I wonder how the staff managed to convince that lady to stay. How did they do it?" I was confident in asking him since there was no one around, except for the lady behind the counter.

"I helped," he answered casually, but he seemed to get lost in his thoughts. I ignored it, though deep in my heart, I wanted to ask.

"She's lovely. I first thought she's a famous model while watching her in outburst."

He held his glass in the air while giving me a quick stare as if he had something he wanted to talk to me. Before he could speak out, my phone vibrated. It was the chairman, calling.

"Dr. Fabella?"

"Darling, the board has decided that they are not going to accept no as an answer from you. See you at the Founding Anniversary night for the turnover."

I stiffened in my seat and got tongue-tied. Dr. Fabella had already ended the call, but I remained staring blankly at the opposite glass wall of the shop. I got too overwhelmed by his announcement.

Weren't they cruel? Forcing a position to someone unwilling and unprepared? I pouted as I talked to myself. Sean noticed the change in my mood, and he asked.

"What is it, dear?"

"It's Dr. Fabella, ignoring my refusal." I gave him a brief idea of our agenda earlier this morning, and how reluctant and nervous I was even at the thought of it.

"Accept it. I'm sure the decision came after careful planning."

"Sean, I have no idea about-"

"I'll prepare our attire for that night. I'm sure you'll invite me as your escort," he grinned after cutting me off. I almost got pissed off, but that gentle smile of him always melted my heart.

I went back to the ER after we consumed our drinks while Sean also left. My mind was on my worries about becoming a chairwoman in a few days that I did not look around and see who was there.

"Doc, congratulations!" a sweet voice broke my imaginations. I looked up and saw that the one speaking was Rya Sevilla.

I raised a brow, wondering what she meant. Yet, I smiled warmly at her.

"Thank you, but--"

"For being in a relationship with Mr. Grey." Her grin spread wider as she laid it out to me.

"Y-you know him?" I asked, maintaining a smile.

"Who doesn't?"

Chapter 37

RED'S POV

The orderly appeared out of nowhere, saving me from chatting with this woman. I'm not willing to talk about my new relationship yet, especially in this place, because they knew Eric so well.

"Ma'am, your room is ready. I'll be taking you there," said the orderly, rotating the wheelchair he brought for the lady's easier access.

"I don't need that," she said, moving her eyes from me to the orderly, then back to me. I just observed her. She had no makeup, but her beauty still shone out. Her fair and ruddy complexion added to her almost perfect features, especially her beautiful eyes.

"You are also not allowed to walk," the orderly insisted, extending his hand to her and helped her sit up.

I left them silently while they were yet arguing and proceeded to the station to do my morning rounds. While on the medical unit, I got busy with too many referrals that the time seemed to fly faster than usual. I had intubated three patients and transferred one of them to a government facility.

When I stood up to leave, my eyes caught the label on the chart.

Rya Sevilla.

The charge nurse who was sitting beside me must have seen how my eyes wandered and how I had reacted. She cast me a quick stare, then smiled at me.

"You know her, doc?"

"Her name is familiar," I replied. Little did she realize how I had wanted to flip the chart over and look at her information. Yet, as a physician, I must set a good example of confidentiality.

The nurse then placed both of her hands on her cheeks and pressed it, followed by her squeal.

"Doc, they are both so beautiful and perfect!"

"Who?" I creased my forehead as I looked at her.

They?

I held my breath as I waited for her reply.

"The patient and her boyfriend. He visited her earlier."

I stared at her and got lost in my thoughts. I did not know why but I felt that the boyfriend could either be Eric or Sean. Of course, the president wouldn't want to come over and escalate the scandal.

"You saw them?"

"Yes, doc. I went to her room to give her some instructions. And there he was, so handsome! I can already imagine how cute their baby will be."

My heart percussed like it was on a finale of a closing music piece. I was almost tempted to show them the photos of Sean or Eric. To prevent my loss of self-control, I went out of the station, allowing myself to wonder what the two were doing when the nurse came in.

When I finally went back to the lounge, I already had three missed calls from Sean and five from Eric. I called Sean back to explain why I wasn't able to pick up his call. Before I could even start, he dismissed the subject right away.

"I don't mind at all. Tell me if you're done so I could pick you up at the ER entrance."

I felt awkward for this arrangement--dropping and fetching me up. I knew he was a very busy person, yet he still spared me his time. I hope he wouldn't change in the future. Sean was too perfect for a man in my dreams--too good to be true.

"I want to apply for a car loan," I told Sean the moment I sat beside him in the car.

"Hmmn. Why?" He glanced at me while his hands were on the steering wheel.

"Because I don't want you to sacrifice your time with me. Sean, I know you're very busy."

He chuckled. "As what others say, there's no such word as busy; it's only a matter of priority."

"But-"

"What kind of a boyfriend I am if I don't give you my time?"

"Sean-"

"If I'm out of town, I could have any of the company drivers to pick you up."

"But I don't want other people to pick me up. How about borrowing one of your cars?"

Sean laughed softly as he reached out for my hand. "Red, I only have one car."

I stared at him in disbelief. Rich men always bought all the cars they fancied as if they are just mere toys in the market.

"Even my house is small. I don't need a big one, and I don't deserve to own a mansion."

I shook my head and gave out a thin smile. "I don't understand you at all."

"Someday, you will."

Sean stopped in front of a restaurant along the highway. He then helped me unhooked my seatbelt.

"Let's get inside. You must be very hungry already." Knowing that he would not accept my refusal, I nodded.

Soon, we were inside the restaurant. Sean had already reserved a table on a secluded corner. After the waiter got the order, Sean excused himself and head out for the bathroom. I also occupied myself by opening the notifications on my phone. A headline then caught my attention.

"The first lady expressed her displeasure on the scandal that went viral in just a few hours after a netizen uploaded it. She denied the claim that her husband had an illicit love affair with a lady from Sama Island, saying that her husband couldn't afford to cheat on her. However, the majority of the netizens did not believe because the video was clear. The authorities tried to locate the other woman to hear her side of the story, but sadly, she was able to escape before the investigation started."

So, Rya Sevilla's coming to the hospital might not be because she felt ill, but perhaps a part of her escape plan. Of all the places in the whole, wide world, why did Rya Sevilla come from Sama Island? It makes it annoying because I always had this thought that Rya Sevilla and Calla Rivera are one.

"Red?" a familiar voice broke into my train of thoughts.

I looked up and saw Shirley. Weren't she in Sama Island as Eric had told me earlier? I did not know if I should smile or be angry. She broke my trust and even had controversial sex with the man who made love to me every day for five years. On the other hand, she severed the tie that connected Eric and me. In other words, she paved my path to freedom.

Chapter 38

RED'S POV

Shirley dropped her knees on the floor beside my seat. Her face flushed right away as she called me, and tears started to run down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Red. I never meant to cheat on you, but I was drunk."

I got shocked to see her kneeling. Though it hurts, I knew I should not put all the blame on her. Eric had already explained that Calla was the root cause of all these. However, if she didn't show Eric any motive, he would not have taken advantage of her weakness.

"No, Shirl. Stand up. I won't say I can forgive you, but the wound is still fresh," I mumbled while pulling her up and helped her stand up.

"I know!" She was already sobbing, and to spare us both from making a scene, she ran away and went to the bathroom.

Scenes of our friendship flashed in my mind again until it wandered to that moment where I saw them covered with a thin sheet--both naked. Nothing hurt me more than seeing them like that, so having it on my mind again, made me sob as well.

An arm wrapping around my shoulders made me look up, and I met Sean's worried look.

"Why?" he asked, and I turned my head towards the bathroom.

He nodded and pulled me closer to him. "She must be that crying lady rushing to the bathroom."

"Shirley," I mumbled between my stifled sobs.

"I see."

The waiter came with our food, but Sean told her to pack it, instead. Glancing at me, whose eyes were already puffing out, the waiter agreed right away. Sean then stood up and walked me to where he parked the car and ushered me inside. He just returned after a few minutes to pay our bill and take our food out.

As soon as Sean stepped out, I cried out loud. Until I could release my welling emotion that way, would my feelings lighten up. When Sean came back, I was already sniffing with my tears. Sean did not say a word and gave me my privacy. I closed my eyes on the way, and little did I realize that I fell asleep. When I woke up for about an hour later, I was already lying on Sean's lap.

"You didn't wake me up," I complained while I got up from his thighs.

"You were tired," Sean replied, but his eyes were not on me but on the screen in front of him.

I brushed my hair with my fingers as I also fixed my eyes on the screen. Sean was watching the early evening news program, and the headline was still about the president's scandal.

"Information about the president's other woman has leaked again to social media. Rumor has it that the lady had herself admitted to one of the most famous hospitals in the city due to complaints of abdominal pain. However, when the group of reporters went to the said hospital, another source told them that the lady had escaped."

My eyes widened at the news. "The lady has escaped?"

Sean turned his head and looked at me, but he did not respond. He stared back at the screen without blinking.

"There must be an inside source. I'm sure it's political. Once again, to bring him down from his presidency. It's always like that. People vote for them, find fault in them later, then cry for their ouster. No firm stand at all; so confusing." I grumbled, and in my mind were scenes of protest rallies, endless issues about faulty government, and campaigns against anything that contradicts some people's preferences.

"As to how I see it, it's not political, but revenge," Sean finally replied as he turned the car TV off. He then got out of the car ahead and opened the door on my side.

I pulled up my brows when I realized we were not on the premises of Laminae, Inc. I had scheduled interviews in the early evening, and what would be their impression on the company if I wouldn't appear? When I did not move, Sean raised a brow on me.

"The interview?"

"I sent someone to do a basic interview and have it recorded so that you can sort it out. You are not emotionally well today."

I sighed in relief. After everything that happened today, I wanted a long and deep sleep. I even brought with me an antihistamine.

"Thank you, Sean." And for the first time, I wrapped my arms around his neck and initiated a light smack on the lips, but Sean hooked his fingers on my hair as he tilted my face for a deeper and probing kiss.

"Let's get inside now," he said, stopping reluctantly. I saw the glow of desire in his eyes, and somehow, the act also awakened something in me that I also wanted more.

Sean was unusually silent when we entered the gate. Perhaps, the momentary bliss blew my mind away from the present because I did not notice right then that we were coming into someone else's

place. The design of the house was similar, as well as the outer structure, but the location of the lawn garden had shifted to the right.

"Where are we? Whose house is this?" I stopped and faced Sean, giving him a puzzled look.

"Come." He held my hand, and we got into the cemented and pebbled path at the side of the house. Beautiful, flowering plants lined both sides. The lovely flowers caught my attention that I no longer minded where we were.

"Babe, we're here."

I looked around and gaped at what I saw and realized. We were already in front of my house!

"This is a duplex-style house, each unit facing a different road."

"Whose unit is it on the front?" I asked, but then I realized that I am living in a subdivision and that Sean owned this estate. So, probably, it was still an unoccupied unit.

"Mine."

My mouth hung open as I realized that this--and many things else--was no longer a coincidence. The more I got determined to know why everything about my life lately would always link to Sean.

Sean held the door open for me as I got lost in my thoughts. I was about to step into the stairs, but Sean caught my arm and pulled me instead to the kitchen. He led me to the door, which I misconstrued as an exit. To my surprise, it opened to another kitchen.

I felt so silly to realize that our house was interconnected. I was too busy and tired that I had not familiarized every corner of the house yet. This house was already fully-furnished when I moved here, according to the agreement I signed. I am someone who does not care so much about brands, that when the agent asked me about my preferred types of furniture and appliance, I entrusted everything to him.

I was still on my spell when Sean held my hand and gently led me upstairs. I wanted to know if our bedrooms were also connected. Before I got the answers, Sean pinned me on the door of his bedroom and began kissing me.

Chapter 39

RED'S POV

My eyes grew wide as Sean caged me between him and the door. This rough move was the aggressive side of him that I did not see yet. This passionate kiss may not be our first, but Sean was always gentle, and he did it in the right place. His eyes darkened as he gazed down at me, and I could tell beneath those narrow darts that a strong desire was already consuming him.

With his hands planted on each side of my shoulders, he tilted his head and started a slow and sensual suck, alternating between my upper and lower lips. Drawn into the momentum, I opened my mouth to welcome him, and he probed his tongue inside as soon as he got the access. He stayed that way for a couple of minutes, shifting between sucking and probing until my senses screamed for something more.

I closed my eyes as his mouth moved into my earlobes, my fingers clutching into the edges of his shoulders. Sean took it as another sign of welcome, and he ran his tongue right away down to my neck, leaving wet trails and tingles on my skin. As his hands also ran down my upper arms, his mouth sealed my mouth again. I gasped when his hands crawled to my back, unclasping the hook of my bra. Soon his hands spread over my breasts and his fingers fondling on the tips. I moaned loudly when the sense of pleasure bolted throughout my body. He was already kneading it according to the rhythm of his tongue exploring on my mouth.

The next moves happened fast. Sean lifted me with one arm in an upright position that my upper body hanged on his right shoulder. Soon, I felt the soft cushion on my back as he laid me on the bed. My heart throbbed louder each second because I could already guess what's next.

I closed my eyes as I anticipated him undressing me, but instead, I felt the bed sank on my side. He then wrapped his arms around me, the top of my head under his chin. I heard his shallow breathing as he held me tighter, and I started wondering what he was doing. I turned to face him, but he stood up in an abrupt motion and ran to the bathroom.

When I heard the sound of the running water, I knew the answer to my question--he did not want to do it with me. Maybe, he did not want to spoil his memories with Calla, or perhaps, he felt that I was unclean, If I could imagine him with that woman, he probably pictured me out in his mind with Eric. I could not blame him if he felt that way; it was not our fault if both of us had pasts with someone else.

My own desire for sex had died down when I thought about this. A pang of pain started to creep in my heart because those scenes earlier that day began to play in my mind again. Droplets of water in my cheek snapped me back to my senses. Sean was already hovering above me when I looked up.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into my ear as soon as he lay down beside me, his elbow planted on the bed. "I got carried away." He then kissed my forehead, and I felt like a little child, being deprived of a piece of candy.

"What's wrong?" I was not holding back my curiosity because the sense of inferiority had already started to engulf me.

"I'm sorry for not being able to hold back. I could have waited a little longer."

I pulled myself up, and I sat down on the bed, my back on the headboard. "What I wanted to know is that why did you stop?"

He looked at me and chuckled, perhaps sensing my embarrassment. "Isn't it too soon?"

"I know it. First, it's because I'm not Calla, and second, you do not want to ruin your memories with her."

I planted my hands on the bed, then slid my lower back down, and tossed myself back into the bed. Next, I pulled the sheets up to my neck and turned to my left side, my back facing him. He was also quick to pull me close to him.

"What are you talking about? I just want a clear difference between love and want."

When I remained silent, he continued. "Red, I have learned my lesson. I do not want to get blinded by lust anymore and misinterpret it as love. The same as I do not want you to do it with me because of need, and not because you love me."

I still did not move, pretending that I was ignoring him.

"Forget Eric, let me in, and learn to love me soon."

"I already told you that he no longer means to me," I finally replied.

"If it's true, then why are you still affected? You should not have been bawling your eyes out just because you come across with your boyfriend's one-night-stand."

His words moved me. I could not imagine how much patience and self-temperance he tried to uphold, just because he thought I was still hurting for Eric.

"I was crying, not because I still love Eric, but because of their betrayal. I feel I am so insignificant and worthless in their eyes."

"However you define it, it's still the same. There is a song that goes this way, "I remember the boy, but not the feelings anymore. Get me?"

I sighed. Maybe, he was right, and I just denied it. Silence followed, and before it could lull me to sleep, I kissed the tip of his nose, then stood up.

"Sean, I need to go. I already want to sleep."

Sean also stood up and walked to the glass wall next to his bed. He then pushed the thick curtain to the side, then slid a door open. My eyeballs almost popped out when that door opened to somewhere I already half-expected-- my bedroom.

Chapter 40

RED'S POV

I woke up in my bed in the morning with Sean still asleep beside me. The more I wonder when he had started planning to connect our lives. I remembered my assigned room in the office and how it came next to him. It only meant, wherever I would be--in the office or at home--there would he be also. The more I suspected that there must be a reason for all of these and that these went through careful planning. I swore to myself; I would find out the secret.

I slowly lifted his arm that trapped me in, but it tightened around me, instead. When I moved my eyes to look up to him, a wide grin was already spreading across his face.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

"You're tricking me again!" I grumbled.

He chuckled. "Because I do not want you to get up."

"Are you not going to work?" I raised a brow at him while I slowly sat up.

"You are not going to work, but if you like, you can do the interview today."

"I will, after my hospital duty." He released me, so I got up from the bed and walked to the bathroom.

"Read your email from the hospital admin first," he called out. I stopped and turned to him. What did he know about hospital matters?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you were asleep yesterday in the car, I saw your email notification."

I walked back to the side table and picked up my phone. And according to what he said, there was indeed an email from the admin. I glanced at him before I opened the mail. He was still on the bed, lying on his back, arms clasping beneath his head.

Dr. Red Nelson,

Thank you so much for your dedication and service. We are happy to inform you that you are already close to completing your medical residency program. And because of your commitment and your willingness to spend extra hours on duty, we would like to reward you by giving you a break. Take the coming days as your vacation and in preparing for your new responsibility. The

number of days during your leave would be counted as regular working days. This means that when you are back, you would also be culminating in your residency training.

I furrowed my brows at him after reading. Why did he know about this? He seemed to read my thoughts because he justified himself.

"Dr. Fabella called while you were asleep. I answered your phone and told him I was with you. He then informed me about everything."

The more the creases of my forehead gathered together. Dr. Fabella would do that? It seemed unlikely. Dr. Fabella was always a man of order and principles, so how could he disclose any legal matters over the phone?

I was about to confront him, but I realized I would only be ruining my secret investigation. So, I just turned towards the bathroom again; my mind was on how I would use my leave.

I decided to spend the morning at my office in Laminae. I wanted to plan out the things I wanted to set up in this office. I also decided to sort out the first round of interviews and start meeting some of them later in the afternoon. Since I only need a few staff, watching the videos did not take long. I sent them emails right away, hoping many would be available in such short notice.

"Why should I hire you?" I started to ask the first applicant. She was a fresh graduate who did not like to work in a hospital setting.

I noticed the fine tremors on her lips, as well as her unsteady gaze. She could not look at me directly in the eyes, and her focus was always on the wall behind me.

"Miss Era Ramos, am I that scary?" I asked, amused, trying to break the tension in the atmosphere.

"No, doc." Her voice was a little louder than a whisper that only she could hear.

"Do I look like a monster?"

"No, doc. You're so beautiful," she finally managed a timid smile.

I also smiled back at her and took a deep breath. "Just relax. I won't bite."

I called the next applicant. The first one had never improved. Her nervousness grew worse each minute, so I ended it. She might have a heart attack.

"Miss Precious, tell me about yourself." I pulled myself up and placed my clasped hands on the desk.

This lady shot me a bright and confident smile, giving me good eye contact. "I am the youngest daughter of the family. Not to brag about myself, I am the only child who brought trophies and medals to the family..."

My single question resulted in a litany of many good things about herself. I just let her go ahead; she felt too good of herself, and I was afraid I might ruin her day.

"Next..." I called for the third applicant. I closed my eyes and leaned on the backrest while waiting. I heard the door opened and closed, but I did not move yet. I just got tired of listening to the first two applicants.

A hand lifted my chin, and as soon as my eyes flew open, I saw Sean bending over me, sucking my lips before I could pull up straight.

"Just dropping by," he said, drowning me with his radiant smile.

"No kissing allowed in the workplace. Remember that," I said as I pushed him away, urging to let him go. Deep inside, I got flattered with these sweet little moments, wishing this would last until forever.

However, he pulled me over for another kiss, but the door swung open, and both of us froze in place. A beautiful lady in a business suit came in. Her skirt was short and tight, hugging her flaunting hips. She stood slim and tall, emphasized by her black stilettos.

"Third?" I asked, thinking she was the third applicant. I am a person who has a very poor memory of people and places. I couldn't even remember the names and faces of the post-graduate interns from the previous batch.

However, she did not answer me. Her eyes were on Sean, whose lips had smears of my lip color.

Chapter 41

SEAN'S POV

When the president's scandal became the top headline of the day, Calla came to my mind. A part of my investigation was to check who were the prominent people that came to Sama Island shortly before Calla left Eric. Although hundreds of people swarmed the island, only a few belong to the description of "someone richer and more famous". And among them all, there was someone consistent in visiting the place.

I also checked the owner of that private property, where I met Calla. Though it belonged to the name of a person not known in our business circle, it linked to the name of the president after a series of investigations. I felt sorry for Calla--she had wasted her prime years with a married man--someone who could never be her own. What else did she want when Eric could provide everything that she wished?

