

Prague Christmas Affair



“Prague: Where snow hides more than footprints.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“AS A FORMER FLIGHT attendant with 15,000 flying hours and 15 years in the skies, I’ve seen, heard, and experienced moments that linger long after landing. From the confined cabin of an aircraft—where the boundary between the ordinary and the unexplainable feels razor-thin—to the vibrant and mysterious layovers around the globe, every journey holds its own story. While this series is a work of fiction, it draws inspiration from the many faces, places, and whispers I’ve encountered throughout my years of flight.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Copyright © [2024] by [THE CREW].

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations used in reviews or other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events is purely coincidental.



Table of contents



TABLE OF CONTENTS 6

Chapter 1. Arrival in the City of Secrets	8
Chapter 2. The Festive Dinner	40
Chapter 3. Under the Mistletoe	70
Chapter 4. The Captain's Games	101
Chapter 5. A Secret Rendezvous	134
Chapter 6. The Ice Begins to Crack	166
Chapter 7. Midnight Confessions	195
Chapter 8. Everything Falls Apart	233
Chapter 9. The Dark Night of the Soul	260
Chapter 10. Confrontation at the Lobby	285
Chapter 11. A Cold Morning After And Departure	303
Final Chapter: Unfinished Business: A New Year's Guilt	318

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL



Chapter 1. Arrival in the City of Secrets



THE CREW STEPPED OUT into Prague's icy embrace, their breath visible in the crisp, twilight air. Snow blanketed the tarmac, softening the edges of the world into something magical. Sofia pulled her scarf tighter, her hazel eyes scanning the horizon where the gothic spires of the city loomed faintly, like secrets whispered in the wind.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Alex's deep voice broke the moment. His uniform, pristine as always, carried the authority that made heads turn. But it wasn't his words that lingered—it was the way his gaze flickered from Sofia to Elena, a glint of mischief buried in his otherwise calm demeanor.

"Stunning," Elena replied, her tone lighter than the snowflakes that dusted her cropped platinum hair. She adjusted her coat, her blue eyes alight with wonder. "Feels like we just stepped into a fairy tale."

Sofia kept silent, her eyes fixed on the luggage carousel as their cases arrived. The chatter of tourists around them seemed distant, the holiday carolers by the grand tree a blur. It wasn't the snow or the architecture that made her heart race—it was the unspoken tension, the way Alex's teasing glance lingered too long, and how Elena's quiet awe seemed to draw her in despite herself.

"Let's not get lost in the magic," Alex quipped, rolling his suitcase forward. "The city has a way of making you forget where you're supposed to be."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia followed, the words striking closer than they should have. The snow crunched underfoot as they moved toward the exit, where the city waited, its charm both welcoming and foreboding.

The airport shimmered with the glow of festive lights. A towering Christmas tree sparkled in the corner of the hall, its ornaments catching the light like tiny stars. A group of carolers dressed in red and green harmonized softly, their voices weaving warmth into the chilly air. The crew moved through the crowd, their matching uniforms drawing a few curious glances.

“Feels like Santa’s workshop exploded,” Alex remarked, a faint smirk playing at his lips. His tone was casual, but his eyes darted between Sofia and Elena, as if gauging their reactions.

Elena’s gaze lingered on the tree, her breath fogging in the cold. “It’s beautiful,” she said, almost to herself. She tugged her scarf tighter, her movements a mix of comfort and uncertainty.

Alex stepped closer, leaning in slightly. “I hear there’s mistletoe scattered all over the city. Better watch your step.” His voice carried just enough humor to make the comment seem lighthearted, but Sofia caught the way his glance flicked between them.

Sofia tightened her grip on her carry-on. “Maybe we should focus on getting to the resort,” she said, her tone sharper than intended.

Elena’s lips quirked into a smile, her cheeks flushing faintly. “Good idea. I’m ready to see Prague up close.”

The group moved toward the exit, but Sofia felt the weight of Alex’s gaze as she walked away. It was subtle, almost imperceptible, yet it lingered like the faint hum of the carolers’ final note.



THE VAN RATTLED GENTLY over cobblestone streets, its windows fogged from the warmth inside. Prague revealed itself slowly through the frosty glass—gothic spires rising against the evening sky,

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

markets alive with twinkling lights, and the faint aroma of roasted chestnuts wafting through the air.

“Talk about a postcard,” Elena said, her face practically glued to the window. Her breath fogged the glass as she traced a finger along the pane, trying to capture the scene like it might vanish.

Alex chuckled from the front seat. “Wait till you see the Charles Bridge. It’s like stepping into another century.” He turned slightly, his eyes catching Sofia’s in the rearview mirror. “Unless you prefer sticking to your phone?”

Sofia glanced down, her screen still open to a text from her husband. A photo of her kids grinned back at her, oblivious to the snow-covered wonderland she found herself in. She forced a smile. “I’m taking it all in. Just multitasking.”

Elena glanced over, her curiosity evident but unspoken. Her knee brushed Sofia’s lightly as the van hit a bump. Sofia stiffened, unsure if the contact was intentional or accidental.

“You should both relax,” Alex said, leaning back in his seat. “Prague has a way of making you forget everything else.”

His voice carried a promise Sofia wasn’t sure she wanted to unpack.



THE RESORT EMERGED from the snow like something out of a fairy tale—rooftops heavy with white, windows glowing amber, and a single iron gate swinging open to welcome them. The reception hall was warm and inviting, with a crackling fireplace and the faint scent of cinnamon wafting through the air.

The receptionist, a young woman with a bright smile, handed out room keys as she spoke. “Welcome to Prague. A romantic place for a group like yours.” Her words were casual, but Sofia felt her cheeks flush.

Elena laughed softly, her voice carrying a teasing lilt. “Guess they’ve pegged us as the fun crew.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Alex grinned, slipping his key into his pocket. “They’ve clearly met enough flight crews to know better.” His gaze landed on Sofia as he added, “Or maybe it’s just this group that stands out.”

Sofia fumbled with her key, her fingers brushing Elena’s in the process. The touch was fleeting, but her pulse quickened nonetheless.

“Shall we explore before dinner?” Alex asked, his tone effortlessly commanding. He turned toward Sofia, his expression unreadable. “Unless you’d rather settle in first.”

Sofia hesitated, caught between the warmth of the lobby and the chill of unspoken tension. She nodded toward the staircase. “I’ll unpack first. Long day.”

Elena lingered, her eyes following Sofia for a moment before she turned back to Alex. “I’ll join you for the tour.”

The receptionist’s earlier comment echoed in Sofia’s mind as she climbed the stairs. A romantic place. She wasn’t sure if the setting heightened the tension or if it had been there all along.



SOFIA PRESSED HER FOREHEAD to the frost-dusted glass, her breath fogging the surface as she scanned the bustling Christmas market below. A kaleidoscope of twinkling lights illuminated the cobblestone square, where vendors sold trinkets and holiday treats. The hum of carolers, muffled by the thick windows, gave the scene a surreal quality.

Below, Alex and Elena stood close, their figures backlit by the glow of a towering Christmas tree. Alex gestured animatedly, his laughter carrying faintly upward when Sofia cracked the window to let in the crisp air. Elena leaned in, her platinum hair catching the light, a faint smile tugging at her lips as she responded.

Sofia stepped back from the window, her stomach tightening. She shook her head as if to clear it, retreating to the small wooden desk in

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

her room. Picking up her phone, she glanced at the last message from her husband: “Call when you can. The kids are asking for you.”

Her thumb hovered over the screen before she locked it and shoved the phone into her bag. Outside, Alex threw his arm around Elena’s shoulder as they walked away from the market square, their laughter fading into the snowy expanse.



THE SHARED QUARTERS buzzed with laughter as the crew filtered into their respective rooms. Suitcases slid across polished wooden floors, and the distinct sound of zippers punctuated the chatter. Alex leaned casually against the doorway, arms crossed as he watched the group.

“You know, Morales,” he drawled, nodding toward Sofia’s neatly arranged belongings, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone fold their socks with such precision.”

Sofia glanced up from her suitcase, a wry smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “I’m efficient, Reed. You should try it sometime.”

The room erupted in laughter, the playful jab breaking the tension Sofia hadn’t realized was building. Alex smirked and straightened, clapping Tom on the back as he wandered further into the suite.

Across the room, Elena tucked her scarf into her bag, her gaze flicking toward Sofia. Their eyes met briefly, and Elena offered a small, almost shy smile before turning her attention back to her things. Sofia’s pulse quickened, but she focused on rolling her remaining sweaters into compact bundles.



ELENA WAITED FOR SOFIA near the grand staircase, her hands tucked into the deep pockets of her coat. When Sofia descended,

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

adjusting the scarf at her neck, Elena smiled. “Thought you might want to stretch your legs after all that unpacking.”

Sofia hesitated but then nodded, allowing Elena to lead her down a candlelit corridor. The resort’s rustic charm unfolded around them—vaulted ceilings with exposed beams, tapestries of winter landscapes, and the faint scent of pine mingling with wood smoke.

“This place is like something out of a storybook,” Elena said, brushing her fingers over a garland adorned with glittering ornaments.

Sofia hummed in agreement, her gaze lingering on the snow-draped courtyard visible through a window. “It’s beautiful. Almost too perfect.”

Elena turned to her, a teasing edge in her tone. “You don’t trust perfection?”

Sofia smiled faintly. “Let’s just say I’m a realist.”

They walked in companionable silence, their steps muffled by plush rugs. When they reached the lounge, Elena gestured toward the flickering fire. “Want to sit for a bit?”

Sofia hesitated again, her instincts warring with her desire to stay in Elena’s orbit just a little longer. “Why not?”



THE LOUNGE WAS WARM and inviting, its centerpiece a stone fireplace where flames crackled and danced. Alex appeared moments later, holding two glasses of mulled wine and flashing a grin as he approached. “For the ladies,” he announced, handing one glass to Sofia and the other to Elena.

Elena raised her glass in mock salute. “To surviving layovers with style.”

“To the best layover yet,” Alex countered, his gaze lingering on Sofia as he clinked his glass against hers. The intensity of his expression made Sofia’s pulse stutter.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

She broke the moment by taking a sip of the spiced wine, the warmth spreading through her chest. Alex shifted his attention back to the room, engaging the others with his easy charm, but Sofia couldn't shake the sensation of his eyes finding hers at odd intervals.



THE GROUP'S LAUGHTER ebbed and flowed as the night deepened. Alex leaned back in his chair, his drink in hand, and smirked. "So," he began, his voice casual but laced with mischief, "who do we think ends up under the mistletoe first?"

Elena chuckled, her gaze darting to Sofia before returning to Alex. "Bold of you to assume it's not a group effort."

The room erupted in laughter, but Sofia's grip tightened on her glass. She forced a smile, her stomach twisting as Alex's smirk deepened. He raised his drink in a mock toast, his eyes flicking between Sofia and Elena.

"Well, it wouldn't be the holidays without a little surprise romance," he teased, his tone light but deliberate.

Sofia's jaw clenched, and she stood abruptly, excusing herself to the nearest window. The laughter continued behind her, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Alex's words had been meant specifically for her.



THE ROOM FELT COLDER than it should. Sofia stood by the small desk, her hands resting against the wooden surface as she stared at her phone. A photo of her husband and their two children smiled back at her from the lock screen—a reminder of the life she was temporarily detached from but one she felt slipping further away with each passing moment in Prague.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The laughter from downstairs filtered faintly through the floorboards, a constant hum that made her shoulders tense. She pressed the phone's button, darkening the screen, and turned to the window. Frost framed the edges of the glass, the view of the snowy courtyard below obscured by her breath as it fogged the pane.

She wiped the glass with her hand and caught sight of Alex and Elena standing outside near the firepit. His stance was relaxed, one hand tucked in his coat pocket while the other gestured animatedly. Elena's response was harder to gauge from the distance, but her posture leaned slightly toward him, a signal of ease—or complicity.