I came to see Red again that morning when the news hit all over the country. Aside from wanting to comfort her from her shock of having appointed a great responsibility, I also had to be there to protect her from any unpredictable outcome. As we talked while sipping our drinks at the coffee shop, my mind kept on playing the incident of that single call that bothered me all day.

"Mr. Grey, someone is on the phone. He wants to talk to you," my business partner told me as soon as I went inside his office. "He said it's highly confidential."

I gathered my brows as I looked at him. "Who?"

He didn't answer me but instead handed me the wireless phone.

"Good morning. How may I help you?"

"Mr. Grey, this is President Ric Abella. Please don't ask me anymore as to how I get your number. I know I can trust you. You must have heard the news. I sent my woman to your hospital. Please keep her safe..." He put the phone down, leaving me staring at the receiver.

If I am right with my presumption, I'm going to see her finally!

No one knew how big was the effort I allocated just to find her. The outbreak in Sama Island had gone worse daily, and I wanted to protect her and her family. She may not be the woman for me, but she had shared a part of herself that I thought I could never forget. Yet, no matter how much I poured into the effort, Calla disappeared like a bubble. Only after I shifted my focus on Red, did she vanish from my thoughts.

I felt my heart stopped from beating when I saw her arguing with the PGI and the nurses. She was still as beautiful as that last time I saw her disappearing from my sight during my last, passionate night with her. Scenes of our sexual encounter then played in my mind as I stood behind Red, not expecting I'd see Calla again this way.

I was glad Red could not see my reaction as Calla did not hesitate in staring at us. What's worst was that Calla let her mouth hang open as she gazed at us. Anyone could tell that Calla knew me, judging from her eyes that lingered at my hand, wrapping around Red's waist. Perhaps, Calla couldn't believe I have found a woman that fast because she knew she was my first.

When that obstetrician-gynecologist-on-duty pulled Red over to their lounge, I sighed in relief. Calla was about to insist again on her want to discharge against medical advice but I intervened.

"Excuse me," I said, running my eyes to all of them around before I fixed it on Calla. "I'm so sorry to intrude, but may I have a moment with you, ma'am?"

She nodded, and the nurses and interns sprinted right away from us. I was glad they did because I must do it fast before Red would emerge from their room.

"Calla, I'd be short. I'll talk to you and help you once you will be in your room," I whispered, looking at my left and right, while my ears were picking sounds from the door where Red entered.

Calla stared at me with those beautiful and gentle eyes of her. Having recalled what Cynthia warned me before, I looked away. She's right after all. On those few seconds I looked at her eyes, it seemed to have a pulling force, drawing you to stare at her longer.

Having said no words other than those implied by the silent message of her eyes, I stepped away. Calla also walked over to the nurses' table and announced her plan to withdraw from her request. A nurse then stood up and led her back to her bed.

As soon as Red went back to work, I went up to Calla's room right away. And as soon as I closed the door she ran to meet me, throwing her arms right away around my neck.

"Sean, I missed you," she exclaimed in a hoarse voice, emphasizing the magnitude of her statement.

"Calla-"

"Sean, I mean it," she said, crushing her lips on mine the next moment. I was taken aback. My mind stopped working for a second before I extracted her arms from my neck.

"Calla, please don't. I'm getting married already," I said as she resisted my effort, sealing my mouth instead, and sucking roughly on my lips.

"I don't care." She released my lips for a moment and looked up to me. "Just as you did not care also when you made love with me despite knowing that I was with someone."

I would be lying if I said I had no reaction, even if I applied force in taking her claws off me. She may have pulled her arms away from my neck but she suddenly cupped my throbbing manhood.

"Calla, what we had was something wonderful, but I am already committed to someone else," I said, closing my eyes as I caught her hand away.

"Then why are you here?" she sighed, glints of frustration registering in her face.

"To talk to you, and to help you get away from here."

Calla then threw herself at me in gratitude for what she foresaw as pronounced freedom. "Please, I want to get away from him."

"Why? Because of the scandal? Or, you have caught another much bigger fish again?" I asked myself, waiting for her excitement to die down.

When she finally released me, I asked her to sit down for a talk. To avoid looking at her deceptive eyes, I sat beside her on the couch.

"Calla, why did you do this. President Abella is a married man. Why are you inviting trouble into your life? Why did you leave Eric?"

To my guilt, she let out a mirthless laugh. "Wow! You already know a lot about me."

"Yes, I'm sorry."

Then she turned to me and said, "It only means you're interested in me. Sean, it's not too late yet."

Chapter 42

SEAN'S POV

Before I could answer, the door opened, and a nurse came in. Her smile disappeared the moment she saw me, and she stood pinned on the doorframe. Her eyes widened and froze for a few seconds as she gazed at me, though she managed to let out an awkward smile afterward. Probably, she didn't expect I was there because Calla came alone. And I was sure that part of her endorsement from the ER stated that she should have maximum confidentiality and that there should be no visitors allowed.

"Yes?" Calla raised her brows on her, embarrassed by her sudden intrusion. I was sure she knocked on the door but perhaps, we were just too overwhelmed to hear it.

The nurse looked at me, then back at Calla in an unsteady gaze. "I'm sorry if I disturb you, ma'am, sir but I'm here to give you-"

"Please, come back later. We have some important matters to discuss," Calla replied, suppressing her embarrassment from showing up.

"Sure, ma'am. Just dial 01 to connect to the nurses' station."

I smiled at the nurse to ease the tension away, and her eyes glittered as she smiled back. I was about to tell her to keep what she saw to herself, but she slipped away from the door before I could open my mouth.

I looked back at Calla who was taking a deep breath to let go of her embarrassment. She only spoke again when I gestured for her to do so, perhaps losing the courage to continue our disrupted subject.

"Sean, when are you going to help me get out of here?" I smiled inwardly at how she changed the topic.

"Now," was my brief reply.

Her eyes brightened again the moment I uttered the word, and she moved closer to me. She took another breath and whispered, "Sean, I'm pregnant."

I knew about it already while we were still in the Emergency Room, but the way she told me made my heartbeats race. A glint of fear and hesitation flickered in her eyes, and she looked away.

"How old?" I held my breath as I waited for her reply.

"The doctor said it's eight weeks." She stared at me, watching my reaction.

A lump formed in my throat as I did a mental count of the weeks that passed after we made love. My mind suggested that the baby could be mine.

I was dying to ask who she thought was the father, but I couldn't dare. I got scared. I could never turn my back on Mr. Thomas Grey, and I did not want to break Red's heart. I was set on marrying her as soon as she falls in love with me. Calla had been together with the president, anyway.

However, if the baby is indeed mine, how can I turn my back on my child?

I stood up and called a pizza house. "Twenty sets of your best-sellers and twenty liters of soft drinks, your choice. Have half of it delivered to the nurses' station and a half to the utility department."

Calla gazed at me with furrowed brows, wondering why I did a bulk order. I threw her back a glance but did not explain. I proceeded to call the head of the maintenance and utility department instead after I settled the payment.

"Gather your staff in thirty minutes. I ordered pizza for all of you. Take a short break and enjoy."

"S-sir? Who's this, please?" I could picture his reaction in my mind, and I got amused.

"From the HR."

I heard a gasp before a series of 'thank you's flooded into my ear. I chuckled at their evident joy. I then turned to Calla and said, "Prepare."

"What?" she clarified, but I answered her with a quick stare before I went out of the room.

I passed by the nurses' station and saw the nurse who entered the room. She was answering a call, but her eyes caught me approaching their cubicle. She then hurriedly ended her call and opened the glass window of the station.

"Sir, is ma'am ready now?"

"Maybe, later," I shrugged and then smiled at all of them as I ran my eyes on everyone inside the station. "By the way, guys, I ordered sets of pizza for you. Enjoy it while it's hot. It will be here in 25 minutes."

All their eyes were on me, and it felt like it was boring a hole in my face. Not even one of them thanked me. They just stuck their eyes on me, unblinking. I smiled and closed the window before I walked away. I then heard squeals the sooner the edges of the glass fitted together.

I went straight to the parking area and slid into my car. I turned the engine on, waiting for the notification that the delivery personnel has arrived. After exactly thirty minutes, my phone beeped. I then called Calla through the intercom.

"There's a set of a scrub suit in the closet. Put it on and get down to the basement using the elevator near the exit. It's on your right, a few steps from your door."

I calculated the time that Calla could change into her scrub suit. When my set time was up, I stepped out of the car and walked towards the guard who posted near the basement elevator.

"Good day, sir!" he smiled, having recognized me already.

"Good day, chief. I just ordered a pizza and a cold drink for all of you. Why not get your share first?"

He was about to say no, but I was already holding my phone to my ear in a loudspeaker mode.

"Maintenance department, good day!" The guard stared at me as soon as he recognized the voice of the call receiver.

"Sir, can you please have a slice of the pizza sent over to your guard in the basement?"

"Of course, sir. All of us are going to have our share."

The guard gave out a shy grin as he glanced at me. "Thank you, sir."

I smiled back at him and locked his gaze. Out of the corners of my eye, I saw Calla emerging from the elevator.

"You're welcome, chief. By the way, how long have you worked here?" I asked, trying to distract him until Calla could safely take her exit. I secretly pressed a button on my car remote, hoping that the blinking lights would give her a clue.

Chapter 43

RED'S POV

"Miss?" I called her attention again. "Are you the third applicant?"

She narrowed her eyes on me, and a frown spread across her face. She looked at me then back to Sean. I got embarrassed by her dumbness so I checked to see the profile of the third applicant. However, the applicant's profile displayed a chubby face, but this lady before me had a beautiful, heart-shaped one.

"You are in the wrong office," Sean spoke before I could send her out. "The HR's office is on the left-wing. And you are on the right."

"But I-" she started to protest, but Sean walked towards her and cut her off.

"I'll show you the way," he offered, but the lady did not nod or shook her head. She just stared at him with an upset expression.

Sean walked back to me and smacked a kiss on my lips. "See you at lunchtime, babe."

"Okay," I said, wrapping my hands around his neck. I did not know why but I felt threatened at the thought that he would be guiding the lady to the HR's office. Somehow, Sean placed both his hands on my shoulders, making me feel secured.

"You're breaking your rule," he whispered in my ear, "but I love it." He bent his head closer, staring at my lips.

I chuckled and raised a hand to cover his mouth. "Go now. The lady is waiting," I said as I peered on the lady standing still at the doorway, staring at us.

I watched Sean opened the door for her, and I saw the lady glanced up to him without that grateful look a common applicant would show. I didn't know why but the closing of the door brought a pang of pain to my heart.

To shake off this unwanted feeling, I called for the next applicant. A little chubby lady walked in with a smile but a hint of sadness showed in his eyes.

"Good morning, doc!" she greeted me with a forced smile, and I noticed how the edges of her lips trembled.

"Good morning, Miss Hazel Villanueva?" I gave her a genuine smile and a raised brow.

"Yes, doc."

"Please, sit down," I said after seeing her still standing across my desk.

"Thank you, doc."

I watched her sitting down slowly in a graceful poise until she looked up to me. "Miss Villanueva, may we proceed?"

"Yes, doc."

"Please tell me about yourself," I said without looking at her; my eyes were on her curriculum vitae submitted through the company's account.

"I graduated last year and had passed the board exam that same year, also. However, I have not worked in a hospital because there were good job offers in my hometown. I worked as a company nurse instead, for the Martela Group of Companies."

I shot her an abrupt look, and she got startled. "Where's your hometown, Miss Villanueva?"

"In Sama Island."

I held her gaze for a moment, twirling my pen with my fingers. "Do you know many people there?"

"Yes, doc. In provinces, people know each other, except for those transient tenants or staff of a business establishment."

"Are you still currently connected to the Martela Hotel and Beach Resort?" I asked, using the data she provided in her resume. I wondered then if she knew Eric's personal life.

"Not anymore, doc," she smiled sadly.

"Is the offer not good?"

"Very good, doc, but-" she stopped, and despite how she tried to hold back her emotion, she still burst out crying.

I just smiled and looked at her, waiting until she would stop her emotional outburst. After a few minutes, she calmed down a bit, and she tried to speak between her sniffing.

"I'm sorry, doc, but I need a greener pasture. I am the family's breadwinner, and my parents are sick."

Silence followed, and she could no longer bring herself to speak. I'd be wasting time, so I dismissed her. "See me when you're ready, Miss Villanueva."

She looked up to me and brushed her eyes before springing to her feet. "I'm sorry, doc. Please don't tell the Martela Group about this application."

My hands that I laid on the keyboard stiffened suddenly, and my mouth hung open as I wondered what could be the reason behind her request. I wanted to call her back, but she had already closed the door before my reflexes dictated me to stand up and go after her.

I sank back in my seat and called up another seven applicants. And after that, I went to my room to take a break. They were all I had to see, and in the afternoon, I would be talking to the doctors I had personally picked up to work with me.

I went straight to the dining room, and the aroma of freshly-cooked food wafted through my nose. My stomach churned right away, and I glanced at my watch. I realized it was already lunchtime. I presumed that Sean was in the kitchen, so I went to see and help him with the preparation. To my surprise, he was not there, but the stove was on, and there was a pot--its lid moving against the pressure of the boiling content.

I went to open it and saw strips of beef tenderloin cooking under low heat. The fluid had almost dried up, telling me that this was unattended or forgotten. I picked up a piece and pinched it between my fingers. Seeing that the meat had tendered, I sauteed it with the spices that Sean had prepared at the kitchen bar.

Since Sean had not come back yet, I decided to prepare the table with the food that he had already cooked. However, he still did not come back even after I was done. I got worried, so I called him up. It took long before he picked it up, and I felt I heard the ringing of his phone from the next room.

"R-red-"

"Where are you?" I cut him off.

"I'm sorry. I got tangled up. I'll be there in a minute."

Before the sixty ticks of a minute got completed, Sean appeared at the door. His hair was disheveled, and his shirt got creases. He was no longer wearing his long-sleeved polo shirt he wore from the house. Worst of all, he looked guilty, and it seemed he could not look at me straight in the eyes.

Chapter 44

"Where have you been?" I asked, my eyes planted on the mess of his appearance.

He gave me a sheepish smile and apologized. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"You look bothered," I commented, running my eyes up and down on him.

"I am. I'm sorry. Something came up."

He seemed not interested to talk about what bothered him, so I decided to keep my mouth shut. I always know when to stay silent and when to open my mouth. Men hate nagging, and they hate to talk about themselves. I tried to ignore this uneasy feeling, so I wrapped my arm around his waist. He also placed an arm around my shoulder, and we walked together towards the dining room.

When my head hit his chest as he pulled me closer to him, I smelled a strange scent. I pulled a long face, wrinkling my nose afterward. Sean seemed to notice my expression because he withdrew his arm from my shoulders and held my hand instead.

"Dear, may I go to the bathroom first?"

"Of course," I nodded, releasing his hand.

I proceeded to the dining room, pouring an iced tea into our glasses. I also put some food into our plates so that it would cool down a little before we start to eat. In less than five minutes, Sean came in. His hair was already dripping with droplets of water, and he was already wearing a bathrobe.

"I feel hot, so I took a quick shower," he said when I run my eyes on him again. I wondered why he felt hot when the thermostat of the aircon was at its fullest.

"You look better--fresh and handsome," I said, smiling, but my eyes were on my plate.

"Thank you," he chuckled while pulling out a chair across me.

We were halfway through our meal when his phone vibrated. He placed it on the right corner of the table after he settled himself on his seat. I glanced at it, and the word "Samsam" floated on his phone screen.

He grabbed the phone and put it between his shoulder and his head.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"I'm with my fiancée."

I only heard his side of the conversation, and my bad mood suddenly disappeared when he acknowledged me as his fiancée. I kept my eyes on my plate, but in the corners of my eye, I saw him stealing glances at me.

"It's someone unimportant," he shrugged, and I couldn't care less, either.

"The name is beautiful. Samsam. She or he?"

"The name applies to both men and women." He continued to eat, evading my question indirectly.

Realizing that Sean was not in the mood, I stayed quiet until we placed down our spoon and fork. I was about to stand up to clean the table and wash the dishes, but Sean also stood up and pulled my hand. I looked up to him with a questioning look, but he did not say a word. He just took steps forward until we were out of the dining room.

I thought we would sit down on the couch, but he continued walking until we entered my bedroom. I just followed him like a puppet until we reached the bed.

"Let's take a nap together," he said, pulling me down on the bed. I landed in his arm, and he enclosed me right away in a tight hug. "I'm really exhausted."

"What did you do this morning?" I asked, glancing up at him. He was indeed different today, not the usual calm and cheerful person.

"Nothing much," he replied in a lazy tone. He was closing his eyes, so I no longer asked the detail. I also closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth of being in his arms until I dozed off.

The ringing of the phone woke me up, and because I was on the outer side of the bed facing the bedside table, I reached out for it. The ringing had stopped but a message popped up on the lock screen. The message came from the name Sean registered as Samsam. I also checked the name of the missed caller, and the same name was in the notification.

"Sean, I need the doctor's prescription for my supplement. The baby needs it the most this time."

If this Samsam was not important to him, why would she ask him for something like this? It's about pregnancy and such matters are directed to a husband, a boyfriend, or a family member.

Does it mean Sean has impregnated someone else but who? According to him, Calla was her first. Does it mean he has found Calla already? Is she the reason why he seemed disturbed today?

I scrolled up the screen to reveal the notification again. Once it displayed, I read the number and committed it to my memory quickly. I should find out about this while it's still early, and while it wouldn't crush my heart into pieces yet.

It hadn't gone a minute yet after I settled back in Sean's arm when he started to move. I closed my eyes and relaxed, pretending I was still asleep. After a few minutes, he slowly lifted my head and placed me on a pillow. I then felt the bed sank on one side, telling me that he got out of the bed. I listened to his movements, sharpening my sense of hearing. When his footsteps faded, I slowly opened my eyes. He was standing by the window, his hand was on his ear with a phone.

"Don't worry. I'll ask that doctor who handled you."

"Alright. Just keep in touch."

These two sentences I heard him said were enough to create turmoil in my mind. Who really is this Samsam? I tried to put the pieces together to come up with an answer.

Samsam...Sama...Sama Island; and Calla is from Sama Island! Damn it.

I hurriedly closed my eyes as I saw Sean turning to face in my direction. I heard his footsteps again coming towards me. To my surprise, I heard the sound of the closing and opening of a door. I flew my eyes wide, thinking that I just did not hear correctly. To my surprise, the door he opened was the door of a closet.

Chapter 45

The closet opened to a line of business suits hanging neatly on the rod according to colors. On the lower compartments, I also caught a glimpse of folded clothes. Ever since Sean showed it to me the first time we came here, I had not placed a single item there yet. I wondered if I got into the wrong room, so I let my eyes roam across the place. Yet, everything around showed feminine touches, including the floral prints of the bedsheets.

I continued to watch him changing into his trouser and slipping into a white undershirt. When he turned around to discard his bathrobe, he caught me staring at him, and his lips twisted into a smile.

"Did I wake you up?" he asked, walking back to the bedside.

"No," I replied, covering my mouth as I broke into a yawn.

"Why not sleep still?" He sat down beside me and brushed his fingers on my hair. Those sweet and tender eyes sent a warm wave into my heart, making it pump a little faster.

I sat up and pulled my knees, leaning my head on top of my knees for a moment. He moved closer and trapped me inside his long arms that coiled around me.

"Finish your interview today and make a final decision on your staffing because I'll be taking you away for a short vacation."

"Really?" I gasped in surprise, giving him a pair of wide eyes.

"Yes. Just you and me, away from the world."

"I love that," I exclaimed, having realized that Eric never offered me the luxury of his time.

"I love you," he responded, pressing his lips on my temple.

My eyes darted open, sticking on his face for a moment. It seemed that my world stopped spinning at that very second. He understood the expression on my face because he elaborated on what he said.

"I'd been thinking about you for so long already. Do you believe in the power of the mind?"

"No. You are blowing my mind, instead." I rolled my eyes, and he chuckled.

"I'm willing to wait, Red."

He hugged me tightly for who knew how long, allowing me to feel his sincerity through that simple gesture. He showed no signs of sexual desire, just a pure warmth of his touch. He didn't even kiss me on the lips that would have kindled a fire between us at that moment. Tears stung my eyes, wishing I had experienced this treatment a long time ago.

All my doubts vanished after that. I lay down on the bed with my eyes on the ceiling, feeling the bliss of his confession. Sean had long gone ahead to his office while I stayed an hour longer. I remembered the clothes in my closet, so I stood up to inspect it. And I realized that Sean's stuff was also on the pull-out trays and some drawers on the cabinet.

I recalled his messy appearance and his disheveled hair. Was it because he was simultaneously cooking and moving his things to my room? I felt guilty. His things in my room were proof that he wanted to move in with me.

I snapped out of my reverie when my phone sang the tune of my favorite song. It was Dr. Mimi calling. I answered her call, and she informed me that she was on her way. In less than ten minutes, I was already sitting behind the desk of my office. Dr. Mimi also arrived a few minutes after.

"Wow! What a beautiful contrast to our everyday environment." Dr. Mimi commented after her eyes scanned the whole surroundings. "And it looks so peaceful here."

"Hopefully," I smiled, not wanting to give her a false assurance since Laminae was a huge company, and there were hundreds of workers to cater to.

"I understand," she chuckled, having perhaps seen my point. She sat down comfortably across my desk, and I began orienting her on the scope of her job and responsibilities. I also gave her a rundown of the company's profile and the nature of the business.

"Does it mean I am already hired?" she said, laughing. Perhaps, she could not believe how easy she got into the job.

"Of course. I am given the task to decide, so what would you expect?" I also laughed.

Dr. Mimi's stayed her eyes on me as I laughed, and all of a sudden, her expression changed into a concerned look.

"Red, how are you? You know, I got so worried about you, but I was also hesitant to ask. You might not want to talk about it. Is this the reason why you accepted this job?"

My lips stretched across my face in a pursed smile. "It's over between Eric and me."

She nodded, giving me a sympathetic look. "I'm glad you are able to let go."

"You know it hurts like hell, but I'm moving on."

"That's good. I regret I took my leave after that day." Dr. Mimi meant the day Eric and Shirley got confined due to sexual disengagement. If not for her thoughtfulness, dealing with them would be much more painful.

"My heart is already anesthetized," I joked, drawing out a smile of pity from my friend.

"Don't look at me that way," I added. "I'm truly fine." I giggled.

"If you said so," she shrank and leaned her back on the chair.

Before I could speak, the door opened, and Dr. Leila, my OB-Gyne friend, stuck her head inside.

"Come in," I called out excitedly, a wide grin sprawling across my face.

She closed the door and strode faster to my desk. Dr. Mimi pointed out to Leila the chair across her.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Dr. Yrna requested me to take over as she was on maternity leave." Dr. Yrna was one of our senior OB-Gyne consultants.

"You had a meeting?" I asked, watching her stretching out her blouse, trying to compose herself.

"Yes, for an endorsement," she sighed.

"You look stressed," Dr. Mimi commented.

Dr. Leila sighed before she answered. Then in a split of a second, her eyes widened as she looked at me.

"Red, do you remember that woman who insisted on going home against medical advice?"

Chapter 46

I nodded, squinting my eyes. "Yes. What about her? The president's woman?" I whispered, afraid that somebody from outside would suddenly open the door.

"Yes. She is one of the patients whom Dr. Leila endorsed to me." She stressed out the words, her sharp and narrowed eyes drew both Dr. Mimi and mine's full attention

"And?" I followed up.

"Mr. Sean Grey asked her to continue handling that lady. I have to see her for her regular checkup, but I would be the one to come to wherever Mr. Grey wanted to see her."

I froze for a moment, and the same look of horror in my face reflected in Leila's expression.

"Red, tell me. Your new boyfriend's name is Sean Grey, right? Why would he have a say in that woman's prenatal care? Is she a relative?"

"What?!" Dr. Mimi butted in, confused and surprised.

I did not answer, and my face dropped as if a yoke was tied to my head. My mind drifted back to the day I met Rya Sevilla at the ER. She was already hysterical when we came in, but when I went out of our lounge, she had already calmed down. She had even requested for hospital admission and subjected herself to the procedures like a wet puppy.

I recalled asking Sean about how the woman calmed down, and I snapped when I remembered his reply.

"I helped," his voice echoing in my mind. And the only reason why that woman obeyed him was that she was no other than my boyfriend's first love, first sex experience, and the woman that made him crazy. I even remembered that Sean spent a lot in looking for her!

I racked my brain in thinking about some more of those incidences that linked him to her. Then I remembered how his eyes darted on the news about Rya Sevilla's escape from the hospital. If she's not Calla, why would Sean be so much interested in her?

"Red?" Dr. Leila called out, staring at me with a worried expression. "What is this topic all about?"

"It's nothing," I denied. How could I tell her about my stupidity again? It would only look like I haven't learned my lessons with Eric.

"What's nothing?" Leila confronted me. "It is clear as a broad daylight that you're clueless about this news. If it's nothing Red, then why would Mr. Grey hide this from you?"

"Ladies, calm down," I smiled, but I knew that the gloom inside my eyes betrayed me. "That said lady is the president's woman. Perhaps, he and the president are friends, and that he entrusted that task to Sean on his behalf. And maybe, Sean doesn't mind much about that. He's so busy. That's probably why he forgot to tell me about her."

"Are you sure? Why did you look so hurt a while ago?"

"Me? As in me? Why would I?" I widened my eyes to prove it to them that I was not affected. "But I admit I got bothered because I already know that she is the president's woman. I can't imagine the trouble she's into."

"For a while," Dr. Mimi raised her hands and faced each palm to Leila and me, "can you two please explain what's happening? And who is this Mr. Gey?"

Leila and I broke into loud laughter, so I began the task of breaking out to her the latest update of my love life. In the end, she looked at me sincerely and said,

"Red, I hope this new boyfriend of yours is not a mistake. Don't you think you jump into his arms so soon? Yet, I understand that you need someone to help you move on."

I stood up and walked over to them, throwing myself between them for a hug. Even if I considered Shirley as my best friend, they were the closest friends I had in my workplace. Tears were running down my cheeks as they warmed me with their embrace. And those simple act was enough to assure me I have them in case I fail again.

"May I borrow a moment with my precious one?" Sean's voice startled us all, and we immediately disentangled ourselves from each other.

My friends froze and got tongue-tied, afraid that Sean had heard a part of our conversation. It was also the first time that Dr. Mimi had to meet him as my boyfriend, so the atmosphere was a bit awkward.

"Hello, Dr. Mimi, Dr. Leila, how do you find the job offer?" Sean's wide grin at them eased their sense of awkwardness.

"Oh, it's good. I am looking forward to it. Thank you, sir," said Dr. Leila, bowing down her head slightly to express her gratitude.

"Oh, I'm not the boss here. It's Red," Sean replied, looking at Red with those tender eyes.

"Shut up," I pretended to scold him, but my smile reached my ears. "Why are you here?"

"Can't I see you anytime I like?" he complained, wearing a wicked grin, but then he raised the box in his hand. "I'm going to prepare your snacks. Go ahead with your chat." He waved a hand to the three of us before opening the door to the staff lounge.

"Red, he knows how to cook? Did you just say he is the CEO of this company and other companies under Thomas and Albert Grey Group of Companies?" Leila exclaimed, her eyes as bright as the LED light in the ceiling.

Dr. Mimi also dropped her mouth open as she inclined her ear to what I was going to say.

"He does every chore in the house," I said, elaborating about it afterward.

When I stopped, Dr. Mimi tapped my shoulders with a glowing face. "I hope he doesn't change. He's such perfect for a husband."

I gave out a pursed smile, saying a silent prayer that her prediction may come true. I then stood up and led them around, orienting them to all the areas of the building. When we came back, Sean was already ready with the snacks.

Sean ushered them to the table and started a conversation with them. In less than five minutes, they were already laughing out loud. For them to have free time with Sean, I excused myself to go to the bathroom. And once inside, I called up the PGI who was on duty during my encounter with Miss Rya Sevilla.

Chapter 47

"Dr. Red, it's you! I've heard you're on .vacation," the nurse exclaimed, happy to hear my voice.

I smiled, looking at the screen. It's pleasing to know that someone missed me. "Yes, sir. How are you?"

"Fine, doc. Our hospital is still free from Bronc X virus infection, although we have some suspects currently admitted."

"That's good to know," I answered, but my mind was debating whether or not I should ask what I had in mind.

"Doc, do you have something to ask me?"

I chuckled, thankful that he opened it up for me. He had lessened my burden in finding the right words to say. "Sir, do you still remember our patient named Rya Sevilla?"

"The one who insisted on going home against medical advice?"

"Yes, sir." I skipped a breath, waiting for his reply.

"Of course, doc. How can I forget when she was so beautiful despite her bad mood. I'm even willing to be the receiver of her tantrums or hysteria if she just let me hold and kiss her," he replied, laughing.

"Oh, really," I gasped. If this young nurse was attracted to Calla, then I wouldn't wonder if Sean was still crazy about her.

"Just kidding, doc," he laughed softly again but continued anyway. "What about her, doc?"

"Sir, do you still remember how she changed her mind about going home against medical advise?"

"Of course. You're boyfriend talked her out of it."

"Really? How?" I tried to sound amused, letting him believe that my asking him was only about curiosity and not something personal.

"I really don't know, doc. He just talked to her in less than a minute, then she approached us again, telling us that she's changing her mind."

"I see."

"Doc, if you don't mind, why do you ask? I don't want to have issues between our boss and me."

I chuckled. Why would he have issues with our boss? And how would this conversation reach the chairman? His fear didn't make sense at all.

"Dr. Mimi and I brought up that topic again, so we both wonder how she changed her mind."

"I see," he laughed softly, but I could tell the hesitation in his voice. "Anyway, she escaped a few hours after she's wheeled into her room."

"What? How?" I sounded surprised. I heard about her escape already.

"It remained a mystery, doc since the CCTV failed to show the incident. But-"

"But what?" I asked.

"Rumors had it that our big boss helped her because he was the last person seen entering her room."

The suspense was already killing me. There was only one possible reason why there was no video footage about her escape--video tampering. An institution owner can always disable or edit the footage. And the chairman had the power to do that.

I feared for the chairman. It would be alright if her escape had been agreed by him and the president because the issues could be ironed out. It is an accepted fact that there could be possible ties between a politician and a businessman.

"Does the hospital administration revealed the fact that the last person entering her room was our big boss?"

"No, no, no. Of course, not."

I ended the call after a friendly chit-chat, but my mind was in turmoil. If Sean coordinated with an obstetrician, it meant that he knew where Calla was hiding. And why there have to be many people involved? The president could just reach out to either Sean or the chairman. Why does it have to be the two of them?

"Red?" A knock on the door followed by Sean's voice had me scrambling to my feet. "Are you alright?"

I opened the door with a wide grin on my face, making Sean sigh in relief.

"You make me worry. You're taking so long."

"I'm just in the bathroom and not on the battlefield," I giggled, amused at his exaggeration.

"That's exactly my point. You have gone far beyond the usual bathroom period."

"I'm sorry," I conceded. Chatting always makes anyone forget about time. And maybe, I just did not realize I had spent a long time chatting with the nurse.

I made a final agreement with Dr. Mimi and Dr. Leila the moment I joined them in the staff lounge. All we need to hire was a surgeon, so I left the choice to Dr. Mimi. I wanted to unload another burden because I was already set to the vacation Sean had set for the two of us.

Sean and I walked the two of them to the door, and before Dr. Mimi said her goodbye, she looked at Sean, and what she said moved me.

"Sir, please take care of my friend. If you are not serious about your relationship with her, stop it now before you break her heart. She's like a daughter to me."

"I do, and I am sincere towards her," Sean replied, tightening his arm around my shoulders.

"Dr. Mimi, thank you." I broke away from Sean's grip and hugged her.

"Darling, your happiness is mine."

I was happy that I chose them to be my partners in the work. Dr. Mimi's display of affection only proved that my decision is right.

I completed the selection of the nurses when my friends left. Sean also had something to complete at his office, so we separated ways. I scanned the profiles of those I interviewed, and later, I came up with three, including that one who kept on crying. The Human Resource Department would be the one to facilitate the start of their duty because Sean and I would be away for a while.

Early the following morning, Sean's private plane took us to somewhere far away. I did not ask where we were going; I just allowed him to decide for me. After a few hours, we landed on a hilltop. On one side, there was a sprawling cornfield, on the other side, a vast stretch of dense trees and greeneries.

Sean led me inside the only house I saw in the place. It was not huge nor glamorous. It was just a simple bungalow in contemporary design.

"Where are we?" I asked as he led me inside the bedroom. It looked like this house had only three bedrooms.

"In my farmhouse."

The blinding lights of the sun had me squinting as its harsh golden beam pierced through the room. The ceiling was high, and it made the room look spacious, even if it only contained a huge bed, built-in closets, and a bathroom.

Though the materials of the house looked expensive, I could still not figure out why Sean chose this as our vacation house. His name was broad and famous, and anyone who knew Mr. Grey would always associate him with elegant and luxurious properties.

"Red, this is the only place I call my own. All the rest is not mine," Sean said as he both sat down in the bed. He held my hand and put it on his lips for a long while.

"I don't even deserve you."

"What are you talking about?" I grabbed his hands and placed it around my neck. As his face came closer to mine, I ran my fingers around his lips, staring at it like those were chunks of chocolates.

Chapter 48

I got lost in my thoughts as I traced his lips with my finger. Rya Sevilla's lovely face flashed in my mind, and I started to imagine Sean's lips on hers. I snatched my hand back and looked away; the sense of humiliation started to rule my emotion. All of a sudden, I lost interest in listening to what he wanted to tell me.

"What is it?" Sean asked, and I could tell through that question that he understood that something was wrong.

"I-I suddenly feel dizzy," I lied. I couldn't tell him about my suspicion that Rya Sevilla was Calla, and that I knew that he hid her somewhere. The thought hurt me, and I couldn't possibly get intimate with someone who had started cheating on me at an early stage of a relationship he himself had wanted to establish.

A glint of worry spread across his face. He touched my head and my neck like I was a kid who was burning with fever. Without any word, he lifted me in his arms and placed me at the center of the bed. He then pulled up the sheets up to my shoulders then pulled another layer of curtains on the wall to veil the room from the penetrating sun rays.

"I'm sorry to wake you up early. Get some rest first. If you don't feel better by noontime, then let's go back to the city."

I did not reply because I felt guilty. I just closed my eyes, hoping I'd catch some sleep and feel emotionally better later. If only I were not curious about the mysteries implied my Sean's coming into my life, I would have left him before it would be too late for me to let go.

"Put this on," he said, and I felt his hand on my head, slipping a band around my head and a mask in my eyes, "so that you can rest well."

"Thank you," I whispered and pursed a smile, turning to my side afterward so that I could curl up and pull my knees upward in a fetal position. It earned me a kiss on my temple before I heard him closing the door.

Just as I was about to drift into the dreamland, Sean's phone vibrated on top of the bedside table. I smirked as I propped up to take a look, pressing an elbow on the bed.

This man is really careless. If he dares to hide something, he should supposedly be careful with his phone, or at least turn the notifications off on the locked screen.

I moved to the side of the bed then looked at the screen without having to touch it. The name Samsam was blinking in bold letters beside a green dial icon.

"Dr. Yrna's proxy sent me a box of folic acid. She said, that's all I need for my first trimester. Sean, I am already starting to feel nauseated. I hate this feeling. How's the business trip? I miss you already."

I felt a heavy lump running over my chest. I moved back to my bed and pulled on the covers up to my head. At that moment, I wanted to cry, but I took a deep breath and bit my lip. I should not get affected. The relationship was still too fresh to ruin me emotionally. Why not act as a good player of the game?

The door opened, and I heard Sean's footsteps coming to the bedside. A clattering of a cup against another object suggested that Sean must have placed something on the bedside table. I continued closing my eyes but tuned up my sense of hearing to be able to interpret his movements. The phone sounded again, and I knew it was a call. He picked it up right away because the sound immediately stopped.

"Hello," he said as the sound of his footsteps got a little farther away from me. "I got your message, and I'm glad you have the supplement. Whatever you need while I am away, just call Philip. You have his number. He will come anytime to attend to your needs."

Philip. The second name I'd put on my list. And the key to knowing more about this woman. Most of all, a confirmation that Sean was keeping her.

I stayed motionless while lying on my side, afraid that Sean would catch me prying over him. I shut my eyes off as I heard his footsteps coming towards me. Then the bed sank, and I felt his hand on my forehead again. Afraid that he'd know I was pretending I was asleep, I opened my eyes and pulled the cover down.

"How are you feeling now? Does it get worse?" Sean asked, holding my hand to help me get up.

"Hmnn, a little."

"Drink this tea. You will feel good after this." He picked up the glass kettle he brought and poured it on a cup. "This is a concoction from what we call as miracle leaves. I know medical people don't advise taking herbal teas, but my friend, who knows a lot about healing and cure, says this is good."

"Who's that friend, you said?" I asked to keep our conversation going because, honestly, I lost the interest to talk to him again.

"He was someone important before, but fate pulled him down, so he resumes to his traditional way of discovering nature."

Bringing the cup to my lips, I sipped a little to taste it. The lukewarm fluid and the fresh aroma of fresh leaves concealed the slightly bittersweet taste. I gulped the content until I consumed it all. It tasted good, so I reached out to the kettle to have another cup.

"Let me do it," Sean said, stopping my hand mid-air.

He placed a hand behind my head and pulled me closer to him. He then bent down and kissed my forehead before he lifted the kettle. My raging emotion started to calm down again at this simple, caring act.

"Go back to sleep while I prepare our breakfast," he said after I emptied the cup. He then lifted the cover, gesturing to let me lie down again.

"No, let me help."

"Not this morning. Maybe in the evening."

He bent down and placed an arm under my thighs and another on my back, setting me back to bed. Just as my head touched the pillow again, he lowered his head and gently sucked my lips. I raised my hands and locked it around his neck, responding to his moves. At that moment, I forgot all about my humiliation I felt earlier. I kissed him back until he pulled down the covers and let his hand creep under my shirt. My kisses went harder as his fingers found my tips, rolling it between his fingers.

I lifted my shirt, exposing myself, urging him to explore more. Unconsciously, our eyes locked, and I saw that burning desire in his eyes. He bent down and gave each of my nipples a gentle suck. I arched my body forward to give him more access, but he stood up and pulled my shirt down.

"Sorry for stealing your rest time," he said, giving me that dark gaze.

Damn him, I wanted more. Before I could reply, he stepped away and said,

"I'm going to see my friend who gave these leaves. Be right back."

Chapter 49

I opened my phone and checked the latest news. News about Bronc X virus infection was still the hottest, ruling the headlines for many days already. Its spread had become more extensive as it invaded more countries each day. All governments, local or nationwide, imposed several safety measures, including strict quarantines. Business operations, recreational and religious activities, and any gatherings were temporarily withheld to minimize the spread of infection.

Eric's name on the headline caught my attention, so I hurried to open the article about him. It stated that he went to Sama Island and organized a team to investigate the source of this infection. He gained praise and admiration from the netizens for his cooperation to prevent the widespread of the virus. However, an anonymous person uploaded a post and exposed his relationship with a woman from Sama Island. Of course, I knew it's Calla, but what sent goosebumps all over my body was the statement saying that this woman created a feud between him and the president.

I smirked at the thought of it, but I felt a sharp pain deep inside when I realized how great was his love for Calla. This feud would not have escalated if Eric didn't care so much about her. Just what did this woman possess to make two powerful men go crazy about her?

I got jealous of her. There was Eric, and now, it's Sean.

I went out of the room and headed to the kitchen. The place was neat and clean, and I wondered who took care of this house since Sean wouldn't come here often. The cooking appliance, as well as the dishes, were glossy and dustless. The scent of a cleaning agent lingered, telling me that someone had just cleaned up the room.

I jumped in my place when a woman in her fifties came in through the back door in the kitchen. She also stopped abruptly and raised her wrinkled hands to her chest when she saw me.

"Good noon, ma'am," she said, giving me a sheepish smile. "You must be Dr. Red, the wife of Sean."

I smiled at her, but my pulled-up brows told her I was wondering where she got the fake news.

"By the way, my husband and I are the caretakers of this house, as well as his farm. I come here every day to clean up. My name is Dina."

I nodded and smiled. "Where do you live, auntie?"

"Somewhere below, not far from here. I think Sean is there, talking to my husband."

"Have you talked to Sean already?" I asked. I didn't even see a house nearby or hear any person talking to Sean since we arrived.

"He informed us a few days ago that he is coming with his wife," she smiled, and her eyes shined with happiness. "I'm happy for him, you know. Finally, he gets himself a wife."

I laughed softly, and she also grinned. "Sean will not run out of women."

"Ever since he graduated from college, he was already looking for a woman he wants to be his wife. I'm glad he finally found you."

"Are you sure it's me?"

"Of course. Sean always tells us about his matters. He's a family to us, and I guess, we are also a family to him."

"But Sean has another girlfriend before me."

"We also know about her, but he wants you only for his wife. And she's not a girlfriend."

I scoffed as I heard her. How could he want me only when he is keeping Calla? Who is she in his life? A sexual partner? And that's why he doesn't want to make love with me because Calla does better in bed?

"By the way, auntie, where is that woman now?" I shrugged and spread my hands open, palms facing upward. "I'm just curious, auntie. This subject is something I don't want to ask him anymore."

She did not answer me right away. She walked instead to the kitchen bar and pulled the cord of the rice cooker out from the socket. She then turned around and faced me before she turned her back on me again. I watched her spreading a rag, wiping the rice starch that spilled on to the surface.

"He is keeping her because she is pregnant with their baby."