Sofia's stomach tightened as her thoughts spiraled. What was it about Elena that made everything feel off balance? And why did Alex have to always be there, his charm twisting moments into something that felt more like traps?

She stepped back from the window and sank onto the edge of the bed, her face burying in her hands. The familiar pang of guilt surfaced again, clawing its way to her throat. Was it the way Elena's smile lingered in her mind or the weight of Alex's gaze earlier at dinner? Whatever it was, it gnawed at her resolve.

A sharp knock on the door startled her, and her head snapped up. She hesitated before crossing the room, pausing with her hand on the doorknob.

"Elena," she whispered as she cracked the door open. The younger woman stood in the dim hallway, her breath forming small clouds in the cold air. Her lips parted as if to speak, but then she stopped, searching Sofia's face.

"I just...wanted to see if you were okay," Elena finally said. Her voice was soft, tinged with uncertainty, yet her eyes held a quiet determination.

Sofia opened the door a bit wider, the warmth of the room spilling out to meet the chill from the hall. "I'm fine," she lied, forcing a small smile. "It's just been a long day."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Elena didn't push further, but the look she gave Sofia lingered long after she disappeared back into the hallway. Sofia closed the door and leaned her forehead against it, her chest rising and falling as she steadied her breathing.

The frost on the window had melted slightly when she looked back. Outside, Alex was gone, but the firelight still illuminated Elena's silhouette as she walked toward the garden path, her hands shoved deep in her coat pockets. For a moment, Sofia thought about following her. Instead, she turned off the light and let the room fall into darkness.



SOFIA STEPPED OUT ONTO the balcony, the icy air biting at her cheeks as she wrapped her arms tightly around herself. Below her, the courtyard lay cloaked in snow, its untouched surface shimmering under the soft glow of hanging lanterns. The distant hum of laughter and murmurs from the lounge floated upwards, blending with the crunch of boots on cobblestones as a pair of crew members passed through the grounds.

She tightened her scarf, her gaze following their silhouettes until they disappeared into the night. Her eyes settled on the scene beyond—the bustle of the Christmas market just visible beyond the resort's gated path. The twinkling lights, festive music, and mingling figures seemed so far removed from the storm brewing in her chest.

Her breath came out in visible puffs, matching the rhythm of the snow drifting down. Her thoughts, however, refused to settle. She leaned against the rail, her gloved hands gripping the cold iron as her mind replayed the day's fleeting glances and lingering touches. The sound of Elena's laugh still echoed in her ears, mingled with Alex's teasing remarks. A simmering tension had followed them all, weaving its way into every conversation, every moment of silence.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The sound of laughter carried upward again. This time, it was unmistakably Elena's, bright and uninhibited. Sofia leaned forward, her heart clenching as she spotted Alex and Elena near the courtyard fountain. Their heads were close, their bodies turned toward each other in an exchange that looked intimate even from her vantage point.

Elena tilted her head back, her laughter ringing out again. Alex reached forward, brushing something—a snowflake, perhaps—from her shoulder. The gesture was casual, too casual, and yet Sofia felt a pang of something sharp and unwelcome twist inside her. Jealousy. Or was it guilt? She couldn't tell anymore.

The cold metal of the railing grounded her. Sofia pulled her gaze away, forcing her breathing to even out as she pressed her gloved hands to her cheeks. The frost numbed the heat rising in her skin, but it couldn't chase away the emotions building within her.

"You're losing control," she muttered to herself, her voice barely audible above the distant wind.

The snow fell heavier now, muffling the sounds below. It cloaked everything in silence, offering a temporary reprieve from the turmoil she knew would only grow louder when the night deepened. Sofia turned and retreated into the warmth of her room, the frosted glass door sliding shut behind her. The snow outside continued its descent, covering the courtyard in an unbroken layer of white, as if attempting to bury the secrets it witnessed.

The knock was so soft that Sofia thought she'd imagined it. She hesitated, her hand frozen on the edge of her suitcase. When the knock came again, she crossed the room and opened the door to find Elena standing there, her scarf pulled tight against the cold.

"I saw your light on," Elena said, her voice a low murmur. "Couldn't sleep either?"

Sofia stepped aside to let her in. "Too much on my mind."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Elena's eyes wandered around the room, settling on the framed photo of Sofia's family on the bedside table. "They look lovely," she said, her voice laced with something that wasn't quite envy. "Your family."

Sofia followed her gaze, her chest tightening. "They are."

The silence that followed was heavy but not uncomfortable. Elena wandered toward the window, her fingers brushing the frost-crusted glass. "Prague has a way of making you feel like anything's possible, doesn't it?"

Sofia stood a few steps behind her. "I suppose so."

When Elena turned, her smile was small but sincere. "We don't really talk much outside of work, do we? I always thought you didn't like me."

"I don't dislike you," Sofia said quickly, then paused. "I just—" She faltered, unsure how to finish the thought.

Elena stepped closer, her head tilted as if trying to read Sofia's mind. "You're hard to figure out, you know that? But I like that about you."

Sofia didn't answer. She couldn't. The warmth in Elena's tone, the proximity of her presence, it was all too much and not enough at the same time. When Elena reached out and placed a light hand on her arm, Sofia felt herself sway slightly, like a tree bending in the wind.

"It's late," Elena said, her hand lingering a moment too long. "I should go."

Sofia nodded, her throat too tight to speak. She watched as Elena slipped out the door and down the hallway, her footsteps barely audible on the plush carpet.

When the door clicked shut, Sofia leaned back against it, her heart hammering in her chest.



THE LOUNGE WAS ALIVE with the low hum of conversation and the occasional burst of laughter, but Sofia barely heard any of it. She

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

sat at the edge of the group, her hands wrapped around a warm mug of mulled wine, her thoughts still tangled from Elena's late-night visit.

Alex's voice cut through the haze. "Sofia, you're too quiet tonight."

She looked up to find his sharp green eyes fixed on her, a teasing smile playing at his lips. The others turned to look as well, their conversations pausing.

"Just enjoying the atmosphere," she replied, her tone carefully neutral.

"Ah, the atmosphere," Alex said, leaning back in his chair with an air of casual authority. "This place does have a certain magic, doesn't it?"

Elena, seated across the room, glanced at Sofia briefly before looking away. Alex caught the movement and his smile widened, though it didn't reach his eyes.

"It's not often we get to spend time like this," he continued, raising his glass. "Away from the chaos of the skies. To camaraderie and unforgettable memories."

The others raised their glasses in a chorus of agreement. Sofia hesitated, then followed suit, the heat of Alex's gaze making her skin prickle.

"Speaking of unforgettable," Alex said, his voice dropping just enough to make it feel intimate despite the crowd. "Sofia, what do you think makes a moment worth remembering?"

Sofia blinked, caught off guard. "I suppose it's the people you share it with."

"Exactly," Alex said, his smile turning wolfish. "It's all about the connections we make, isn't it?"

Elena shifted in her seat, her expression unreadable. Sofia avoided looking at her, focusing instead on the fire crackling in the hearth.

"Well," Alex said, breaking the tension with a chuckle. "Here's to more connections."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

The others laughed and raised their glasses again, but Sofia's hand trembled slightly as she took a sip. She didn't look at Alex, and she certainly didn't look at Elena.

Instead, she focused on the warmth of the wine and the steady rhythm of her heartbeat, trying to drown out the chaos simmering beneath the surface.



THE LOUNGE BUZZED WITH soft conversation and the clink of glasses as the crew lounged in overstuffed chairs, basking in the glow of the crackling fireplace. Alex, perched casually on the armrest of a chair, swirled his mulled wine lazily. His gaze roamed the group before settling on Sofia and Elena, both seated at opposite ends of the room.

"We should make tonight count," Alex announced, raising his glass. His voice cut through the chatter, drawing all eyes to him. "How about dinner in the main hall? Festive, a little indulgent... exactly what we deserve."

The crew murmured their agreement, already fantasizing about the spread the resort's kitchen might offer. Alex's smirk widened, his gaze lingering on Sofia.

"Sofia," he began, tilting his head, "why don't you and Elena sit with me? Let's keep the holiday spirit lively."

Elena glanced up sharply, her cheeks coloring. Sofia froze, the warmth from the fireplace suddenly stifling. "Why not mix it up a little?" Alex continued, his tone light, almost teasing. "It's Christmas, after all."

Sofia forced a smile. "Of course," she replied, her voice calm but clipped.

"Great," Alex declared, raising his glass in a mock toast. "To memorable nights."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The crew cheered, their voices overlapping with laughter. Sofia's smile wavered as she caught Elena's hesitant glance.

Beneath the festive cheer, a quiet storm brewed. Sofia wondered, not for the first time that evening, whether Alex was testing her resolve—or his own.



AS THE GROUP DISPERSED to their rooms, the air seemed heavier, weighed down by the lingering tension of unspoken words. Sofia trailed behind, her mind swirling with Alex's pointed glances and Elena's fleeting smiles.

Elena hesitated at the staircase, her hand brushing against the banister as Sofia approached. "You're really coming for dinner, right?" she asked, her voice quiet but firm.

Sofia nodded. "Wouldn't miss it."

Elena offered a faint smile, but her expression remained clouded with doubt. "Goodnight then," she whispered, stepping away before Sofia could respond.

As Sofia climbed the staircase to her room, the snow outside thickened, coating the landscape in a pristine white. She paused by her window, watching the flakes swirl under the glow of the courtyard lights. Below, Alex lingered by the fountain, his figure sharp against the snow-draped scene.

Elena appeared a moment later, her scarf trailing behind her as she approached him. Their laughter carried faintly upward, light but intimate.

Sofia's hand tightened on the windowsill. The snow continued to fall, each flake heavy, as if reflecting the growing weight in her chest.



Chapter 2. The Festive Dinner



THE DOORS TO THE DINING hall swung open, releasing a wave of warmth and the scent of cinnamon and roasted chestnuts. Candlelight flickered off the garlands draped along the edges of the room, their deep greens and reds casting a festive glow. The long table gleamed with polished silverware, tall glasses catching the light like crystals.

Sofia hesitated at the threshold, her eyes lingering on the Christmas tree in the corner, its golden lights twinkling like a promise of something just out of reach. A hand on her lower back nudged her forward. She turned, startled, to find Alex smiling down at her.

“Don’t just stand there. It’s Christmas,” he teased, his voice carrying that infuriating mix of charm and command. His hand lingered for a beat too long before he stepped past her, motioning toward the table.

The crew filed in, laughing and shedding their scarves and coats. Elena brushed past Sofia, her scarf slipping from her shoulders, and paused to glance at her. “Looks magical, doesn’t it?”

Sofia nodded, her throat tight. She let her eyes follow Elena as she crossed the room, her movements fluid, unhurried, like she had all the time in the world to leave Sofia unsteady.

Alex gestured to a chair near him, his grin unrelenting. “Sit next to me,” he said. “I promise I don’t bite.”

Sofia managed a tight smile and moved to the seat. Across the table, Elena’s eyes met hers for a moment that felt heavier than it should.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL



THE CHAIR CREAKED SLIGHTLY as Sofia adjusted her coat over the back, hyper-aware of Alex settling in beside her. The head of the table suited him, the way he sprawled in his chair, one arm draped lazily over the backrest. Across from Sofia, Elena folded her hands neatly on the table, her gaze flicking between Alex and Sofia with a subtle sharpness that made Sofia's pulse tick faster.

"Quite the setup, isn't it?" Alex gestured to the table, his glass already filled with a deep burgundy wine. He raised it slightly, his focus resting too heavily on Sofia. "They went all out for us."

"It's beautiful," Elena said, her voice soft but cutting through the growing hum of conversation. "Almost surreal." Her eyes landed on Sofia for half a beat before lowering to her glass.