Now, this was a bomb, stripping me off from my energy. I pulled out a stool and sat down limply, staring at her back. All of a sudden, I had trouble controlling the rise and fall of my chest.

Auntie Dina suddenly gasped and covered her mouth, perhaps realizing that this had to be a secret. She turned around to look at my reaction, her color drained from her face, making her lips as pale as death.

My goodness, damn it! I have agreed to this relationship that also had no direction. My shoulders dropped, and I felt like crying.

"I-I'm sorry. What did I do?" She clasped her hands under her chin, turning around a couple of times to both watch me and hide her reaction.

"But Dr. Red, she isn't the woman he wants to marry. Sean just wants to protect her from stress due to her scandal."

I smiled, but I know my eyes betrayed me. "It's alright, auntie. I know about it. I just didn't want to ask Sean more about where he keeps her. It's a decision I shouldn't interfere. If I keep on asking, he would think that I don't trust him."

"Sean will surely get mad at me and throw us out of this place," she said sadly, drops of sweat ran down her temples. "Dr. Red, we have nowhere to go."

I watched her fallen and guilty demeanor. And I was afraid she'd get a heart attack.

"Don't worry. I won't tell but promise me something," I said, holding both of her shoulders. "Tell me everything you will know about her."

She smiled and sighed deeply, thanking me a couple of times before she left. According to her, she still had something to do at the farm.

I roamed after she left, my mind was on Calla and her pregnant state. Sooner or later, Sean would break off with me because of the baby. Anyway, they were both single, and the president was a married man. Now that the issues had spread to every corner of the country, the president would be too happy to break free from her. When finally he would give his statement to the public, he could always say that it's not him, but Sean. And that photo of them where they made out was only photo shopped, to destroy his image to the public.

Chapter 50

I wandered through the cornfields, still lost in my thought. The height of each corn was still on my shoulder level, so I could always look out ahead of me and appreciate the rolling greeneries below. I just followed the path winding down the hill until I reached a somewhat forest-like place. All I could see was the dense and huge trees, springing from the soil in congested rows. A wide plank hanging on a tree contained the words, "NO ENTRY".

I sat down on one of the boulders I saw at the side, taking in the refreshing sceneries around me. I lived in the city since birth, so I had never been in this kind of place. The gushing of fresh air, the drumming cicadas, and the chirping of the birds were like music in my ears. There were wild flowering plants all around, as well as tied goats, cows and carabaos along the way. I had decided then that if ever I would need peace of mind, I would come back to this beautiful haven.

I thought about my situation. Just a few minutes ago, auntie Dina told me that ever since Sean graduated from college, he was already looking for me. Maybe, I just got her wrong, and perhaps, she meant that Sean was already looking for someone to marry. It was not impossible since Sean grew up as a lonely child, having only her mother as a family. She was not even available for him all the time since their means of living took her time away.

I gathered back the incidences and the conversations that made up the mystery behind Sean's desire to connect with me. Why would he want me when I am only an orphan? If not for Eric, who rescued and provided me a luxurious lifestyle, I am just an ordinary individual.

"I love you...you are already in my mind for a long time."

"The moment I knew you were a doctor, the company bought the hospital you are serving."

"Because the unit you have purchased is under TAG Real Estate and Development." Not to mention that our units were interconnected.

I also recalled that when I applied as a company physician, he came to see me and offered me the job. The question about how did he know about my plans remained unanswered until this moment. While everything remained a mystery, I would act according to how Sean wanted it until I have the answers.

The purrs and growls of the cat jolted me out of my thoughts. I looked around to see where it came from, and in my very own eyes, I saw how the cat chased a wounded green bird! My heart went out to the bird, so I picked up a handful of stones and chased the cat. I watched as the bird tried to fly and hover over small branches, but the cat always had a way to scare the bird until it dropped to the ground.

I ran fast to catch the bird before the cat could make a meal out of her beautiful and colorful body. I did not know anymore how long had I ran, making my way out of those blocking and bending branches.

Finally, I was able to hit the cat, but the bird was already in her mouth. Probably due to the pain, the cat dropped the bird, and she ran away. I continued hurling stones at her out of pity for the wounded bird. I only stopped when she disappeared from my sight.

I picked up the bird in my hand and inspected her body. There was a bleeding wound near her right knee. I looked around, trying to look for the medicinal plants I still remembered during my class in Botany. However, there was none. I kept on walking and scanning the forest floor up to where my eyes could reach, but there was none.

I stopped and looked again at the bird in my hand. The beautiful but tiny creature was gasping for breath and was closing her eyes. My heart ached for her, and I didn't want her to die. I continued walking, believing that somewhere in this wood, I could find the medicinal plants I needed. I forgot that this place was dangerous and that there could be wild animals roaming around.

As I kept on walking deeper into the woods, I reached a place where there were lots of baskets in different sizes. I stopped and observed further. Aside from those baskets, there were nets of varying width and length. There were also jars and bowls hanging in the branches, and I noticed that in every kind, there were lots of them spreading in rows.

I walked still farther. Along my trudging path, there were also hundreds of sheets the size of 50 kg rice sacks, also spreading in rows. Then on the other side, there were pet houses on top of large, single sticks. Farther from where I stood, I also saw barrels sprawling out into the woods in different sizes.

I looked into each type of container. Some pots contained wax-like materials, whitish to greyish pastes, multi-colored kinds of paraffin-like materials, and different kinds of clear or sticky fluids. After peeping into those containers, I crouched on the ground and inspected those kinds of stuff in the sheets. Some looked like seeds; others looked like grains. But the rest of those items were all unfamiliar to me. They even looked weird.

I paused to think while I kept on glancing around. Someone is making this place a sanctuary or a laboratory! Who could he be?

I'd been walking for some distance already, but I saw no other house, except Sean's. Not even a hut that could belong to auntie Dina. Could he be Sean?

I went to the barrels; the little bird was still in my hand. My curiosity got the best of me. I didn't even get afraid. I realized I'm never scared of ghosts or people from other worlds. I was only afraid of someone who would break my heart again!

The barrel was so big, and I couldn't reach the opening. I looked around to find something I could step on. I then saw a log not far from me, so I lifted it with my two hands and placed it somewhere I could have a better angle to peep what's inside.

I opened the lid. Somehow, my heartbeats raced faster. Faster than the rhythmic drumming of the insects inside the wood. As soon as I lifted the lid, swarms of insects rushed out, making me freeze in my place. And oh, I forgot. I am also afraid of insect bites! Before another flock flew in my direction, I felt a tug on my shirt, pulling me backward.

I screamed. I was afraid I'd break my spine, more than my fear of insect bites. An angry voice then roared in my ear, and I stiffened.

"Do you wish to die?"

Chapter 51

"Do you wish to die?"

My feet tipped off from the log as a force tugged me backward. I screamed, thinking I wouldn't be able to walk anymore! But then, my back landed on a pair of strong arms halfway to the ground. My eyes dilated in fear, and the first thing I saw as I opened my eyes was the reddened face of a man in her forties.

The man put my feet down on the ground, and as soon as I gained my balance, he threw me a scowl, followed by a growl. His eyes almost popped out, and the veins in his temples bulged.

"Why are you wandering in this dangerous place? And entering in this restricted territory is even not enough for you. You dared to open the lid. Do you know what's inside?"

My knees were already trembling. I was both scared at this man's reaction and guilty for trespassing. I did not answer, but my eyes stayed on him, wanting to know who he was. The fact that he was furious that I touched that huge barrel was enough to tell me that he was related to this somewhat experimental area.

"Haven't you read the signage at the entrance? And if you ever noticed, the whole area is enclosed by a net. That only means you should not trespass. And dear, do you have any idea how many cobras and pythons are in this forest?"

The voice of the man was as loud as a rumble of thunder and his face as scary as a bolt of lightning that my lips just moved without a sound. I remembered the wounded bird in my hand, and I abruptly turned my head away from him. I scanned the ground to look for the pitiful creature, and before I could find her again, the man chuckled. I turned to look at him, and I saw him bending down in the ground, picking up that lovely creature that caused my wandering.

"Oh, darling, I'm sorry," I approached the man in big strides and grabbed the bird from his hand. "Can you please help me find the cure for his wound? I was searching for a medicinal plant, that's why I reach this place."

I knew I looked silly and stupid, but that was all I could do to divert his anger from me. I no longer looked at him and wait for his answer. I just rubbed the wounded leg of the bird gently and blew air to her wound, hoping to ease her pain away.

"You're willing to risk your life just because of the bird?" His voice was no longer angry, and I wondered how easily he calmed down.

"The cat chased her, so I ran after them. I no longer notice that I have come this far. By the way, how far am I? And if you don't mind, may I know who are you?"

"If I say I am an assassin, what will you do?" He smirked and stared at me, waiting for my answer.

"You're not. You wouldn't be that angry if you want to kill me. Who are you then? Are you the one who set up all these weird things here? And what are these for?"

He laughed softly and replied, "Darling, ask me one question at a time. And let me ask you a question first. Aren't you afraid that you may not be able to come out of this forest anymore because you have seen all these?"

"Sean is going to scour this whole area if ever I won't be home by dinner," I raised my chin high and looked at him. I wouldn't believe if he would say he didn't know Sean.

He laughed out loud and shook his head. "So, you're Sean's wife."

"Not yet." Why does he and auntie Dina say the same thing about me being Sean's wife?

"Oh, you're right, but you're going to be. There's only one woman that Sean wants to marry, and that is the only woman he will bring here."

"You're wrong. Sean is going to marry his first love from Sama island because they are having a baby soon." I pouted as the pain started to stab my heart again.

"He told you that?"

"Of course, he did not. Why would he? No thief would ever admit that he is one." I wondered why I poured out my heartaches to him. Just a few minutes ago, he roared at me like the lion I imagined hiding in this forest.

"You're hurting," he chuckled. "Darling, since you know about it already, please take my advice. That thing happened before you met him, and he couldn't just turn his back on the baby. But it doesn't mean he'll back out on his proposal to marry you."

I let out a mirthless laugh because I found this situation a joke. "What do I have that Calla doesn't? What do I have that he would choose me over her? Just because she is the president's woman? She can always end her sinful relationship with the president because he is a married man."

The man walked closer to me and rubbed my back. "Darling. Sean has all the reasons why he will choose you over her. I am just not in the position to speak on his behalf. Just wait. He takes you here, so it means he's going to confess everything."

"What difference is there if he had confessed it right away while we were in the city?"

"Because you can't run away from him. And by staying with you instead of her, he can prove that he wants only you."

I dropped myself on the ground and held the bird to my chest. I pulled up my knees and rested my forehead on top of it, hiding my face. The weight on my chest pressed so hard on my airways that I heaved it out and cried. I didn't know how long I stayed like until another voice jolted me out from my grief. It was Sean, and I was surprised at how he found me here.

"Red? My goodness, why are you here?"

I looked up and glanced at him, but I resumed my position, ashamed of my emotional outbreak. I regret that I opened up to that man because he might tell everything about what I said. That was supposed to be a secret since that was a part of my plan.

"She opened the barrel of the Bronca breeders. Sean, check her out!" I looked up and saw the man's worried eyes on Sean and me.

Sean immediately yanked me up and touched my face. Then his eyes widened in horror. I couldn't understand why.

"Patrick, look here. Fast! Isn't this a Bronca bite?" His voice was shrill and quivering.

"That must be a Bronca bite! I thought I had yanked her away from the flock." The man's voice was louder than a whisper, but I could tell that he, too, was scared.

"Why are they afraid? Am I going to die?"

Chapter 52

"What's wrong?" I squirmed free from Sean's grip on my face. The man's face was also close to me that I felt suffocated. "Am I going to die? What are those damn bugs out there?"

"And why in the hell you're here?" Sean snarled. I stiffened; never did I thought that this man whom I considered perfect was now barking at me. I felt humiliated, but when I looked up to him, I saw drops of tears running down his flushed cheek.

"Patrick, what are we going to do?" Sean growled again, and I noticed his quivering lips, which he concealed by brushing his hair away with his fingers a couple of times. I looked at the man, and I shuddered at his pale lips. Drops of sweats were trickling down his temples.

"Sean, I don't know. You know I have not discovered or developed an antidote yet."

From their tone, I realized I was in danger. What kind of bugs were there in those barrels that this man had to create an antidote? And why in the hell would he grow those kinds of bugs whose bites seemed fatal?

"Boil a needle or knife. I need it now!"

I slowly weakened just by watching them. They scared my soul out of me, clouding my mind. All of a sudden, my energy was leaving me that even the simple task of asking them, I couldn't do. I just watched them in horror, but I was too weak to object to what Sean was demanding. I didn't know if it was because I was just frightened, or it was already the venom spreading into my system.

Sean lifted me in his arms. I could feel him taking long strides towards somewhere I could not figure out. A few seconds after, Sean laid me on a bamboo bed under a tree. Out in the corner of my eye, I saw the man moving the blade of his knife in the midst of a flame.

"Red, please hold on. You're my life, you know that? All my adult life, I was already looking for you. And now that I find you..." mumbled Ryan in between his stifled cries.

I tried to reach out for his hand, but to my added shock, I had no strength anymore. I was just listening and observing them like I was under epidural anesthesia, only that my whole body could not move.

"Every day, I look at your name on my wallet, determined that someday I'm going to find you. You still have no face, but I already imagined you as a beautiful woman. I told myself that someday, I'd give Sir Thomas the reward of having you as my wife. And I can already imagine the smile on his face."

What is he talking about? Why is he looking for me? Dear skies, I was screaming deep inside to ask him all about it, but my mind has started to become groggy.

"Red, I already loved you long before I met you. It's because you were in my mind all day and night. And now, all I am waiting for is for you to fall in love with me and let go of Eric. Red, promise me, you will be my wife, and I will be your husband."

Dear saints, I wanted to hug him at that moment and tell him I did not love Eric anymore. All I felt for him was a heartache because of his betrayal and inability to give me his heart while I was still with him. And it hurt to know that I may have his body but not his heart and mind. All because of Calla.

"Here, Sean. What are you going to do with that?" The man whom Sean called Patrick handed me the cooled-down knife. As a doctor, I knew what Sean was doing. He had the blade disinfected and sterilized in the fire.

"I'm sorry, babe! This will be quick."

Sean placed me flat on the bamboo bed in a supine position. He then stood by the bedside and put one knee at my side. Gaining his most comfortable position, he bent down and aimed the knife at my face.

I closed my eyes. I understood what Sean was doing.

"Please, don't move, sweetheart. It hurt, but this is better than doing nothing."

I felt a cold sensation on my face, followed by the smell of alcohol. Then after a moment, I felt a sharp pain on my cheek, just on top of my cheekbone. I wanted to hold my breath and groan, but I no longer have any strength to do that. I also noticed that I started to feel drowsy.

Then, I felt Sean's mouth sucking on my wound, and I heard Patrick yelling at him. Judging from the pitch of his voice, I could tell that he was furious.

"What are you doing, Sean? Do you also want to die? Even if the venom's effect in your stomach is not as fast as the bite, it will still kill you gradually."

"I could not afford to live, Patrick, if I lose her. If she's not going to survive, at least I still have the time to finalize the papers. How can I face my old man?"

I heard Sean broke into a bitter wail as he lifted me back in his arms. He hugged me tight that and pressed his face on mine, drenching me with his tears.

"Please, don't leave me, dear."

"Sean, cheer up. Let's find ways. Nature has never lacked in supplying us it's healing power. I have here the roots and leaves of an anti-venom plant. What's important is that you have removed the venom that has lodged under her skin." I heard the voice of a woman, and even if I couldn't open my eyes, I knew she was auntie Dina.

So, Patrick is the husband of Dina, and the friend Sean wanted to talk to.

"But this stupid son of yours sucked and swallowed the blood!"

"Don't worsen the situation, Pat. Let's find ways to save them. I always believe in ancient medicine. If it's not that potent, how could any of us survive?"

"But this is Bronca bug, Dina, a cultured type of the Bronca species. I have not yet developed the antidote for this. Haven't you heard the news? After this bug has bitten the first victim in Sama island, no scientist has ever found the cure yet."

"It's true, auntie. The first man the Bronca bug had bitten died in a few hours, and all who touched him got the same symptoms, though not as fatal as the direct bite."

"Scientists have discovered that the bite comes from the Bronca bug. They call it the Bronc X virus. What they did not know is that the breed we have are the fatal ones because they are genetically-engineered. Once a person got bitten, the venom spreads throughout his body. This venom can be passed from one person to another through direct contact and droplets."

I shuddered at what I heard from them. In less than a day, I would then be a memory. Perhaps, due to panic, I lost my sense of hearing and lost my consciousness.

Chapter 53

SEAN'S POV

"Miss," I froze when I saw the person whom Red addressed. "Are you the third applicant?"

Calla frowned after she shifted her gaze between Red and me. I knew she felt bad when she saw Red and me kissing.

"You are in the wrong office," I said, but my heart was already in my throat. This woman was indeed hard to turn down. "The HR office is on the left-wing, and you are in the right."

I stepped back so Red couldn't see my facial expression. I placed Calla temporarily at the hotel while I was still thinking about what's the best thing to do. A few days later, I asked Philip to fetch her and bring her to my office. However, instead of bringing her directly there, Philip took her instead to the clinic. I almost choked to death when I saw her. I still didn't get the nerve to tell Red that Rya Sevilla was Calla.

I pretended to show Calla the way to the HR office. I was glad I succeeded, but Calla's face twisted like a crumpled paper. She never hesitated to show herself to Red, and I hated her for that. I never expected that she would be a headache.

I brought Calla to my room in Laminae, Inc. because I presumed that I could hide her well inside the roof of my company. Only administrators and staff were allowed to enter, and I made sure that the security measures were tight. Applicants underwent strict screening so as not to enable any spy to enter my territory.

"Whose room is this?" Calla asked as she looked around. She was standing at the doorway, inspecting every furniture and appliance with her eyes.

"Mine."

She looked at me and locked my gaze with hers. "Does it mean we will be living together?"

"I have another place to go to. This company is big."

"Sean, if only I could turn back the time, I would not have sent you away from my life."

I smiled. I just didn't know how to tell her that our meeting was an unexpected mistake. I may not have regretted that I met her, but I was already fated to marry Red.

"I'm sorry, but I am already committed to someone else."

Calla let out a sardonic laugh. "Sean, you are not married yet. You can still break free from her."

"And what about you? Can you let go of the president?" I challenged her.

She laughed softly, but her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She looked away and took a deep breath before facing me again.

"Sean, I am just a mistress. I can have him as long as our relationship does not leak yet. I know very well the role that I have accepted." She slowly walked towards me and flung her arms around my neck.

"Please, take me back," she begged, looking into my eyes. I looked away. The warnings of Cynthia always played at the back of mine every time she gazed at me.

"I'm sorry, Calla," I said softly and pulled out her arms from my neck. However, she was quick in sealing my lips, holding both sides of my head. Calla was tall, and even if I was taller than her, her high-heeled sandals leveled up her height to mine.

Sir Thomas' face flashed in my mind, and I felt guilty. I used some force to extricate her arms from me, but one of her hands cupped my manhood while she tried to resist. I held my breath. I will be lying again if I say I did not react; the memory of our lovemaking was too intense to forget. She took this moment as her chance to win over me. He stroked my pet, and it easily bulged out under my trouser. This was already the second time she made the same approach. The first time was in the hospital.

"You still want me, Sean. Why do you have to lie at yourself?" I was embarrassed because it appeared that I was not true to myself.

"You were right when you said that the only thing that bound us was only sex. And sex can be done without affection." My voice already cracked, showing my irritation.

I saw how Calla's face paled in embarrassment. And at that moment, I had seen her concealed attitude. She couldn't accept rejection, and she hated to be turned down. I had hurt her pride.

"What about the baby?"

"And what about it?" I challenged her. Though we had sexual encounters, she was also with the president.

"Sean, do you want me to spell it out for you? My baby is eight weeks old, exactly the time when we had sex every night for a week. Don't you think I could get pregnant?"

I smirked. I admit I got addicted to her and that I was dying to find her again when she disappeared. Now that I had found Red, I already completely forgot about her. My second reason aside from the president's request to keep her was that I wanted to supervise her pregnancy just because I had the feeling that the baby in her womb was mine.

"Calla, you were also with the president-" I couldn't finish it. I knew it was an insult to deny her pregnancy after the sexual bliss I had with her.

"Sean, if the president is around, I would not have sneaked around with you. I know you have an idea of how busy he is."

Calla was right. As the country's president, he didn't have the luxury of time.

"Calla, if ever the baby is mine, I wouldn't turn my back on him. I will support all his needs and will give him my name. But we will do the DNA test first. I would not hesitate if I didn't know about your relationship with someone else."

I left her gaping at what I said, and she stood pinned to the floor. I went into my room and took all my things. I didn't have much because I preferred going home. I also had a small, private room in my office, and some of my belongings were there. I had to hurry up; Red and I were going to have lunch together. I even did multi-tasking. While I was moving and arranging my things in her room, I was also preparing our lunch.

Drenched with my dripping sweat, I took off my long-sleeved shirt and retained my undershirt only. I knew I looked messy and sweaty already because I was catching up with time.

I tried to be quicker; it's almost lunchtime already. Thankfully, I had moved all my things to Red's room before the noon break. However, my eyes grew wide when I saw Red inside the room. I was not ready to meet her yet. I was too ashamed of my messy appearance.

"Where have you been?" Her eyes were boring deeply into my soul as if she knew that something happened in the other room. I felt guilty, and I couldn't look into her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I kept you waiting," I answered. How could I tell her that I got busy because I was keeping Calla in my room and that I have to move my things to her place?

Chapter 54

SEAN'S POV

I already foresaw that Calla's coming into my life again would create a problem between Red and me. Our relationship was still too young, and like a seedling, it didn't have any roots yet. I couldn't allow it to die; it's a commitment I couldn't afford to break.

I applied for Red an indefinite leave and brought her to the only place I called my own. All that I have was not mine, though I spent my sweat and blood for it. When the right time comes--when Red would be able to move on completely from Eric--I would tell her my secrets. Eric was a greedy businessman, always hungry for more power and wealth, so how could I throw out Sir Thomas' legacy to an unworthy person? Red was never business-minded, and she would never be able to handle such massive conglomerates.

We left early in the morning through the company's private plane. In just a few hours, my eyes were already feasting on the lovely greeneries of home. This place was the only inheritance my father left me. My portion was just a few square meters, but when I took over the business, I bought the whole district. Only a few people were living in this place because it's too far from the city. I had the residents relocated to the outskirts of this district, but I paid them and bought them portions of land for them to farm. That's how I met Dina and Patrick.

Red felt ill when we arrived, perhaps because we left so early. I hurried to make tea for her, and because of my worries, I forgot about my phone. When I entered the bedroom again, there were messages and missed calls from Calla. No matter how many times I told her to contact Philip instead of me, she still sent me those trivial messages. I was already almost tempted to block her, but that was not the proper way to solve a problem.

I got worried. I was afraid that Red would find out about my secret before I get the courage to tell her. Looking at her now as she curled under the covers, I could only pray that the ringing of the phone did not wake her up. Or, I'd be damned.

She moved, so I helped her sit up and let her drink the tea. I noticed that she did not look at me in the eyes. My heart pumped faster, and I started to get paranoid. I couldn't afford to lose her. I tried to talk to her like nothing happened, as if my heartbeats did not go wild. To my relief, she also responded as if she had no idea about the messages.

As I laid her down the bed again, I was not able to hold back my burning desire. I kissed her passionately until my hands wandered to her most intimate territories. She moaned to my every touch--even arching her back to give me more of herself.

Right there and then, I had wanted to strip her off from her dress and go beyond petting. I was also dying to do to her those things that Calla and I did. But I have learned my lessons already. I should allow affection to grow first before that because any sexual intimacies would lose its meaning in the absence of love. I did not want our sexual desire to rule this relationship.

I found it hard to stand up and leave, but I was glad I did. I covered Red with the sheets again and urged her to go back to sleep. I knew she felt bad, but one of these days, she would understand.

I told Patrick about my plans. He and his wife were the only people I trusted, even with my deepest secrets. We lost track of time while we talked because we were also discussing his experiments and discoveries. Most of all, about these Bronca bugs.

"Sean, I tried it on deers and other animals, and all of them died after a few hours."

I recalled that incident in Sama island. After the bug had bitten the first victim, he died after a few hours. Not just the first, but the second, third, and so forth.

"The right time has come that Ric Abella should pay for his sins. He destroyed, not just my family and me, but also my dreams and our future." I shuddered at his nth declaration.

"Patrick, this Bronc X virus outbreak is already affecting thousands of people across the globe. These people are innocent." I tried to talk to him out of his revenge.

"Correction. This is not a viral outbreak. It is the venom from Bronca bug that is transmitted from one person to another through droplets, direct contact, and blood or body fluids."

"Since I am in the city, what if I get the venom? Or, anybody from my staff?"

I began to get worried. Patrick was not the type to back out on what he had started. Unless the president gave in to his demand, he would not stop.

"Precautions, Sean. Masks, gloves, or handwashing. The absorption of the venom into the system is not as fast as when you inhale it through droplets. You can even wash your hands or take a bath before the venom seeps into the skin, except through wounds or cuts."

I smirked as the news this morning played in my mind. The newscaster was emphasizing the use of alcohol, sanitizing gels, or disinfectants. Until now that the Bronca craze had reached all throughout the globe, there were no sufficient studies, yet that would shed light on the nature and treatment of this so-called Bronc X virus. Only Patrick, Dina, Ric Abella, and I knew the real name of the illness. Bronc X venom intoxication.

As we were yet discussing, Patrick, scrambled to his feet when he glanced at the camera on the porch of his so-called house. It was not a house, but a cave structured into a residential unit.

"Sean, wait! Somebody is in the territory." He pulled out his gun and disappeared into his study area like a flash of lightning.

Chapter 55

SEAN'S POV

I followed Patrick to the woods when he did not come back after about fifteen minutes. I got worried that his enemies might have already tracked him in this remote part of the country. One of the reasons why I relocated the occupants of this place was because I did not want any trouble coming my way. I did not mind that I had no neighbors, as long as I had Patrick and his wife.

To my horror, I saw Red crouching on the ground with her head buried on top of her pulled-up knees. I got even more horrified when she looked up with bloodshot eyes. I was afraid that Patrick might have suspected her as a spy and hurt her.

"She opened the lid of the Bronca breeders," Patrick informed me, his voice quivering in fear.

"Sean, check her out."

I freaked out when I saw that reddish mark of a Bronca bite in her cheek. Just a while ago, Patrick even boasted about how lethal its bite was. He tried it on the animals, and all of them died after a few hours.

My emotion broke out like an unrestrainable water surge, and I cried out hard. I felt I am useless and inefficient for being unable to protect Red. I didn't only expose her from the illness; I also allowed her to get bitten by those cultured Bronca bugs.

"Why the hell are you here?" I could even still remember how I gritted my teeth in anger upon realizing that her life was then hanging in a thread.

As if responding negatively to my fears, Red suddenly limped in my arms. I raised my voice in a wail, telling her those assurances that I wanted only her to be my wife and no one else. I assured her I was willing to marry her as soon as she could move on from Eric. And I told her I wouldn't want to live anymore if she would leave me.

Time clicked by so slowly as I waited for Patrick to finish disinfecting his knife. I wanted to drain the blood that accumulated the bite area, hoping that a part of the venom would ooze out from the wound. As soon as I made a small slit in her cheek, I immediately suck the wound, thinking that my mouth had more power to extract the venom under her skin before it would seep into the bloodstream.

"Sean! Do you want to die?" roared Patrick as he saw me sucking the wound. He knew that what I did was fatal. Although the gastric juices would neutralize a part of the venom, a part of it would

still create irreversible damages to my system. It could even kill me just as those experimental deers Patrick tested.

I was still bawling my eyes out when Dina approached us, bringing a pitcher of concoction from what she called as miracle herbs.

"Wake her up, Sean! She needs to drink this. I still greatly believe in ancient medicine."

I cheered up a little as her words suggested a light of hope. However, no matter how I tried to wake Red up, she would no longer open her eyes.

Patrick snapped her fingers and bolted into their house. When he was back, he was already carrying a big box.

"Sean, I remember I still have medical kits here," Patrick said without looking up, his hands were busy pulling out packs of medical supplies. I held my breath, making a silent prayer that Patrick may be successful in whatever he was planning.

"Here!" Patrick's eyes lit up as he waved a pack containing a coiled rubber tube.

"This is called a nasogastric tube. We often used this in the lab before."

He searched for more packs until he asked me to prop up Red into a sitting position.

"I'm going to insert this tube through her nose then down to her stomach. In this way, we could give her this tea," Patrick said, glancing at the pitcher of tea that Dina brought. He then turned to Dina.

"Pour Sean a glass of tea. He is also in danger as much as his wife."

My heart jumped to hear the word 'wife' coming from Patrick's mouth. I reached out for the glass and finished the content in a continuous gulp.

Patrick then inserted the tube into Red's nose. Drops of tears escaped from my eyes as I imagined the discomfort, but Red seemed to cooperate. Patrick succeeded in one attempt.

Patrick was once the head scientist of the National Institute of Virology until Mr. Ric Abella became the president of the country. The people appointed him after they hailed him as a hero after saving the country from another case of a virus outbreak. He was able to formulate an antiviral formula that saved the country from further death tolls. Due to the president's plot to kill him, he ran away and hid in this wood.

I watched and admired Patrick silently at how he was still able to retain his skills after his fall. Due to anxiety, he forgot everything about medical stuff for many years until he started growing bugs

again. I thought it was just for his pastime activity, or he was formulating drugs out of those Bronca bugs. But to my horror, he grew those bugs fo his revenge.

"Sean, admit her to a hospital. She needs to be hydrated, and if she wouldn't wake up after many hours, she has to undergo emergency hemodialysis to cleanse out her blood."

I called up Philip to send the plane back to my place. And in a few hours, Red was admitted to the Intensive Care and Isolation Unit.

I waited outside and peeped on the glass window while the medical team got busy. I saw the doctors and nurses running around and pulling out different kinds of apparatus. Some of them attended to her, hooking an intravenous line. Someone else hooked her to the electrodes of a cardiac monitor, and another one to a nasal cannula.

All of a sudden, the monitor beeped, and red numbers blinked. My eyes flew wide as I read it, and I held my breath.

60/40 mmHg 148 bpm

Chapter 56

Sean's POV

I am not a medical professional, but I could tell that her blood pressure was dropping. I got scared, and my knees were losing strength. The beeping of the monitor sounded like a call to the grave, and it drove me crazy.

I looked at the doctor and saw he spoke to the nurses. I could not hear anything, but I knew he was giving orders. The nurses moved like bolts of lightning. My eyes couldn't follow them all. One of them picked up a vial, aspirated the content out of it through a syringe, then infused it in the bigger bottle. I guessed it was the medicine to address her dropping blood pressure. Soon, I saw it hanging on an IV stand, followed by other bottles.

Someone approached me and took Red's history. Looking at the pin on her left upper chest, I understood that she was a post-graduate intern. I may not have known Red too well, but I was able to answer all her questions because I had Red's personal data even before I met her. The intern asked what happened, and I told her a bug bit her.

"What kind of a bug? And where does it happen?"

"Red and I were on my farm when she got bitten by a Bronca bug," I calmly replied, but her eyes got wide. She raised the mask from her chin to cover her nose and mouth.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but perhaps you are aware that the Bronca bugs are the host of these Bronc X viruses."

"I heard so," I lied, and I was dying deep inside to tell her that its not a virus but the venom of the cultured Bronca bug.

"For a while," she said and disappeared before I took my next breath. She was back anyway after a couple of minutes, but this time, she was already wearing a protective gown, a mask, and a face shield. She also handed another set for me, and I obediently complied. I didn't want them to get infected, either.

She asked me to follow her, and I did. She opened the next door to the ICU, where the medical team attended Red. I gazed at the glass window where the curtains obstructed my sight from Red. The intern must have understood me because he moved the curtains aside.

"Sir, you also need to be observed and isolated because you were with her."

I nodded. "As long as you place me here where I can watch my patient, I'll be alright."

"Okay. I'll inform the staff of your request."

She asked me further about the bug and about what did I do after I knew that Red was bitten "I sterilized a knife, cut her bite area, then squeezed the venom out of her skin."

"Where did you get that idea?" Her eyes were as wide as the incandescent lamp above us.

"When I was young, my parents did that to me whenever I got bites." Of course, I was careful not to mention Patrick's name.

My eyes did not leave the monitor, and after a while, I took a deep breath and dropped a sigh when I saw that her blood pressure climbed higher and stayed at 90/60 mmHg. My anxiety did not end there, yet because the attending physician came in to see me. His domineering aura was frightening, and it gave me the impression that he would not be saying something heartwarming.

"Sir, I will refer Dr. Red to a nephrologist. The toxin should be removed from her system. After a few hemodialysis sessions, I am hoping she'll be able to recover.

Though Patrick had already informed me about this, goosebumps still crept all over me, and my lips quivered. I have seen in movies how awful those patients' blood looked on pipes that are connecting to a machine and a catheter in their necks.

Hemodialysis is a medical procedure to remove fluids and waste products from the blood. The patient is hooked to a dialysis machine and a special filter that cleans the blood before it is returned to the body. To do it, the patient undergoes a minor surgical procedure to insert a catheter at the side of the neck called an intrajugular catheter, or in the arm called an arteriovenous fistula. These are the access used in connecting the patient to the dialysis machine.

"Whatever is best for her," I gave out a hoarse voice, reflecting the anguish I felt inside.

I was no longer allowed to follow her in the operating room and in the Hemodialysis Unit since I was isolated. They also aspirated samples of blood from me to test for Bronc X virus infection. Just before the Hemodialysis staff wheeled Red back to the isolation unit, the laboratory unit released my results.

Negative. And I wondered if it was because of Dina's concoction. What I noticed while I was drinking it was that I had frequent trips to the bathroom. I sighed and whispered a silent prayer that may this concoction works.

Since I was not allowed to enter Red's unit anymore, I send her notes and cards. I did not send her some get-well-soon letters but simple words that tell how much I care for her. I also sent pictures of her wedding gown and the places I wanted us to go during our honeymoon—most of all, pictures of her grandfather, Sir Thomas Grey.

I went to see the chairman after I got discharged from the hospital. His greyish hair was what I glimpsed first while I was still on the doorframe. A lump formed in my throat as I saw Sir Thomas in that greyish hair on top of his wrinkled forehead. I wanted to cry and talked to him like I was talking to my old man. I wanted to apologize because I failed him.

"Chairman, after the turnover ceremony, please give these papers to Dr. Red."

He looked at the papers, then scanned all the pages. After a long while, he leaned his back at the cushion of his backrest and gazed at me with furrowed brows.

"Mr. Sean Grey, why?"

Chapter 57

SEAN'S POV

"My beloved countrymen, this is my promise to all of you. I will do all it takes to stop the spread of this deadly Bronc X virus. I am commissioning a group of experts to conduct studies and research about the nature of this virus so that they can formulate drugs that would stop this malady. It had already affected, not just our daily activities, but also the country's economy. As of now, the best solution to this problem is to implement a strict quarantine to every district, city, municipality, and region.

"With my capacity as a scientist and founder of the drug that ended the plague in the past, I will impart all my knowledge to the research teams. As soon as possible, we should be able to come up with the best solution to our current suffering."

The crowd gave a continuous round of applause. Bright flashes of the sea of cameras glittered inside the huge arena.

"God bless the president!"

"We love you, dear president."

"We pledge our full support to your administration."

"We don't believe the scandals. You are so righteous, dear president."

Shouts of admiration for the president rumbled in the arena, and the walls of the halls vibrated against the deafening rounds of applause. The smiles of the president were endless, the twists of his lips stretched out to his ears. He looked handsome and dignified, and his facial features that were too young for his age glowed. His image reflected on the massive screens on his back and every corner of the hall.

All of a sudden, the camera stayed on his lapel flower, zooming it out. Tiny bugs came underneath and crawled fast to his sides. The president kept smiling as if he was unaware of what was happening. Soon, the insects spread its tiny wings and flew to the men standing beside him.

The people screamed as those men lost their strengths and fell on the floor after a couple of minutes. Soon, everything in the arena turned into chaos.

I watched in horror as I watched the live streaming of the president's visit to our city. People were running all around, and reporters flocked to the stage. Soon, the medics arrived, and police controlled the crowd.

I called Patrick right away. "Is this your doing?"

"What do you think?" came Patrick's amused tone, followed by a burst of loud laughter.

I listened until he stopped. "Patrick, this is not fun anymore. What about those innocent lives? Revenge will do you no good in the end."

"Ric knows how to stop me."

I shook my head, but then he added, "Somebody else does it for me."

I stared at the phone, astounded by his revelation. "Patrick, tell me who."

"Sure, but not now."

I hurried to call the heads of all the departments of my business establishments, and we did a video conference.

"Tell everyone to wear masks and gloves. And be careful in disposing of those items because the venom of the Bronca bug can get into your system through open wounds, oral and nasal mucosa, your eyes, and through droplet inhalation."

"Sir, what are you talking about?" Many of them asked simultaneously, starting to get alarmed at my worried-and-scared demeanor.

"If you have watched the president's speech, you will understand. Their so-called Bronc X virus has already invaded our city. Report anyone who does not feel well, and we'll have them checked as soon as possible."

I left the conference while they were still exchanging their outburst of opinions. I drove to Laminae to talk personally to Dr. Mimi, and the rest of the staff that Red chose.

Once they gathered, I informed them about Red's condition and about what happened to the president's speech, although some of them may have already heard about it.

The doctors gasped, and immediately, Dr. Mimi cried. "No, no. Not my Red."

Her voice went louder, and her vibrating tone brought chills to our spines, sending everyone else to tears.

I could understand if these doctors cried hard, but what surprised me was how the new staff nurse by the name of Hazel Villanueva reacted. We looked at each other as she sobbed loudly, wondering at her behavior. I came to her and placed an arm around her shoulders.

"Miss Hazel, take it easy. She's getting well soon."

She sobbed harder and covered her face with her hands. "Dr. Red is so good to me, sir. You have no idea about how I felt understood when she listened to my story."

I gathered my brows and tried to recall what Red said about her. Then, I remembered. She was the nurse who kept on crying during the interview. I then got curious, wondering what kind of life she had gone through.

While Hazel was still sobbing, we discussed how we would implement the precautionary measures to prevent the spread of inspection. Those whose work could be brought at home would be allowed to do so. Those who were willing to stay, a place for them would be provided, but those who were not were advised to take a work leave. We also talked about the place we would allocate for those who would be quarantined.

"Sir, there is no announcement from the government yet. Why are we going to do this earlier?"

"Because I know the nature of these Bronca bugs."

While I was yet talking, all their eyes shifted to the screen in the wall. I also turned to look at it. It was a news break, and the reporter was delivering a report about what happened earlier during the president's speech.

"This incident is no longer new," the reporter in his business suit said. "When the virus outbreak was first reported, someone uploaded a video of our president delivering his speech during the inauguration of one of the Martela's hotels and beach resorts in Sama Islands."

Right after she said it, a video about the said event floated on the screen. President Ric Abella was all smiles after his speech. He shook hands with the VIP's around him, but while they were yet exchanging greetings and salutations, tiny bugs crawled out from his lapel flower. It also flew and bit the men around them."

Stopping the video, the reporter continued. "As to how this incident was kept from the media, no one knows. This is only reuploaded from an anonymous netizen when the incident happened again earlier today. As expected, the Bronc X virus infection is going to increase in the city. Investigations are already conducted..."

I turned off the TV to get back their attention. "Ladies, I am expecting that you will do your duties on behalf of Dr. Red. And once she takes over, I'm also asking for your full cooperation."

I dismissed them after that because I still had many things to attend. Then, her OB-Gyne friend asked me to talk to her privately.

"Red already knows about your betrayal. I hope you were able to explain your side before this happened."

I felt my world stopped spinning for a moment.

Chapter 58

SEAN'S POV

"I don't get what you mean," I replied with narrowed gaze-- trying to wear a nonchalant expression.

"I am covering for Dr. Yrna's patients, including Miss Sevilla."

I felt a pool of blood rushing into my head, sending heat into my face. If I would look at myself in the mirror, I knew I would see a beet-red face, along with the sharp darts of my eyes. I hate myself for being too careless. Why didn't I think of warning Dr. Yrna to keep this matter with Calla between ourselves? Of all obstetricians out there, why did she chose Red's close friend to cover for her during her absence?

"I am never betraying her. Not all things you want to hide means betrayal," I answered, giving her a sharp gaze. "I have reasons."

"There should be open communication. I'm sure she would understand. Why not make her a part of the plan?"

Why not make her a part of the plan, instead of hurting her with my lies? Leila made sense, and I felt guilty.

"How much did Red tell you about her?" I did not mention her name because I still held hope that Red hadn't discovered yet that Rya is Calla.

Leila smirked the moment I gave in. Despite the name I had created myself as Sean Grey, she got the strong nerve to defy me that way. I was not asking nor expecting anyone to treat me with respect despite my mistakes, but I got surprised that I did not feel comfortable. For many years, my voice had become a law wherever I was, and I was used to that.

On the other hand, I admired her because she fought for her friend.

"She did not tell us anything, but her reaction did. Who wouldn't be surprised when the woman who made a scene at the ER in your presence is someone you keep? Are you the father?"

What a tongue!

I pulled a deep sigh and conceded. "Since you brought it up, I may as well tell you the truth. President Ric Abella asked me a favor to hide and protect her. And since he got into trouble these days, he also asked me to find an obstetrician for her. Dr. Yrna handled her while she was admitted, so I let her continue the care."