Sofia reached for her own drink, suddenly wishing it were something stronger. Alex leaned closer, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "Looks like someone's got their eye on you."

She jerked her head up, heat rising to her face. "What?"

"Relax," Alex said, leaning back as if he hadn't just lit a match. "It's just an observation."

Elena's laughter drew her attention. She was talking to one of the other crew members, her smile easy, but when Sofia glanced again, Elena's gaze was locked firmly on her, her expression unreadable.



THE DINING HALL, BATHED in a warm, golden glow, buzzed with the gentle clink of glasses and soft laughter. Garlands wrapped around wooden beams shimmered in the candlelight, and a soft hum of Christmas carols spilled from hidden speakers. Sofia adjusted her scarf, her fingers toying with the fringe as Alex rose from his chair at the head of the table.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“To the most charming crew I’ve ever had the pleasure of flying with,” he said, holding his glass aloft. His voice carried, smooth and confident, cutting through the low chatter. “Here’s to a layover we’ll never forget.”

Sofia’s gaze flicked to her wineglass, the pale golden liquid catching the light. When she dared to glance up, Alex’s eyes lingered on her a moment too long before shifting to Elena. The young woman offered a quick, nervous smile, her hand brushing the stem of her glass.

“You’re setting the bar pretty high, Captain,” someone joked from the other end of the table. Laughter rippled through the group, breaking the tension that Sofia swore only she could feel.

Elena sipped her drink, her lips curling into a smirk as she caught Sofia’s fleeting glance. “He always does,” she murmured, her voice low enough to be heard only by Sofia. The words, laden with a teasing edge, made Sofia’s heart skip.

Sofia swallowed hard, her cheeks warming under the weight of unseen eyes. She forced a laugh, raising her glass in reluctant agreement as the rest of the crew echoed the toast.

From his spot at the head of the table, Alex’s gaze danced between them, a knowing glint in his eyes. The toast had been for everyone, but Sofia couldn’t shake the feeling that it had been meant for her—and maybe Elena too.



LAUGHTER BOUNCED OFF the timbered walls as the crew dove into stories from past flights. One by one, tales of turbulence, unruly passengers, and near-misses filled the room. Sofia smiled faintly, swirling her wine. The conversation passed over her like a warm tide, comforting but distant.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

"You know," Alex leaned back, his chair creaking, "if we had mistletoe in the cabin, half our passengers would probably demand refunds."

Elena laughed, her shoulders shaking as she set down her fork. "Or tips," she added, arching an eyebrow. The group roared with approval.

Sofia's smile tightened. "Wouldn't that complicate things with HR?" Her voice was light, but her grip on the glass was firm.

Alex tilted his head toward her. "Only if you get caught," he said, a playful grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. His words danced in the air, brushing just close enough to make Sofia's pulse quicken.

Elena's gaze darted between the two, her laughter fading. "Careful, Captain," she said, her tone lilting. "You might set the wrong precedent."

The table erupted again, but Sofia couldn't focus on the noise. Her heart beat unevenly, her thoughts scattered like snowflakes caught in the wind. She glanced at Elena, catching her subtle, assessing look.

Underneath the cheerful glow of garlands and baubles, a silent current ran between them—a thread that neither could tug on without unraveling the fragile balance of the evening.



THE HUM OF VOICES AND the clink of glasses dimmed for Sofia as Alex leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear.

"That dress," he murmured, his voice soft but sharp enough to pierce through the chatter. "Perfect choice for the evening. It's almost like you knew it'd be noticed."

Sofia's spine stiffened as she reached for her wine, willing her hand not to tremble. Across the table, Elena's laughter faltered mid-sentence, her knuckles tightening around her glass.

"Alex," Sofia started, her tone measured, "maybe you should focus on the table, not my wardrobe."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Oh, but it’s hard to ignore,” Alex countered smoothly, leaning back as if the remark had cost him nothing. “Wouldn’t you agree, Elena?”

Elena’s head snapped up, her blue eyes sparking under the low light. “What I think doesn’t matter, does it?” Her voice carried a cold edge that cut through the warmth of the room.

The captain chuckled, raising his glass in mock deference. “Ladies, I’m merely observing. No harm in admiring beauty when it’s right in front of you.”

Sofia’s gaze darted to Elena, catching the flicker of vulnerability before it was buried beneath a calm facade. Her chest tightened, the tension at the table almost unbearable.

Someone from across the room called Alex’s name, breaking the moment. He stood, his exit as nonchalant as his remarks, leaving behind a charged silence. Sofia stared into her glass, her reflection rippling against the wine’s dark surface, while Elena’s shoulders sank, her expression unreadable.



THE CANDLELIGHT FLICKERED against the soft hum of conversation, casting shadows that danced across the table. Elena watched as Sofia traced the rim of her glass with a finger, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

“Another refill?” Alex asked, his charm wrapped tightly around the group like a net. He poured generously, the wine flowing smoothly, as though he controlled its rhythm.

Sofia offered a tight smile but didn’t meet his gaze. The wine’s weight in her glass matched the heavy knot in her stomach. Across the table, Elena shifted in her seat, her scarf tugged loose, exposing the sharp line of her collarbone. Her eyes darted toward Sofia, lingering just a second too long.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

"I always find that wine loosens tongues," Alex remarked, breaking the moment. His grin widened as he swept his gaze around the table. "Doesn't it?"

The group laughed lightly, a half-hearted agreement. Sofia glanced at Elena, hoping for some silent assurance, but found only tension. Elena's fingers drummed softly against the wood, her attention fixed on the swirl of liquid in her glass.

Alex leaned forward, the candlelight catching the faint stubble on his jaw. "What's wrong, Sofia? Too much on your mind to join in?"

Her lips parted, but no words came. A strange heat crawled up her neck, and she hated how aware she was of both Elena's quiet gaze and Alex's pressing presence.

"Let's toast to lightening up, shall we?" Alex raised his glass high. His smirk lingered long enough to steal the air from the room. Sofia clinked her glass reluctantly, but when she met Elena's eyes across the rim, the tension between them swirled heavier than the wine they drank.