Leila spread her palms out. I knew she was half-convinced. My thoughts went on Calla and the way she sent those messages, spoke of her intentions behind. I then knew why Leila acted that way. And I started to regret the day I met her.

"If you say so," Leila smirked, then excused herself.

I proceeded to my office afterward. I hang back my head on the top of my chair and thought about the events that happened lately. The president's image then floated in my mind, and I started to recall everything that Patrick told me about him...

"Patrick, my father wants me to run for a seat in the senate this time," Ric said while they were both placing an agar to hot liquid media to make some gel for culturing bacteria.

"That is an opportunity you have to grab," encouraged Patrick, giving him a side glance.

"You know I don't like it even as I started as a councilor."

"Because your father sees great potential in you. And you know that while you are still under his wings, you can make a name in the industry. Make the most of it, and strike while the iron is hot."

"If only I have to choose, I would always want to stay in the lab and make myself a name here," answered Patrick while viewing a bacteria on agar in a Petri dish.

Patrick chuckled, and his eyes lit up. "Come over here."

Ric followed Patrick into his work area, and once they were there, Patrick showed him a table filled with different kinds of plates, tubes, and other laboratory apparatus.

"I got it, Ric!" he laughed, showing him the sensitivity result of the most virulent organism that scared the country at that time, causing hundreds of mortalities.

Ric's eyes widened, followed by a short gasp. He, too, had gone frantic in formulating the drug that would be the answer to the current epidemic. His discovery would have paved the success for his candidacy. He would then be able to prove his worth in his father's eyes, being the incumbent president of the country. Sadly, his best friend took away the crown.

"A few more trials..." he raised a fist in the air and chuckled again. Little did he know that his confession dragged him to his fall.

One day, according to Patrick, he woke up with a burning fever. Only to know that he got infected with the virus. In each passing day, Patrick's condition deteriorated until he lost the faith to survive. Ric encouraged him each day to hold on and keep the faith. He stayed with him at the

hospital and cared for him, even volunteering to change his diapers during those days that he was intubated. Before he went into a coma, Ric's thoughtfulness filled him a sense of deep gratitude.

One day, after his morning care, Patrick held Ric's hand. Patrick then opened his hand and pointed the tip of his point finger in the middle of his palm.

"You want to write something?" Ric asked, and Patrick nodded.

Ric pulled out a chart board that the nurses let him use to communicate with them.

"Please do me a favor. I need a lawyer," Patrick wrote on the board.

The light of victory that Ric was working out, shone in his eyes. He called a lawyer, and in less than an hour, the lawyer came.

"Patrick, here's the lawyer you asked for." He motioned for the lawyer to sit down beside the bed, then stood up to leave.

"I'll go out for a while so that you can have privacy."

Patrick waved a hand and shook his head, gesturing for Ric to sit down beside the lawyer. He then reached out for the board and began scribbling.

"I am giving Ric the consent to continue the research for me..."

Chapter 59

SEAN'S POV

I remembered the rapid race up my heartbeats as I listened to Patrick. My mind was screaming its protest; I could already guess what's next. I stared at him, sparing a blink. Perhaps, Patrick had read my mind because his lips twisted into a sad smile, its corner etched with pain.

"I was already a step away from success, but he took it all and claimed the full victory."

There was a time when the people already cried from helplessness and despair because of the virus outbreak that caused thousands of mortalities. Just when the leaders of the country almost gave up hope, Ric Abella announced his breakthrough regarding the discovery of a particular drug that saved the country from the brink of death.

"Not even one of his colleagues stopped him from doing that?" I stared at him in disbelief.

"It was a secret that only him and I knew." I already expected this, but the next thing he told me had my blood rushed to my head.

"When I woke up from my coma state after a few days, I pretended I was still unconscious. He ordered someone to take me somewhere..."

_____ One summer, I went home to Kalasag, my father's hometown. I already bought the whole district at that time, but there were still some people living in my territory. An hour had not passed yet since I arrived when I saw my neighbors flocking at the porch of my house.

"Sir, a chopper landed on a clearing a while ago. Because of our curiosity, we flocked to the place to see what's going on. The chopper flew right away, and to our shock, it left behind a sick man. Please come and take a look at him!"

I strode fast towards the clearing, and there I saw a man lying down on the wet grass. He was too weak and barely able to open his eyes. I tried to wake him up, but he only responded with a groan. I could tell through his slow and shallow breathing that this man was already dying, so I did not waste time. I had him lifted into my plane. "Is there anyone among you whom I can pay to care for him at the hospital?" I said, running my eyes through the startled crowd.

"Dina, how about you?" A middle-aged woman nudged a lady beside her, drawing all our attention.

The lady's face turned white as I looked at her, feeling awkward at everyone's attention, especially mine. I knew later that she was an orphan, but her relatives supported her studies until she took a

vocational course in a state college. Life was difficult for her since every day, she had to walk several kilometers to reach the school.

"Miss, are you willing? I can't allow anyone to die in my territory. Whoever he may be, if he can only speak, I am sure he will ask for our help. You will be caring for him until he gets well, and I will be paying you well."

As soon as Dina agreed, we flew back to the city. I had him treated confidentially, using a false name to conceal his identity. We also made everyone believe that he was married, and Dina was his wife.

"Doc, what happened to him? Is he also infected with the virus?" I asked, thinking that nothing else could make him look like that, but the virus that currently plagued the country. As I stared at him during our flight, I could tell that he was yet in his late thirties.

"No, we found poison in his blood." An idea formed in my mind--the president plotted to kill him. His death would eliminate the truth behind his achievement. If not him, it could be his father.

It took several days for Patrick to fight for his life in the ICU until I brought him back to my house in Kalasag. Dina was still the one caring for him until he could do things on his own. When he was already able to recall everything that happened to him, he asked me to build him a shelter in the forest. Little did I know that somewhere in the area, there was a cave.

"Why won't we build you a house instead?" I asked when Patrick suggested to fix the cave and had it build like a house, instead.

"Aside from the fact that I am hiding, I would also like to study nature."

Since he told me that he was a scientist, how could I argue with such people having explorative and curious minds like him? Of course, I did not believe at first, but since I could see the wisdom in everything he said, aside from many things in the lab, I did not argue anymore. I hired carpenters and masons, and in less than a month, they already improvised a shelter inside the cave.

When I returned the next few months, I got surprised at the many things he did in certain areas inside the forest. And I could see that he was turning the place into his natural laboratory. However, what surprised me the most was the news that he and Dina were already living together as a couple.

At that time, the country had returned to its normal pace, but the cry of the people was to elect Ric Abella as the president.

I updated Patrick about the recent events of the country, even showing him photos of President Abella's marriage to a beautiful colleague in the lab where he previously worked. To my surprise, he suddenly burst out into mirthless laughter.

"Wow. It's still not enough for him to steal my achievements, poison me to death, and throw my almost lifeless body to the outskirts of a forest. He also took to himself the woman I have loved for years." He tapped his fingers on the table, staring blankly at a distance. Even if he wouldn't admit it, I knew he was hurting.

The ringing of my phone jolted me back to reality. I stretched my arms and sat up straight, picking up the phone. I gasped and held my breath as I saw the name of my caller. If only I could avoid him, I would--in the name of my sympathy over what Patrick had gone through because of him. "I want to see my woman," President Ric Abella said directly, not bothering to say even a simple greeting.

I got tongue-tied for a moment, not knowing what was right anymore. Should I hear Calla's plea to help her break free from this arrogant and married man's claws? Or, should I tell him the truth that I was keeping her somewhere?

Before I could make an answer, the door to my office opened. The sight of Calla on the doorway then seemed to make the matter worse.

Chapter 60

SEAN'S POV

"Calla, haven't I told you many times to stay only at your room?" I said in a frustrated tone, right after the call from the president got fortunately disconnected. I drew in a deep breath, but another headache had then showed up at the doorway.

"Sean, I'm bored to death! Can you at least give me a job?" She walked towards my desk and sat across me, throwing her other leg above the other before she pulled herself upright.

"Calla, sooner or later, your face will appear on the screen. I don't want any trouble with the president, nor with Red."

"Red, again! Haven't you any female employees? Why can't I be one of them?"

I sighed, regretting the day I accepted the president's request to help her hide from the public and accepting Calla's plea to escape from the president.

"How about going to other countries? I can help you with that."

"Sean, I'm pregnant. It's difficult to live on my own," she protested, giving me a frustrated look.

"And Sean, have you forgotten that this baby is yours? And you're sending us away? I know you don't want this child, but he or she is still your flesh and blood."

I stood up from my table, suddenly feeling suffocated by her reminder. If I hadn't given in to lust, this would not have happened. Yet, I couldn't bear the constant reminder at the back of my mind that I should not turn my back on my child. Even if I still have to confirm this matter through a DNA paternity test later.

Calla stood up from her seat and approached me, pulling my head with her two hands for a sudden kiss. I wriggled to break free because I was already starting to dislike her. I believed a relationship should not be forced just because of an unexpected child. I could still give my full support even if I weren't the husband of her/his mother.

"If you keep on doing this, I would tell your boyfriend that you are here. And I'm not kidding, Calla. Aside from not wanting to cheat on Red, we are getting married very soon. And as I said, if that baby is mine, I will not turn my back on him." I said it because a great part of me still hoped that the baby was not mine only that I had to cling to the possibility, no matter how vague.

"You're depriving your child-" I cut Calla off by showing her my phone that the president was calling again. I then pressed the loudspeaker mode so that Calla could hear.

"Sir, I helped her escape and took her to a hotel, but then someone informed me later that she escaped..." I swallowed hard, wishing that he would accept my lies.

He was silent for a while, and my heart throbbed harder. I felt like a sports champion when finally he spoke again. "Thanks. I'll ask someone to investigate."

I then took a slow and deep breath, relieved that he didn't make it a big deal. My eyes then rested unconsciously on Calla's scared face.

What kind of relationship does she have with him? That frightened expression was not love at all!

"Sean, you're employers are wearing masks..."

"Alright," I gave up because I couldn't bear to send her away because of the baby. And she was right; she could conceal her identity by wearing a mask.

I called up the finance head and instructed her to train Calla on the job I wanted to assign to her. He came a few minutes later and took her to his office, so I was finally able to break free from her. I turned on the news program, curious to know about the impact this time on those videos against the president.

"The people are outraged upon knowing that the person behind this Bronc X virus outbreak is the president himself. Whatever is his motive for endangering thousands of people worldwide, remained unanswered as of this moment. The people are now demanding him to explain his side."

Soon, more videos appeared on the screen, showing the same manner the Bronca bugs crawled from the president's lapel flower. It was then clear to the people's eyes that President Ric Abella was the one spreading the bugs throughout all the places where he had speaking engagements.

Sean then browsed through the net and found out that the people had divided opinions on him. Some called him a psychopath, some blamed it to his desire to make breakthroughs in the world of sciences, and some thought that, perhaps, it was part of a frame-up.

Curious about Patrick's reaction to this, he picked up his phone and called him.

"Wait and see, Sean. Tomorrow, the people will see the proof of his crimes."

"Patrick, you're killing innocent people. And what if one of them is Red? You know that she is still fighting for her life in the ICU. What if she can't make it? What about me?"

Silence followed for a few seconds.

"Patrick?" I just wanted to be sure he was still doing the antidote research, and not on revenge alone.

"Sean, don't worry. I'm doubling my effort to find the antidote."

"How much already is the progress?"

"80%."

Sean drove back to the hospital with a troubled mind. Someone must be helping Patrick in his revenge. Ever since he picked him up in the clearing several years ago, he no longer left the woods. Who picked that cultured bugs in the wood and put it in the lapel flower of President Abella? Who uploaded that video on social media? Who monitored his speaking engagements and gathered the data?

Just as Sean parked his car at the hospital, he saw a familiar car. He waited until the person inside the car would step out. Just as he expected, Philip emerged from the door. When Philip disappeared from his sight, he followed him behind, hiding behind the corners of the corridors. He saw her turned to the right, then opened the door of the ICU!

Chapter 61

SEAN'S POV

"Philip?"

I called his name after some moments of observing him. There was a narrow slit between two stretches of curtains covering the ICU glass windows. Only one was allowed to visit each time, so I had to wait outside. I just couldn't barge in even if I wanted to; I was afraid I was just paranoid. I trusted Philip ever since I started taking over the business, and he never once failed me except for occasional, wrong information.

His eyes grow wide for a mere second, expressing his surprise, but he was quick to get back to wearing his usual, calm demeanor behind the mask he wore.

"Sir, I'm sorry for Dr. Red," he commented, turning a little to glance at Red.

I nodded, then asked, "Why are you here, Philip? You should be resting by now."

It was a long day for the two of us since I had him do many things regarding the transfer of business ownership under the TAG Group of Companies to Red's name.

"I come to see you," he replied, repeating the first syllable of his statement.

I was already used to the frequent updates of his activities, including his location now and then. What made me wonder was his unannounced visit to the hospital without telling me first. Perhaps because this latest incident between Patrick and the president reminded me that their relationship started as best of friends, I had realized that it is indeed difficult to trust anyone.

"I just think that maybe, you need someone to talk to." He glanced at Red again, and I understood that he was worried about me.

Why am I so paranoid lately? This man only came here to show moral and emotional support. He is Philip, after all, the only man I trusted so much about my secrets.

The simple act of thoughtfulness had my heart melted in so much appreciation. In my world, where smiles were fake, and sympathies were shallow, Philip's loyalty was something I should treasure forever.

"You're right, Philip," I started to confess. "The Bronca bug that bit Red came from a rare specie. Though there is only about 20 % mortality rate among those who have venom transmission through droplet inhalation or open wound, Red's case was a direct bite."

Philip stared at me with a confused look. "Does this Bronc X virus means something else? That it is not an infection coming from a virus that lives inside a Bronca bug?"

"Yes, it is the venom of a Bronca bug."

"How do you know?"

I got lost for words for a moment. Yet, upon thinking that Philip had been with me for a long time and that he had shown me his loyalty for countless times, I decided that he was worth my full trust.

"A friend of mine is the one who grows the bugs. I don't know how he does it, but this bug is a product of several specie-crossbreeding."

He then stared at me, but his mind seemed to be somewhere far away. Then, after he got over from his state of astonishment, he looked at me and started asking questions.

"Why does the Department of Health says it's a Bronc X virus infection?"

"Because the first batch of Bronca bugs recovered in those areas where the president had his speaking engagements, consisted of different species. Each of those bugs had specific viruses grown inside their bodies. As of now, they can't tell what type of species bit a particular group, and what type of viruses were in them. That's why the researchers named it the Bronc X virus. X because it's still unknown."

"So do you mean the later batches had venoms, instead of viruses?"

"Yes. He intends to mislead those great minds."

"You're friend must be a genius."

"He is."

Then, I told him everything I knew after I invited him to sit down and chat with me in the ICU lounge. After having poured out those huge secrets that bothered me for a long time, I felt relieved. It was indeed good to have someone to share your opinion and ideas with.

"What about that venom you have ingested after sucking Dr. Red's wound?"

I chuckled, shaking my head afterward. "Patrick said those experimental animals died around a month after he placed the venom in their mouths. I don't know how it works, but I'm still alive and kicking as you see."

"It's merely a day ago, sir. What did you do?"

"I underwent treatment together with Red, and all my tests are negative."

"Negative because the later Bronca breeds have no viruses inside their body, as you said. And blood cultures take days before organisms grow."

"At least they can identify the venom inside my body."

"They are testing for viruses, sir, not the venom."

I stared at Philip for a while. What he said indeed made sense.

I stood up and went inside the ICU when the nurses peeped at the door. I guessed it was already time to change her diapers. I had already instructed the ICU nurses to give that responsibility to me. She is my soon-to-be wife, so I could not entrust her personal care and hygiene to others even if I was paying them. And even if it's part of their job.

Red still looked beautiful even if she looked lifeless beneath those tubes. Everywhere around her were tubes and catheters, and my heart ached for her. For three years under her residency, she treated hundreds of patients, and now when her term had just ended, she had gone under the knife herself.

I pulled a chair by her side, then reached out for her hand as soon as I settled comfortably. I held it tightly for a while before I brought it to my lips.

"Red," I began to whisper, "please hang on. There are so many things you need to know. The old man I adore so much is none other than your grandfather. He left his wealth to me and adopted me as his son. Yet, the moment he knew about your existence, he asked me to marry you."

I did not realize that my tears were already streaming down my face as I recalled the difficulties I had gone through as a child. I remembered all our financial struggles until Sir Thomas brought my mom and me to his home.

"He showered me the kind of love he should have given you, but he was not able to make it until I could find you. When he asked me to marry you, it was because he didn't want to take back everything he had entrusted me. But I am not greedy, Red. Everything he had is yours, and I am already giving it back to you. His love and kindness to us were enough for me. And I could live happily at the thought of it until I die."

I stopped mumbling words for a while because, all of a sudden, I felt a sense of deep loneliness. As if I was going somewhere far away, far from anyone I knew. I missed mom, and I longed for the presence of my old man.

"Get well soon, dear, and I promise I will no longer force you into the marriage if you are not happy with me. You can always hire someone capable to help you in running your family's legacy."

Chapter 62

RED'S POV

I dreamed I was standing on a mountain top, looking down at the cliff below. The stiff breeze coming from the sea that sprawled beyond the cliff ruffled my hair into a mess. Instead of listening to the chirping of the birds, the gushes of the wind, and the rustling of the leaves, I heard the beeping of machines.

I felt the omen of death coming closer to me. Suddenly, I heard someone whispering into my ear. I listened carefully, and those whispers came with a sob. Who could be sobbing for me? I'm already alone in this world, and Eric did not love me enough that he would cry for my departure. Then I remembered I was already with Sean, but he, too, hadn't learned to love me yet. He was kind and showed me the respect I hadn't experienced with Eric. However, he also was not perfect. He loved someone else, and they were soon having a baby!

"Red, please hang on. There are so many things you need to know. The old man I adore so much is none other than your grandfather. He left me his wealth and adopted me as his son. Yet, the moment he knew about your existence, he asked me to marry you."

"Who is that old man?" I asked the man who whispered into my head, but my mind was too tired to say it louder. The white cloud from the sky was sailing closer to me, and I jumped in so I could lie down and sleep on its fluffy cushion.

I tried to speak louder, battling against my drooping eyelids, but I stopped because I started to hear his whispers again.

"He showered me the kind of love he should have given you, but he was not able to make it until I could find you. When he asked me to marry you, I understood that he was hesitant to take back everything he had entrusted me. But I am not greedy, Red. Everything he had is yours, and I am already giving it back to you. His love and kindness to us were enough for me. And I could live happily at the thought of it until I die."

Who is having what? And why is he giving it to me? I started to close my eyes because the cloud started rocking me to sleep. I heard him spoke again after a while of soft sobs. I pulled the cord at the side of the bed to stop the cloud from moving away. I wanted to hear him; his voice was like a soft feather, caressing my heart.

"Get well soon, dear, and I promise I will no longer force you into the marriage if you are not happy with me. You can always hire someone capable to help you in running your family's legacy."

I did not hear him speak again after that, so I continued to sleep. I didn't know how long I dozed off; those beeping sounds I heard in my dreams woke me up. I took a deep breath, forcing myself to open my eyes. Then, a louder alarm sounded from the machine, and I heard a male voice shouting at someone.

"Nurse!"

I heard loud footsteps coming towards me, and the alarm sound stopped.

"Sir, she already has her own breathing. That alarm sounded because her own breathing goes against the flow of the air from the machine."

"Does it mean she's getting well soon?"

"I think so, sir. But we have to hear what the doctor has to say."

I listened well to the voice of the man speaking now, comparing it to the voice that cried in my dream. It sounded different. I laughed at myself inwardly. Why wouldn't it be different? That was just a dream, and this voice now is real.

I held my breath again to summon the strength within my system so I could open my eyes. Just as my eyes flew wide, I met Eric's face, gazing at me worriedly.

"Red! Oh, good. You're awake already. Thanks, heavens! He heard my prayers."

I stared at him and tried to speak, but my voice wouldn't come out. I looked around, and my heart fluttered when I saw machines around me. The bigger box beeped louder, and Eric stormed out of the room, shouting for the nurse to come over.

I touched my mouth and nose--it had tubes. I lifted my arms--it also had IV tubings. I began to shudder, and with the cloud of confusion in my mind, I pulled out the tube in my mouth!

The door at my far side opened, and when the lady in white uniform saw me, her eyes flew wide in shock.

"Goodness! You are extubating yourself!" She hurriedly picked up the bag valve mask and cupped the mask cushion over my nose and mouth. Then she began pumping the self-filling ventilation bag.