AS THE EVENING DEEPENED, the conversation turned playful. Alex, ever the orchestrator, leaned forward with a grin. "How about a round of holiday confessions? It's only fair during Christmas."

The group murmured in agreement, some shifting nervously in their seats. Sofia froze, the concept sparking a flash of panic. Elena, beside her, crossed her legs, her fingers brushing the edge of her scarf as if steadying herself.

"I'll start," Alex announced, his eyes dancing between Sofia and Elena. "Once, I got stuck in Berlin overnight because of a... let's call it 'extended layover' with a certain someone." His tone was light, but his gaze landed heavily on Sofia. The group laughed, a mix of shock and amusement, while Sofia gripped her glass tighter.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Elena spoke next, her voice quiet but deliberate. “One Christmas, I spent the entire day waiting for someone who never showed up. I told myself it didn’t matter, but...” Her voice trailed off, raw and exposed.

Sofia blinked, the ache in Elena’s words settling somewhere deep in her chest. “That’s terrible,” she said softly, the words escaping before she could think.

Elena’s eyes locked on hers, the unspoken words louder than any confession could ever be. “It wasn’t all bad. It taught me to stop waiting.”

Alex interrupted, clapping his hands. “Well, that’s one way to put a damper on the festivities.” His laugh echoed, but it felt hollow.

Sofia glanced between them, her throat tight, her words caught somewhere she couldn’t reach.



SOFIA ADJUSTED HER posture, her back rigid as the laughter around the table ebbed and flowed. She reached for her glass, careful not to make eye contact with Alex or Elena. The warm candlelight reflected off the crystal, casting fleeting patterns on the tablecloth. Alex leaned back in his chair, his movements deliberate and relaxed, commanding the room without effort.

As she lowered her hand, Sofia felt it—a fleeting touch against her foot. Her breath hitched. The contact was light, almost incidental, but there was no mistaking the pressure against her heel. She froze, her heart racing as she glanced down. Was it Alex? Or was it Elena?

Her eyes darted across the table. Alex was mid-laugh, his teeth flashing, his posture oozing nonchalance. Elena, however, sat stiffly, her fingers gripping the stem of her glass as though holding onto something fragile. Sofia’s pulse quickened. Neither gave anything away, leaving her to sit in the confusion, her nerves thrumming.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“You alright?” Alex asked casually, his gaze brushing over her like a lingering whisper.

“I—fine,” Sofia stammered, her voice quieter than intended. She hoped no one noticed, but Elena’s gaze flicked to her, a fleeting glance heavy with meaning.

Across the table, Alex tilted his head slightly, his smirk so faint it could have been imagined. The room seemed to constrict around Sofia, the laughter and chatter becoming background noise as she struggled to regain her composure.



A LOW HUM RUMBLED THROUGH the room, followed by a sudden, audible click. The chandeliers flickered once before plunging the dining hall into complete darkness. Gasps rippled around the table, followed by nervous laughter.

“Well, that’s one way to keep things interesting,” Alex remarked, his voice smooth and unshaken in the void. The faint shuffle of movement filled the room as people adjusted to the sudden change.

Sofia gripped the edge of the table, her knuckles white. In the inky blackness, a hand brushed hers. It was fleeting but unmistakable—a soft graze across her fingers, deliberate and unhurried. Her breath caught. The lack of light amplified every sensation, leaving her hyperaware of the presence beside her. But whose hand was it?

“Elena?” she whispered instinctively, the name slipping out before she could stop it. No response. The tension in her chest tightened, the air around her heavy with unspoken possibilities.

“Everyone alright?” Alex’s voice rose over the growing murmurs, cutting through the disquiet like a blade. His tone was steady, commanding. No one answered immediately, and Sofia could almost hear the smirk in his words.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



A FAINT GLOW BEGAN to creep back into the room as staff hurried to relight the candles scattered across the hall. The flickering flames cast long, dancing shadows, pulling the group out of their disorientation.

Alex sat back, his smirk now fully visible. “I think that added a little drama to the evening,” he quipped, lifting his glass. His relaxed demeanor made the whole episode feel trivial, though Sofia couldn’t shake the tension clinging to her like a second skin.

Elena’s cheeks were flushed, her gaze avoiding Sofia’s. The air between them felt heavier now, charged with something unspoken. Sofia looked down at her hands, clenching them beneath the table as though trying to trap the errant sensations that had crept through her.

“Back to the festivities,” Alex declared, his voice commanding the room once more. “It takes more than a blackout to dim our spirits.”

The laughter that followed felt forced to Sofia, but Alex’s charisma worked its magic, pulling everyone back into the moment. Everyone but her and Elena, who exchanged one brief, loaded glance before returning to their silence.



SOFIA SLIPPED HER PHONE into her pocket, the glow of the dining hall fading behind her as she stepped into the dimly lit corridor. The quiet hummed around her, amplifying the weight of her thoughts. Elena’s voice broke the silence before the echo of her steps reached Sofia.

“You’re not going to run away from me all night, are you?” Elena’s tone was light, but her expression carried something heavier.

Sofia hesitated, glancing over her shoulder. “I wasn’t running. I just needed some air.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena crossed her arms, leaning casually against the wall. “Convenient timing.”

“I—” Sofia’s words faltered. She exhaled sharply. “I didn’t want to make a scene.”

Elena tilted her head, her eyes narrowing. “So avoiding me is easier?”

Sofia’s fingers brushed her temple, frustration bubbling beneath her calm facade. “This isn’t easy, Elena. None of it is.”

The distance between them closed as Elena stepped forward, her voice softening. “You don’t have to make it harder on yourself, Sofia. I just—” She stopped, her hand hovering briefly before dropping back to her side. “I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

Sofia’s laugh came out bitter, almost involuntary. “You think I’m okay? After that dinner, after... everything?”

Elena searched her face, the flicker of a smile gone. “It’s not just you. I feel it too.”

For a moment, silence stretched between them, heavy with unsaid words. Sofia’s gaze flicked to the ground. “I don’t know what to do with it.”