I lifted my hand and wiped her hand away. I pointed a finger to my nose, trying to tell her that I'm alright without it. She froze for a moment, but then, she pulled out the bag valve mask and replaced it with a nasal cannula. I smiled, assuring her that I was okay. She gathered her brows and glanced at the monitor. I followed her eyes and saw that my oxygen percentage was 98%. The rest of the numbers blinking on the screen showed my vital signs were normal.

"My goodness, Dr. Red! You scare the life out of me. But thanks God, you're now awake!"

I smiled again, giving her a thumbs-up sign. "Okay, then, I'll leave you to your guest."

I remembered Eric, so I turned my head at my side. He was there towering above me. I watched him take a deep breath, and the scare in his face slowly disappeared.

"You're here," I opened my mouth to speak, but my voice would not come out yet. But I guessed, he was able to lip-read.

"Why not? I'm sick worried about you," he said, pulling a chair at the bedside. Once he settled himself, he reached out for my hand and held it.

"Red, please get well soon. I need you."

I smirked. He needed me because I could do many things for him. I could be his doctor, sex partner, and a trophy to show to his business colleagues.

"I'm sorry that it takes a disaster first to make me realize that I need you in my life."

I looked away. Those words made my skin crawl with goosebumps.

"Red, you may not believe me, but I truly love you."

Chapter 63

RED'S POV

Eric understood that I did not want to hear those words. Throughout his creepy confession, I looked somewhere else. Where were those sweet nothings when I most needed it? I already got so fed up with his foul mouth and complaints that recalling a part of it made me feel sick.

"Red, how did this happen to you?"

I slowly turned my head to look at him, relieved that he changed his topic. I pointed a finger to my throat, telling him I could not speak yet. Sore throat is common in patients after extubation, and hoarseness of voice persists after a few days or even weeks.

"I see. If you're bored later, and if you're no longer tired and sleepy, we can exchange messages."

Just when he has the time to chat or exchange messages with me? I rolled my eyes, and he looked away, pretending he did not see me.

My silence probably told him that I no longer wanted his presence; he stood up and picked up his things.

"I won't stay longer. I know you need more rest."

I nodded and gave him a pursed smile. He also bent down and kissed my forehead before he turned to leave. Watching him heading towards the door, I wondered if he was indeed sorry that he took me for granted. I also wondered how did he know I was here. I shouldn't guess that it was Sean who told him about what happened to me because I knew it was the last thing Sean would ever do.

Left alone in the silence of the ICU, my thoughts went back to the scenes in the forest. I imagined those tiny creatures crawling in their designated spaces until my train of thoughts jumped forward to the scene where I opened the lid. The buzzing sound of those bugs storming out of their confinement area pierced deeply into my mind that I covered my ears with my hands.

Who is Patrick, and how did their friendship start? Why is Patrick living in the same place as Sean? Is the forest their hideout of some illegal things they do?

I tried to recall each piece of their conversation, and the depth of their relationship was as bright as the broad daylight. Patrick was not a common man, judging from how he lived amidst that weird environment. Goosebumps spread over me as I thought of him. Scenes of those crawling creatures, moving beneath sticky fluids and powdery mats, flashed again in my mind.

The door suddenly swung open, jolting me out from my deep thoughts. Sean's handsome face met my eyes, and his smile got wider, showing his happiness. He rushed towards me, then held my face with both of his hands.

"Thank God, He gives you back to me."

He pressed his lips on my forehead and closed his eyes for a long while. Drops of tears spilled on my neck, so I reached out to wipe it away. He straightened up and chuckled, brushing away the trail of tears from his face with the back of his hand. Pulling the chair that Eric used a while ago, he sat down in it and reached for my hand. He stayed quiet for a while, but a smile broke out from his lips while gazing at me with his tender eyes.

"Patrick used to be the head of our country's biggest lab. He was about to tell the world of his discovery, but someone else plotted for his life and claimed his victory. When he got into a coma state, his enemy threw him on a clearing somewhere near my house. To cut the story short, I rescued him and provided him a home."

"He started growing domestic animals. And maybe because his curious and explorative personality surfaced later, he also grew different kinds of insects. And that's how he comes up with those Bronca bugs."

I nodded. My questions about Patrick's personality now had some of its answers, but another set of questions began to pop out in my mind. Who is his enemy? And just how deep is his grudge toward Patrick that he was able to do that horrible thing?

"Bronca bugs are everywhere, but Patrick did crossbreeding out of them. He also introduced some viruses into their bodies."

I stared at him as he explained, imagining those tiny claws creeping on my skin. As I imagined thousands of them into my bodies, I cringed in fear, and I gasped.

"Why?" Sean asked, his eyes widened in alarm.

"I saw those bugs again in my mind."

"Oh, I'm sorry that you have to go through with this." Sean stood up, but after a moment, he sat down beside me and gathered me in his arms.

"Never did I expect that you would go down that far. It's a forest, and it's scary. Of course, I had it in my mind to show that place to you. Patrick already expected that I would introduce you to them." Sean shook his head, perhaps thinking how stupid I was to do that.

"Anyway, it happened already. And I thank God so much that you're awake now." Sean pressed me closer to him and pressed a long kiss on my temple.

The door opened again, and my senior consultant came in, followed by PGI's and nurses.

"Dr. Red, you scared us all. Researchers are still not successful in their studies about these Bronca bugs, and you got yourself bitten. But don't worry, they are getting closer. Thanks to that netizen, who sheds light on us."

I smiled, but perhaps, the sense of confusion reflected on my face.

"Someone uploaded videos in social media showing that these bugs crawled out from our president's lapel flower. So, it is clear that the president himself made us all subjects of his experiment. He is a scientist by profession, in case you don't know yet."

I furrowed my brows as I stared at him, demanding for more information.

"Those bugs that crawled out from him were cultured bugs, or shall we say crossbreeds."

My eyes flew wide as I associated the term "cultured" to Patrick. There must be a conspiracy behind the spreading of these bugs. If it was not meant to kill, it was rather intended to destroy. And the president's reputation was clearly the target of this plot.

My heartbeats started to race. There must be a relationship between Patrick, the president, and Sean. If there were none, why would the president order to admit Calla at the hospital closer to Sean?

Probably, my face looked like a crumpled paper because the doctor laughed and said, "Don't get bothered by that. Focus on your healing first. And for the good news, you may now transfer to a regular room."

An hour after Sean and I settled in the hospital's suite room, someone knocked on the door. Soon, it opened, and a female nurse stepped in. She was wearing an N95 mask, but after a few moments of gazing at her, I realized she looked familiar. Of course, I was already familiar with the nurses because I was already working here ever since I was a PGI.

"Flowers for you, doc." Her voice sounded different, but her accent gave way.

Sean handed the bouquet close to me so I could pick up the card. I hurried to open it, and I saw a small strip of paper attached to it. I pulled it out and secretly dropped it on my side. When Sean came back to my side after placing the bouquet on a table, I handed the card back to him.

He read aloud and said, "Get well soon."

"There's no name, dear, but I think it's from Eric. How does he know you are here?" Sean said, glancing at me.

I rolled my eyes and slipped under the covers as Sean stood up again to put down the card on the side table. I picked up the strip of paper and read the message in it.

"I'll get you out of here as soon as possible. Sean is a dangerous man."

The message then ended with Eric's signature.

Chapter 64

RED'S POV

I scoffed as I reread Eric's message. Of course, he wouldn't say anything nice to the man who gave me worth. He just wanted to let me feel that Sean just played with my feelings because he perhaps thought he was taking advantage of my vulnerability. He tried to prove it to me that I didn't deserve any special affection from powerful men like them, and that only he could bear with someone like me. I would never allow him to break my self-esteem again.

The bed at my right side sank, and soon, Sean's arms draped around me. He then pulled me up and placed my head in his chest.

"Have you already decided on the design of your gown?" Sean asked as he stroke my hair with his fingers.

I shook my head then wrapped my hand around his abdomen, hugging him tightly. Though I already started to harbor doubts at him, every time he showed me his gentle and caring ways, I always melted like wax against a burning candle. It felt so good to have someone to care for me, even if at that moment, I was no longer sure about Sean's sincerity.

However, two voices kept speaking at the back of my mind, and one always said that Sean was as truthful as he showed, while the other suggested to open my eyes and look at him behind his disguise.

"Then start browsing the net for designs. When you feel a little better, I'll have the designer come over so that he can already start," Sean said, pulling me out from my racing thoughts about him.

I nodded again and buried my face in his chest. The fresh scent of his shirt diffused with the light fragrance of his musk, making me feel good. For a few days, I always smelled the strong odor of antiseptics and cleaners inside the ICU. He rubbed my back and started to tell me many things about his plans.

"I can't wait to bring you home and show you your grandpa's place."

"My grandpa?" my mind repeated these words, raising these as a question. I raised my head to look up to him, but my head hit his chin, hindering me from seeing his face.

Sean kissed the top of my head and said, "Get well soon, sweetheart. A lot of surprises await for you during the party."

I could only nod and hug him as my responses, but Sean continued talking to me like I was responding normally.

"I can't wait to bring you to Australia and see what's in store for you. I also hope that on that day, you can already make up your mind."

"Make up what?" I asked myself, but to him, I gave out furrowed brows, indicating my confusion.

"Make up your mind to marry me," he smiled, patting the top of my head.

My eyes flew open, wondering about his sincerity. I was already expecting that one of these days, he would call our relationship off. I would understand if he would; providing his child home was more important than losing me. Half the part of me accepted the fact that I was just staying to enjoy the moments of being loved and pampered, even if it could be fake.

"But only when you're ready," he added, perhaps interpreting my silent response as my way of refusing to his proposal.

Another knocking on the door disrupted our sweet, little talk. Since we were at the hospital, anyone, especially the hospital staff, could come in without having to wait for someone to open the door. To my surprise, the person standing by the door was someone I never wished to see me cuddled by another man.

"Just dropping by to see if you are well," he smiled then turned around to go, but then, he stopped and looked over his right shoulder. "I'll talk to your doctor and ask if I can take you home tomorrow. I can hire nurses to take care of you there while you recuperate."

Sean sat up abruptly, and I knew trouble was coming next. My adrenaline worked alongside my fear that I got the strength to push him down. Sean was about to get up again, but I climbed on top of him, pushing his head back on the pillow. He sighed and stared at me; his face was still flushing. I held his face and began kissing him until he held the back of my head and kissed me back. I no longer knew how long did Eric watch us, and when did he leave. I didn't care anymore if he saw me flirting with my new boyfriend; he was asking for it, anyway.

"I'll get you home first," Sean said between his panting, "if he can hire doctors and nurses, we also have our team. Dr. Mimi and the rest can take care of you in Laminæ."

I cupped Sean's face again and smacked a kiss on his lips. When I withdraw my face away from him, I lifted his chin to let him look at me and do lip-reading. "I want to go home. Now."

Sean nodded and gently placed me back on the bed. Then, he sat up and reached out for his phone.

"Dr. Mimi, I'm going to bring Red to Laminæ. Can you please talk to her doctor for an endorsement? I can't let any other doctor come into my territory."

"Doc, we are so sorry. We want to go home against medical advice. We are under threat, and we don't wish to get you involved..."

"Philip, please bring my car over to Laminae. I'm going to leave the keys to the parking attendant."

"Ma'am, kindly forward Dr. Nelson's bill to Laminae, Inc."

"Sir, kindly send the company ambulance to TAG Medical Center right now..."

I smiled as I listened to Sean's continuous calls. Furthermore, I was happy that he was willing to defend me from Eric.

In less than an hour, the orderlies wheeled me to the waiting ambulance in front of the hospital. Sean walked by my side, and he also sat beside me inside the ambulance, holding my hand. As the driver turned the engine on, Sean suddenly called out.

"Stop!"

The driver turned the engine off, and I guessed all of us turned to look at him. I also sat up and followed his eyes. He was staring at the sleek, black car on the other lane. With just a mere glance, anyone could tell that the car was one of the expensive models of the year.

"Philip?"

Chapter 65

RED'S POV

After a few days, my health improved. My voice also came back, though it still sounded hoarse. I only came back to the hospital once for my last hemodialysis and the removal of my intrajugular catheter afterward.

An intrajugular catheter is a type of catheter inserted into a vein in the neck called intrajugular vein. The catheter is used as a route for the exchange of blood from a person's body to the dialyzer and back to the body.

The moment Sean wheeled me to the Hemodialysis Unit, a bouquet of red roses beside my assigned dialysis machine met our eyes. I pulled in a deep breath, wondering how Sean felt about this.

"How does he know I will be here?" I whispered to Sean's ears while my eyes roamed at my left and right, looking for signs of Eric's presence.

"Good morning, doc. Someone delivered these flowers for you," the nurse assigned to the unit greeted us with her bright smile while simultaneously looking at the flowers beside my designated place.

I just smiled back and thanked her. I didn't have to ask who sent it to me. I glanced at Sean, and I saw him removing the card tied to one of the stems. He handed it to me afterward, and I opened it in front of him.

My dearest Red,

I wish to talk to you alone as soon as possible. I have so many things to tell you and one of those is to tell you how much I want you back in my life.

Loving you so much,

Eric

I felt like puking out at those words that Eric said. I squeezed the card inside my palm until it became a crumpled, paper ball. I then handed it to Sean, and he threw it inside the trash bin. He did not say a word, but I saw glints of pain registering in his eyes.

"Ignore him," I said, running a finger across his cheeks, assuring him that I wouldn't allow myself to get flattered by Eric's romantic approaches. I did not mind if there were other people around us. I even wished someone would snap us a photo and send it to Eric.

"We'll have your gown fitting today. Then, we will resume our vacation. Where do you want us to go?"

My heart sank as I realized that Sean was afraid I would accept Eric back. I understood his intention in taking me for a vacation. He wanted to spend more time alone with me until I would fall in love with him. Until I would be emotionally stable enough to turn my back entirely on Eric. Perhaps, he didn't believe me and convinced himself that those five years I was with Eric was too difficult to forget.

"I want to go to one of the beautiful beaches in Hawaii," I replied, staring off at the white wall across us. I also needed a long break.

"Sure," he grinned and lifted my hands on his lips. "I'll call Philip right now."

"You seem so dependent on Philip," I commented. In everything he did and planned, Philip was always on his lips.

"He's the only person I trust regarding my personal matters," he reasoned out, and I remembered Philip talking out to me about the house in Greenville.

"By the way, I remember you looked astonished when you saw Philip on the hospital the day we moved to Laminae."

He gathered his brows, then snapped his fingers. "Ah, yes. I'm just surprised he gets a new car without telling me first."

"It looks like his car is more expensive than yours. Maybe, you need to upgrade and buy a new one." That luxurious black car flashed in my mind, and I compared it to Sean's still beautiful but outdated model. The car he bought for me was even more expensive than his.

"I can't afford it anymore," he smiled and pinched my nose.

"You're the most famous billionaire in the country, and you can't afford it?" I smirked, disappointed for having the nerve to fool me.

"Behind the famous billionaire you say is a silent, beautiful billionaire. She now owns everything I have."

"What?!" I frowned right away because I could no longer think of someone else to own what he has, other than his heir. He said he no longer had a family except for his mother, who was then at his home in Australia.

Sean placed a finger on top of my nose. He smiled and said, "Sweetheart, may I ask a favor? Please, don't ask me yet about this. You will know everything about me a few days from now."

No matter how much my mind is screaming in annoyance for the many secrets he had, but I tried to understand. I was still someone new in his life, and he couldn't just disclose everything about himself just because he had been proposing marriage from the start. One wrong move could mean his ruin, and in many movies, women were always sent as spies because sex is still a man's weakness. Speaking about sex, I then understood why Sean always refused to make love with me.

Our attention shifted to the big screen across us. It was a news break, and the voice of the newscaster caught our ears.

"The people are now demanding President Abella to step down from his presidency. Several studies have confirmed that the virus came from those Bronca bugs that crawled out from his lapel flower. During his private interview, he claimed that someone else is framing him up to destroy his image and reputation."

"When asked who he thought are the people behind this suspected plot against him, he said he could not disclose the name yet until he could gather sufficient evidence. Yet, he gave out a clue, saying that he is one of the country's famous business tycoon."

I looked at Sean, who stayed silent even as the news ended. I couldn't understand why, but somehow I felt that Patrick was the man behind this. And my heartbeats spiked harder as I thought that the closest business tycoon to him was no other than Sean.

"Didn't you say that Patrick grows those Bronca bugs?" I whispered, and Sean jolted out from his lost state.

"Yes, he grows some Bronca bugs and experiments with them,"

I watched his throat bobbed out as he swallowed hard, but he admitted to it anyway. Even if he would deny, I could tell clearly that he was feeling nervous at the moment.

"Don't you think it's him?"

Chapter 66

RED'S POV

Sean looked around with watchful eyes, so I understood that he did not want to talk about Patrick here. I dropped the topic, and he kept his silence. However, his choice to keep his silence gave me a clue that Patrick was behind this. And the more my suspicion grew that he was the famous business tycoon the newscaster meant.

Why would Sean do this? Why the hell would he support Patrick's moves against the president? And why would he risk his reputation over this crime? Just how deep was their grudge towards him that they need to involve innocent lives?

Once we were back at our room in Laminae, I brought up the topic again. But before that, I decided to hit his weakness - every man's weakness- so that he would open up to me. No matter how I felt silly for thinking that it would work, I still wanted to give it a try. I no longer wanted to complicate things over this damned mystery.

I went to the shower and stripped myself naked. Just as the tub filled itself up to the brim, I poured the bubble bath solution then stirred it until the foams formed into white clouds of suds. I then dipped into the water, enjoying its soothing and relaxing temperature, combined with the fresh scent of the foam solution.

I closed my eyes, not realizing that I dozed off after a few minutes, failing myself from my original plan. However, I still succeeded because my prolonged stay at the tub made Sean worry.

"Red!" My eyes flew wide when his voice pierced into my ear.

"What?" I grumbled, still feeling sleepy.

"What takes you so long? The water is already cold," he said, and I followed his eyes, sticking on my naked self.

"Why don't you come over, instead? It feels relaxing here."

"The water is already cold. Come out." He picked up the showerhead and rinsed me from the soap suds. Once he's done, he held my hand and helped me get out of the tub.

I looked away from his piercing gaze on my body, and I walked to where my towel was, but Sean was quicker to pick it up ahead of me. With my back facing him, he spread the towel on my head then rubbed my hair dry. He then pulled the towel away from my head then pat-dried my skin

from the neck down to each of my thighs. I held my breath when the side of his palm hit my sensitive part as he moved the towel between my inner legs.

"It's done," he whispered in my ear, and before I could move, I felt his hands on my shoulders and his tongue at the back of my ear, nibbling the edges softly. I stiffened as the sense of pleasure built up inside me, but still, I stayed in place, allowing him to do his ways.

Then, his hands moved away from my shoulders, and it crawled on my peaks, kneading them softly. His tongue moved to the sides of my neck while his hands were rolling my nipples between his fingers. I then felt my knees wobbled, and I complained.

"Stop, Sean. Let's go to bed."

He indeed stopped, hugged me from behind, then interlaced his fingers on top of my navel. He then rested his head on my shoulder while my back felt his heat, including the hard thing poking at my behind.

"I'm sorry I lost my temperance. You're such a temptation," he whispered, his breathing caressing my face.

"Continue it on the bed," I replied, fighting against the shame from asking for it.

"You have not recovered fully yet. I won't forgive myself if you get unwell again because of my intemperance."

I knew Sean felt my embarrassment for being turned down because he lifted me in his arms and placed me on the bed. He covered me with the quilt and began kissing me again while hovering over me. Just when I got carried away and put my arms around his neck, he stood up.

"Please, excuse me," he said. Then like a bolt of lightning, he sprinted towards the bathroom.

I then heard the splashing of the water, and I started to wonder about this strange behavior. I tiptoed towards the door to the bathroom, and I was glad it was not locked. The sound of the running water seemed to complement what I was planning because he did not notice that I slid the door open and peered on him.

I saw him there, standing under the strong sprays of the shower. He was completely naked, though I could only see his back. Then, my eyes bulged out when I saw his arms moving. Even if I couldn't see him in full view, I knew he was holding his shaft and rubbing it vigorously to relieve himself.

I ran back to my bed, then hurried to pull out a set of clothes from the wardrobe. I was already lying back on the bed when he came out; his hair was glistening with drops of water. Feeling my gaze on him, he sat down beside me on the bed, then stroke my forehead.

"Red, I don't want you to think later that I'm only taking advantage of your vulnerability because you just broke up with Eric. And I don't want to do sex for the sake of need. I want to make love with you, you just don't know how much, but I want to do it when I am sure that you are giving me your whole heart and soul."

When I did not answer him, he continued. "I already learned my lesson, and I don't want to do it again."

I was moved by his self-temperance and his reasons why he didn't want to indulge in sex with me. I sat up and hugged him, letting him feel my appreciation in this simple way.

Later in the afternoon, the gown designer came over, and I met her in the clinic.

"Have you chosen your design?" she asked after she sat across me in the sitting room.

"Not really," I smiled. I was never particular with brands and designs, and I could wear anything available.

"Or, you can choose from this brochure," she said, handing me the book. Her smile was captivating, and her poise she moved around gracefully that I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I flipped the pages and stopped at the part where I spotted a design I thought I liked.

The designer's face dropped, and she looked at me apologetically. "I'm sorry, Dr. Red, but Mr. Martela has already picked up that design for his woman."

Chapter 67

RED'S POV

I laughed softly at what the designer said, earning me a confused gaze from both Sean and the designer. Eric planned to take me back, so maybe, he prepared ahead for my gown. Through the years of choosing by himself the dress I would be wearing on all the occasions I attended with him, I no longer wondered if he made another one for me.

"I'm just wondering who the woman Eric is fooling around with, this time."

"I can't imagine how he fools around with someone new but still insists on winning the previous one." Sean scoffed, gathering himself a curious glance from the designer.

"It's his business we shouldn't be meddling with," I answered, trying to cut off the topic.

"As long as he won't meddle with the present."

I winked at the designer who then looked at me, perhaps finding herself trapped within our discussion.

"What would you like to suggest, ma'am?" I asked her opinion to put an end to this meeting.

She smiled, and her fingers turned the pages fast until she stopped on the elite section.

"This is our new design, and I'm sure you'll look perfect in this," she said, running her eyes on me, from top to bottom.

"Okay, then. You know what's best for me." I closed the book, and she asked me to stand up to have my measurements taken.

While we were still discussing the kind of fabrics she would be using, the nurse I hired came in. Her eyes lit up when she saw me, but she covered her mouth when she noticed that I was talking to someone else.

I smiled and watched her as she walked past us. Suddenly, her figure reminded me of the nurse who brought the flowers to my room in the hospital. I blinked many times to convince myself I was wrong. The flowers came from Eric, and according to her, she ran away from his company in Sama Island, so it looked impossible that she was still working for Eric.

"Miss Hazel, have you been in the hospital last week?" I asked her as soon as the designer left.

She pulled up her brows together and asked back, "Hospital?"

I looked at her confused expression, and I decided to drop the subject. "Never mind, Miss Hazel. I just thought you visited me at the hospital."

"I did not," she spread her palms out and shrugged her shoulders, denying my claim that it was her.

I let it pass since Sean and I were catching for the next flight bound for Hawaii. Sean decided that we leave the country as soon as possible before the international flights would stop for the planned lockdown.

"Miss Hazel, kindly tell Dr. Mimi and Dr. Leila that I will keep in touch with them."

"Got it, doc. But if you don't mind, where are you going?"

"Hawaii," Sean replied for me when he saw my hesitation. I just did not feel safe about telling anyone where we were going.

"I see. Enjoy, both of you," Hazel giggled. Probably, feeling excited for both of us.

After the next few hours, the flight attendant already announced that in a few minutes, we would be landing at the Honolulu International Airport. I got excited. Ever since my childhood days, I never felt as carefree as now-- away from work, away from Eric, and away from the troubling news in my country.

We stayed in one of the most famous hotels and resorts of Waikiki, where our room was just around three blocks away from the sea. The famous Mount Leahi, called Diamond Head, was our backdrop, adding to the spectacular view of the place.

I didn't care where we were. I just knew that we were on the south shore of Honolulu, the so-called playground of the Hawaiian Royalty before this place was introduced to the world. Today, this place has become one of the global tourist attractions and home to world-class shopping, dining, and entertainment.

"Do you want to learn how to surf?" Sean asked one afternoon as we sat down on the sand, watching the few surfers catching the waves before the sunset.

"It takes a long time to learn, and our time is not enough," I replied, staring at the silhouette of the Diamond Head, a volcano crater that looked like the back and fin of a tuna fish, occupying the distant horizon.

"Let's learn a little while we are here, and learn more as we go to other surfing beaches around the world," Sean chirped.

"I'm poor at balancing. I don't even know how to ride a bicycle."

"We would be taking up lessons, and we will be learning together."

"Okay, then," I conceded. I just didn't want to dampen his spirit.

He pulled me closer to himself then kissed me hard on the lips. I stiffened when I sensed he was carried away. Ever since that heated moment back home where he stopped, he never kissed me again on the lips. Yes, he cuddled me while we slept, he planted kisses on my temples, but never the passionate kiss anymore.

"Don't ever start if you don't want to finish it," I said smiling, after he stopped, allowing me to take a deep breath.

He chuckled, but I saw the guilt in his eyes. He then hugged me tightly and whispered something that thawed my heart. "I can't wait to hear you say you love me, Red."

It was my turn to feel guilty. For the past few days that we were here, he took care of all my needs. He massaged my feet and my whole body every night before we slept. It all started when I complained that my feet ached from walking around the beach.

He made me cups of coffee every morning and gave me glasses of milk before bedtime. He pressed my clothes after claiming it from the laundry shops and hang it for me inside the closet. He placed food on my plate, cutting those steaks in tiny pieces for an easier bite. He just did almost everything for me, and never had I felt pampered this way.

Chapter 68

RED'S POV

Since I held too many doubts at him, and since I was too afraid to give my full trust because of Calla, I also didn't want to deceive myself, nor give Sean false assurances. Until now, he didn't dare to tell me about her. If it were not because I could also justify his action because Leila told me about the call from the president, I would have made it a big issue. If it were not also for the assurances of both Dina and Patrick, I would have called this relationship off.

Aside from that, Sean had maintained his warmth towards me, and he was always on my side. I couldn't forget how he cried and how scared he was when he learned that the bug bit me. I could not put aside all his efforts in giving me his time for this relationship to work.

What remained a mystery was the reason why he said he had been thinking about me for so long. Had he been stalking at me while I was yet a student? I tried to ask about it many times, but he always said he would surprise me one day with the answer.

I just gave Sean back a tight hug, silently telling him my gratitude for loving me this much.

"Sean, thanks for coming into my life. I hope I don't live in a dream, and may we last forever," I mumbled, tears stinging my eyes.

Those were tears of humiliation for not trusting me entirely as to why he kept Calla from me, and tears of gratitude for being cared for the way he did. Throughout my five years with Eric, I had learned to be submissive. I have learned to keep my questions to myself and have learned not to complain. Perhaps, this was just the way it should be when one is in a relationship with powerful men like Eric and Sean. Whenever they avoided answering questions, it only meant I should wait or forget about it.

Sean rubbed my back and assured me. "You are not dreaming, sweetheart. There are so many beautiful things I want to share with you right now, but I want to wait for that day where many people are watching as witnesses."

"What are you talking about?" I insisted, but my lips twisted into a wide grin. I imagined his surprises as the night he would formally ask my hand in marriage, placing a diamond ring on my finger. I imagined him promising to support me as the new chairwoman of TAG Medical Center.

"It won't be a surprise anymore, my dear. Just a little more patience."

"Alright," I agreed, but my lips pouted, that he cupped my face and sucked my lower lip.

The following morning was our schedule to go hiking towards the top of Diamond Head Summit Trail, one of the wonders of Hawaiian Islands of O'ahu, known to Hawaiians as Le'ahi. It is a volcanic tuff cone that can be seen from the coast of Waikiki, the place where we stayed, appearing like the dorsal fin of a tuna fish. The climb towards the peak looked difficult, but in reality, the height is only 760 feet away from the foot of the crater.

I wore a comfortable set of leggings and top, while Sean did a pair of body-hugging shirts and knee-length shorts. He looked more handsome and attractive, and I couldn't seem to take my eyes off him. Throughout our hike, he either held my hand or place an arm around my shoulders. I really felt safe, loved, and protected.

We talked about many things, sharing about our childhood days. Sean never kept the fact that he came from a poor family, and that his mother was widowed. He also told me how they lived in a hand-to-mouth existence until Mr. Thomas Grey brought them to his home and adopted him as his legal son. It sounded unusual that her mother did not accept Mr. Grey's offer to marry her.

"She doesn't want the people to think that she married him because of money."

"But he made you the heir to his wealth," I argued, "and how does it differ from marrying him?"

"Making me a legal son is different from making her a wife," he laughed, knowing that he lost the argument.

"You and your mother have a pure heart, Sean, that's why you are blessed."

"But dad has a secret," Sean said, looking straight into my eyes, "but I will tell you about it during the party."

"You're placing me in a cliffhanger, Sean. Can you just tell me right now?" I pouted. I felt so fed up with his secrets and surprises.

"No, baby. Just a little more patience."

The path towards the top get narrower and steep, and I was already panting for breath. I stopped to take a rest; drops of sweat came trickling down my temples. Sean pulled out a face towel from his backpack and pat-dried me, including my back. And before I could step forward, he stepped ahead and crouched in front of me.

"Hop on, babe!"

My eyes widened in surprise. This was too much. "No! I'm too heavy."

"Come on! Hurry up. I won't go forward if you don't hop on."

Squeals from other hikers had me blushing, and so to keep them quiet, I gave in.

"That's good. You should not tire yourself," Sean said, pushing my thighs up to a more comfortable position.

"The people are watching us."

"Just keep quiet. Your health and safety should come first. Let's just pretend that we are husband and wife. And husbands should care for their wives, right?"

"Sean, what if Calla suddenly comes and claims that she is pregnant with your baby? Would you still want to be my husband?"

"I want nothing in this world, but you. Always keep that in mind."

"What about the baby?"

"It won't happen. She was sleeping with another man."

"What if she proves it with a DNA test?"

"I'll support the baby."

"What about her?"

"There's only one woman that I love to be with forever. And that is Dr. Red Grey."

I did not answer, but these exchanges moved me again that I wanted to cry. I took a deep breath to hold back my tears. I felt being desired, wanted, and needed. And at that moment, I felt a sense of self-worth.

After a few minutes, the trail got more difficult, and I felt him breathing hard.

"Put me down," I whispered in his ear.

"No. I don't want to lose a wife just because I let her climb up a hill a few days after being discharged from the hospital."

Before I could answer, Sean suddenly tripped over a rock. He staggered but tried hard to keep his balance, and I screamed.

"I'm sorry, dear. I was too careless." He stopped and panted, not because of the labored walk, but because he got scared that I might get hurt.

"I said, put me down," I squirmed to get down, but he secured me tighter to his back.

I didn't know why I got so emotional. The tears I kept pushing back a while ago, escaped freely from my eyes. I brushed it angrily from my cheeks, embarrassed for having to cry in the presence of so many strangers.

"Sean," I whispered again.

"Yes, sweetheart."

"I want-"

"Water? Yes, sure." He stopped and put me down gently.

"No-" I said, and I felt heat rushing into my face.

"What do you need?" he said, squinting his eyes. His expression told me he got worried about why I was blushing.

"I want-I want to be your wife."

Sean suddenly swept me off from the ground and squealed.

Chapter 69

RED'S POV

"If only I knew you would say this once we are in this place, I would have brought you here a long time ago," Sea laughed out loud, making other tourists turn their heads at us.

"The people are watching us," I cringed in shame as some of them smiled and teased us.

"They will have to watch us. Wait." He crouched again and let me hop on to his back. I no longer refused; I would not win over him, anyway.

Soon, we entered a long, dim-lit tunnel, and once we were on the other side, we turned left, and I gasped at the magnificent view before us. On one side, the sprawling ocean glittered against the golden glow of the rising sun. On another side laid the vast stretch of hills and plains, including the famous navigational lighthouse. I stood watching in awe at this splendid view before my eyes.

As the people took time to rest after picture-taking, Sean suddenly stood up. I wondered what the problem he saw around that the rest of the tourists and I did not see.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sean started to speak, running his eyes from left to right with full confidence, "good morning."

I noticed that Sean posed an authoritative air because all heads turned to his direction, giving him full attention.

In a modulated voice, he continued. "I am Sean Mark Grey of Thomas and Albert Group of Companies."

I heard people gasped as they perhaps saw him in televisions and magazines. Or, maybe, some of them here were businessmen who knew many of those autocratic figures in the business world.

"I never expect that this morning would be one of the most beautiful moments of my life. Along the way here, as we climbed the steep trail, she said yes. Yes, the love of my life says yes! And I want you all to become witnesses as I give her the Grey's legacy marriage ring."

The people squealed and gave us a loud round of applause that I felt like melting in shame. I watched in horror as Sean pulled out from his bag a black, velvet box. As he opened it in the eyes of everyone around, the crowd gasped again as the glittering diamond ring shone against the light of the sun.

"That must be a million-dollar ring, Mr. Grey!" one of the men exclaimed.

"Yes. Our great, great grandfather bought this when he proposed to our late grandma, Anita Grey. From them, this ring is passed down until it has become my turn."

The people squealed again as they heard about the legendary name, Anita Grey. One of them stepped forward to the front and introduced herself as a college professor.

"Anita Grey's name is told by generations after her heroic act of saving a soldier from the brink of death. Beforehand, she had led out different charitable organizations and foundations that had helped the country in surviving against a national crisis that hit the nation at that time."

"And that soldier had become her husband, the famous Thomas Grey I. With their strengths and talents combined, they built empires of businesses, creating themselves a name throughout the world."

"Unfortunately, the next heirs did not manage the businesses well. It thinned down until it almost sank beyond redemption. However, after Thomas Grey V, the father of Albert Grey took over, the businesses began to spring back to life."

"Another blow hit the family again as Albert Grey left their home due to a secret family feud. He was supposedly the successor of their business empire, but he left his sick father alone and hopeless. Thankfully, Sir Thomas V got himself a son by the name of Sean Mark Grey. And as many of you may have known, Thomas and Albert Grey Group of Companies have expanded to almost part of the world through his leadership."

A loud round of applause erupted again from the crowd, and I stood gaping at what that professor said. I knew Sean was a famous business tycoon, but this professor spelled it out in bold letters for me to know him more.

"Thank you so much, professor, for telling our family's story. And now, let me make you witnesses as I pass this legacy to the next Anita Grey."

Sean gazed at me with those tender eyes of his and smiled. I felt like collapsing from these complicated emotions that were torturing me at the moment. My heartbeats blow against my chest in a rapid rhythm, making me deaf to the squeals and rounds of applause from the crowd.

When Sean finally touched my hand and slipped the ring on my finger, I could no longer restrain myself from crying. What did I do to deserve him? How am I able to doubt his love for me?

"Red Nelson-Grey, will you marry me?"

I laughed while tears streamed down from my eyes. "How can I refuse when you already give me your name?"

"Whether you like it or not, you will always be a Grey."

I sniffed in my tears as I stared at the precious sparkling stone on my finger.

"You have not answered me yet," he teased, and the people broke out in laughter again.

"Yes, I will marry you, Mr. Grey."

Sean hugged me tight, and I sobbed louder while I rested my head on his shoulder.

"When will be the big ceremony, Mr. Grey?" asked someone from the crowd.

"We'll work on it once we are back in our country."

"Haven't you heard the news? That Hawaii closed all the ports from both domestic and international departures last night?"

I withdrew myself from Sean as I listened to what this person is saying.

"What the hell-" Sean bit his lip, and his face dropped in frustration.

"Mr. Grey," another from the crowd spoke up, "I am the director of the Civil Registry of Honolulu. Why not do a civil wedding first since we do not know yet when this lockdown would end? I can help you with the processing of your papers. You can even have it today if you want."

Chapter 70

RED'S POV

"Forasmuch, as the bride and groom have pledged their love and loyalty towards each other, and have declared the same by giving their rings, by the power vested in me, and as witnessed by friends and acquaintances, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

The few instant friends we first met in Diamond Head cheered and gave us loud rounds of applause. I smiled as I looked up to the man I never thought would become my husband this fast. He looked back at me with those beautiful eyes that, as of the moment, were sparkling with joy and love. For a few seconds, my world seemed to stop spinning, and all I could see was him.

He then reached for the back of my head and ever so gently tilted it back as he bent down and captured my lips. I heard the loud cheering again, but I seemed to see no one--my world existed only around him. I never felt so happy until that moment where he caged me in his arms, and I was watching the waves rolling towards the shore. I then closed my eyes and wished that this moment could last forever.

After our dinner by the shore, and when all the guests had left, a white speedboat came to fetch us and brought us to the waiting yacht a few miles away from us. Hawaii is best known for its beautiful and pristine beaches, and so we were bound to set forward to many of their famous destinations.

The fine weather seemed to blend with the wonderful feeling we had that night. The breeze was crisp and cold, but not harsh. All we could see around as the vessel moved forward was the sprawling body of water, wrapped entirely by the golden rays of the moonlight.

"I wish to see you in white wedding gown soon," Sean whispered in my ear as he hugged me from behind. We were standing by the glass wall of our suite, basking on the moonlight as it turned our surroundings into glossy shades of silver and gold.

"And I want to see you also in that wedding suit," I replied, turning to face him, while my back leaned on the wall. Looking at his broad chest, I ran my fingers through it, lost in my thoughts. I imagined the day where I would walk down that aisle. He would be there on the other side, waiting for me by the altar.

His eyes turned dark as he looked into my face. "But as of now, I want to see you without that dress."

Not wasting any more second, he bent down and grazed on my lips. I kissed him back in equal fervor, locking my hands around his nape. His hands then moved to my shoulders, sliding off the sleeves of my satin dress down my arms without breaking the kiss. It fell on the floor, exposing my body--clad in a set of black lingerie. He turned me around, my back facing him. I held my breath as the hook of my bra snapped off because his hands replaced it right away, squeezing and kneading my soft peaks beneath the tiny piece of cloth. His hands stayed that way for a couple of minutes, and his tongue ran on my ears and my neck.

My heart hammered faster and louder as his hands moved to my abdomen and his tongue to my spine. I knew what's next, and I felt thrilled at the thought of it. Just when his hands held the lace garter of my undies, I drew in a deep breath because I would finally be giving him my all!

He bent down and placed an arm on my thighs, and another on my back. Before I could pull in my next breath, my feet lifted off the floor, and soon, my back felt the soft cushion of the bed. Taking off his shirt, he then hovered over me and retraced the path where his mouth had been. I was already moaning loud when his mouth captured my nipples, one after the other. But I groaned louder, tossing my body up the moment his mouth left my breasts and made a wet path from my sternum, down to my navel, until it rested on my mons.

I couldn't wait for his mouth to move further down, but I did not complain. I just raked his hair with my fingers until he finally parted my thighs and folded it, enclosing his head in between. Shutting my eyes off as my heated desire started to engulf me, I screamed in pleasure as he lingered on my folds, licking and sucking it. The fire within me set ablaze, so I moved my body like a wave--tossing it up and shrinking it back-- until I curled my toes and pressed it deep on the bed, waiting for my sweet release.

Seeing me breaking into an orgasm, he kissed my forehead and asked, "May I now get in?"

The glaring light of the midday sun woke me up. It slipped through the narrow slits between the rows of curtains hanging from the ceiling to the floor. I was alone in the room, and I wondered where Sean was. Until that moment, I still couldn't believe that I was already a Grey and the wife of the most humble and down-to-earth business figure in the world.

Sean was not a perfect man, despite the great name he created for himself. Neither was I. Whatever doubts I may have for him; I should learn to forget it. Why should I doubt about his sincerity when all he wanted was to be with me forever? My thoughts then went on Calla, and I had come to believe that Sean was indeed interested, not with Calla, but me.

I walked towards the glass wall and fixed my gaze on the vast stretch of the depths. It seemed endless, and I couldn't see an end to the rolling of the waves. The horizon looked bleak from a

distance, but I knew that at the end of this journey, I would see unparalleled beauty. Just like life and its unpredictability.

"Good morning, wife!"

I jolted off from my reverie and turned my head towards the door. There I saw Sean, balancing a tray in one hand, and hugging a bouquet of Calla Lilies in his other hand. Of all the flowers in this beautiful country, why choose the one that reminds me of her?

Not wanting to spoil the moment with my insecurities, I smiled back and replied.

"Good morning, husband!"

"I went out to get our breakfast," Sean explained when he caught me staring at him.

"It so thoughtful of you. Thank you," I replied, throwing my hands around his neck after he placed down the tray and the flowers on the table.

"My pleasure, my love, but this is not free. You have to pay me first with your delicious dishes." Without waiting for my reply, he untied my robe again and started eating those goodies only I could give.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My dearest followers,

Thank you so much for the support you give me on this journey, and I hope to see you again in the new book. I always love to hear from you and see your likes, just as I'm also thrilled to see new followers. But I would also jump for joy if you share this with your friends.

To give you more ideas about how the next story would go, this is the synopsis.

THROUGH YOUR EYES 2

I learned about his secret, and my revenge began. I didn't care anymore about the consequences of my decision; I was too blinded by all the lies.

I thought I'd laugh hard to see him crawling on the ground, but to my surprise, I didn't. Perhaps because the truth prevailed that this stubborn heart of mine still loved this man that I now despised. I lied to myself, denying this feeling for him. All because of my stupid revenge.

Just when I thought I couldn't fool myself anymore, I realized I was too late. And I just couldn't cry hard enough.