Elena touched her arm lightly, grounding her. “Neither do I. But I’m here.”

The sound of footsteps echoed down the hall, and both women turned as Alex appeared at the corner, his smirk instantly dissolving the fragile connection between them.

“Am I interrupting?” His casual tone carried the weight of deliberate intrusion.



ALEX STROLLED CLOSER, his hands in his pockets and his usual air of controlled charm radiating off him. The corners of his mouth twitched as his eyes darted between Sofia and Elena.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Deep in conversation, I see. Mind if I join?” His voice was smooth, but there was a hint of something predatory underneath.

Elena squared her shoulders, her eyes narrowing. “It’s a private conversation.”

“Oh, come on,” Alex drawled. “Aren’t we all friends here? No secrets, no hard feelings?”

Sofia’s breath hitched, and her fingers twitched at her side. “Not now, Alex.”

He raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. “Not now? That’s an interesting choice of words. Did something happen between now and dinner?” His gaze lingered on Sofia a second too long.

Elena stepped forward, her voice sharp. “You enjoy this, don’t you? Stirring things up, seeing who breaks first.”

Alex’s smirk deepened. “I wouldn’t dream of it, Elena. But since you bring it up...”

Sofia shook her head, her voice cutting through the rising tension. “Alex, enough.”

For a moment, the air seemed to crackle with unspoken challenges. Then Alex raised his hands in mock surrender. “Fine. I wouldn’t want to keep you ladies from whatever... important matters you’re discussing.”

As he turned to leave, he glanced over his shoulder. “But do try to keep it discreet. For the sake of the team, of course.”

Sofia’s jaw tightened as she watched him disappear around the corner. Elena’s hand brushed her arm again, but Sofia pulled away, her voice low. “We should go back.”

Elena didn’t argue.



THE SOFT STRAINS OF piano music filtered through the dining hall as they re-entered, the light from the chandeliers dancing across

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

the polished wood floor. One of the crew had wandered to the piano in the corner, their fingers hesitantly pressing keys that formed a familiar holiday tune.

Sofia paused, her gaze drawn to Elena. She stood apart, humming quietly, her eyes closed as the melody washed over her. For the first time that evening, the tension in her shoulders seemed to melt away.

The sight caught Sofia off guard. She wanted to say something, but the words lodged in her throat. Instead, she leaned against the wall, watching the soft curve of Elena's lips as she mouthed the lyrics. The room, filled with laughter and scattered conversations, faded to the background.

Elena opened her eyes, catching Sofia's stare. A flicker of warmth passed between them, as fleeting as it was undeniable. Then the music stopped, and the moment dissolved, leaving only the hum of voices and the weight of what couldn't be said.



THE CLINKING OF GLASSES softened, replaced by the low hum of voices and the faint melody of a carol drifting from the corner piano. Alex stood, his presence commanding, as he raised his glass once more. His smile, disarming and deliberate, caught the flickering glow of the candles.

"To unforgettable nights," he announced, his voice smooth yet carrying an edge of mischief. "And to a crew that knows how to make them truly memorable."

Scattered laughter echoed around the table, but Sofia felt her throat tighten. She glanced across the table at Elena, who was tracing the rim of her glass with a finger, her gaze locked downward. Alex's toast felt like a string being pulled taut, an unspoken challenge wrapped in charm.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Unforgettable,” Sofia murmured under her breath, her voice carrying only to her ears. Her hands remained clasped around her untouched wine, the liquid dark and still, like the thoughts pressing against her mind.

As Alex resumed his seat, his gaze swept over Sofia, lingering long enough to make her heart skip a beat. He leaned slightly toward her, his voice a murmur meant just for her. “The perfect ending to an evening like this, don’t you think?”

Before Sofia could respond, Elena stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. “I think I’ll call it a night.”

The room stilled briefly, but Alex’s easy laugh cut through the tension. “Don’t tell me we’ve worn you out already, Elena?”

She didn’t answer, her departure swift, her steps purposeful. Sofia watched her go, her own feet itching to follow, but she remained seated, tethered by Alex’s lingering presence. His smirk deepened, a knowing look passing between them that left her unsettled.



THE NIGHT AIR OUTSIDE the dining hall was sharp, the cold biting at Sofia’s cheeks as she stepped into the resort courtyard. Snow fell in slow, deliberate flakes, clinging to her coat and muffling the world around her. Ahead, Elena stood by a lamppost, the warm glow casting shadows on her features.

Sofia hesitated, her boots crunching softly on the snow. “Elena.”

Elena didn’t turn immediately, her arms crossed tightly as though bracing against more than the cold. “I needed to get out of there,” she admitted finally, her voice carrying a raw edge.

“I understand.” Sofia stepped closer, her breath visible in the frosty air. “It’s... complicated.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena let out a soft laugh, humorless and quiet. “Complicated? That’s one word for it.” She finally met Sofia’s gaze, her eyes searching. “Why do you let him get to you?”

Sofia opened her mouth but found no immediate answer. Her thoughts tangled in the wine, the stares, the tension that seemed to cling to every word Alex spoke. “I don’t know,” she said honestly.

Before either could speak again, the crunch of boots interrupted them. Alex emerged from the hall, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp. “Ladies,” he greeted, his voice warm but carrying that familiar edge. “Leaving without saying goodbye?”

Elena’s jaw tightened, but she said nothing. Sofia felt her pulse quicken, her instincts warring between retreat and confrontation. Alex’s gaze flicked between them, his smile easy but his eyes calculating.

“Shall we walk back together?” he offered, his tone leaving no room for refusal.

Sofia fell into step beside him, Elena trailing slightly behind. The snow fell heavier, wrapping the three of them in a suffocating quiet that spoke louder than words ever could.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 3. Under the Mistletoe



THE DINING HALL'S WARMTH clung to Sofia's skin as she stepped out into the courtyard, her breath clouding in the crisp, snowy air. The quiet of the night enveloped her, a stark contrast to the laughter and music that buzzed inside. She wrapped her scarf tighter, her heels crunching against the frozen ground.

"Elena," Sofia exhaled as the younger woman appeared from the shadows of the towering pine trees, her cheeks flushed. "I didn't expect you to follow."

"You looked like you needed saving," Elena replied, her voice light but her eyes searching. She shoved her hands into her coat pockets and shrugged. "Alex's charm can be... suffocating."

Sofia glanced over her shoulder at the glow of the dining room, Alex's figure unmistakable as he entertained the crew. "He has a way of commanding attention."

"Too much attention," Elena murmured, stepping closer. Her boots disturbed the untouched snow between them, closing the space. "But sometimes it's good to get away."

Sofia nodded, unsure if Elena's words carried a deeper meaning. The silence between them settled, not awkward, but heavy with unspoken thoughts. Above, snow began to fall again, the flakes catching in their hair.

Elena tilted her head, studying Sofia. "You're quieter tonight."

"Just... tired," Sofia answered, though her tone betrayed her, wavering under Elena's gaze.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

"You're not as good at hiding as you think," Elena said softly, her breath visible in the icy air.

Sofia's lips parted, but no response came. The cold began to creep through her coat, but it wasn't the chill that made her shiver.



THEIR STEPS WERE UNHURRIED, deliberate, as they walked side by side down the narrow path that wound through the courtyard. Snow clung to the trees like icing, the moonlight bathing the scene in silver.

Elena broke the silence first. "You've been flying for how long now?"

"Too long," Sofia replied with a small laugh. "It feels like the world blurs after a while. Cities start to look the same."

Elena glanced at her, her blue eyes bright even in the dim light. "And yet Prague seems to have caught your attention."

"It's... different," Sofia admitted, though she wasn't sure if she meant the city or something else entirely. "It feels heavier somehow. Maybe it's the history, or the snow."

"Or the company," Elena added, her lips curling into a faint smile.

Sofia stopped, turning toward her. "Elena—"

"What?" Elena's tone held a note of teasing, but her expression softened. "Don't tell me you regret taking this walk already."

"No, I just—" Sofia hesitated, her gaze falling to the snow underfoot. "It's been a strange night."

"Strange can be good," Elena said, her voice quiet now, less playful. She stepped closer, the distance between them narrowing. "Sometimes strange is what wakes us up."

Sofia felt her pulse quicken, though she wasn't sure why. The faint sound of carolers drifted from the resort, but here, in the courtyard, the world felt like it had shrunk to just the two of them.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



THE COURTYARD GLISTENED with snow, bathed in the soft glow of fairy lights draped along the wooden archways. Sofia and Elena walked together, their steps crunching softly against the fresh snow. Their conversation ebbed and flowed between mundane remarks about the dinner and the crispness of the winter air.

Sofia glanced up, the arch ahead catching her eye. Tiny white berries hung delicately from a sprig of mistletoe, suspended in the center like a daring secret.

“Looks like tradition’s calling,” Elena said, following Sofia’s gaze. Her voice carried a teasing lilt as she pointed to the mistletoe.

Sofia chuckled, an uneasy sound that betrayed her calm exterior. “Some traditions are best left ignored.”

Elena tilted her head, her platinum hair catching the light. “Oh, come on. It’s harmless.”

Sofia stepped back instinctively, her boots sliding slightly on the icy ground. The mistletoe loomed above them like an unspoken challenge, and she shook her head with a laugh that sounded more nervous than amused.

“You’re awfully quick to break rules,” Sofia said, her tone light but not masking her discomfort.

Elena’s smile softened as she took a deliberate step closer. “Rules are overrated. And this...” she motioned toward the arch, her voice quieter now, “this is just an excuse, isn’t it?”

Sofia swallowed hard, her gaze darting between Elena and the archway. The air felt heavier, though nothing around them had changed.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

SOFIA'S LAUGH CAME too quickly, cracking through the quiet night. "You're relentless, aren't you?" she said, hoping humor would deflect the tension simmering between them.

Elena shrugged, her smile unwavering but softer now. "Only when it's worth it."

Sofia's cheeks flushed, the cold air biting at her skin. She glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see someone—anyone—emerge from the resort. But the courtyard was empty, the stillness amplifying the sound of her quickened breath.

"I don't—" Sofia started but stopped as Elena took a small step closer, the space between them narrowing.

"Relax," Elena said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's just mistletoe. Not a binding contract."

Her playful words did little to ease Sofia's nerves. She felt her pulse quicken, the weight of Elena's steady gaze rooting her to the spot.

"You're impossible," Sofia muttered, turning her head away, but Elena's voice drew her back.

"Maybe. But you're still standing here."

The moment stretched, thick with unspoken words. The snow fell lightly around them, the world narrowing to just the space beneath the archway.



ELENA REACHED TOWARD Sofia's shoulder, her fingers brushing away a snowflake clinging to the dark fabric of her coat. The gesture seemed casual, almost reflexive, but her hand lingered. Sofia felt the heat of her touch, despite the biting chill in the air.

"You're always so put together," Elena murmured, her voice lower than before. "Even out here, in the cold."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Sofia exhaled, watching her breath rise like a thin cloud. “Years of habit, I guess.” Her own voice betrayed her; it was soft, too yielding. She adjusted her scarf, her fingers fumbling with the knot.

The silence that stretched between them was anything but empty. The snow crunched faintly under their boots as they stood still. Elena didn’t pull her hand away. Instead, her fingers grazed the edge of Sofia’s scarf, straightening it as though it had slipped.

Sofia’s breath hitched. “You don’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” Elena interrupted, her gaze unflinching. “Is that a problem?”

For a moment, Sofia couldn’t speak. Her chest tightened, an ache blooming that she couldn’t name. Then she took a step back, her heel sinking into the fresh snow. The space felt both a relief and a loss.

“No, it’s not,” Sofia said, finally. But the words felt like a lie, and she knew Elena could tell.



“I WASN’T SURE IF YOU’D even notice me tonight,” Elena admitted, her tone breaking through the careful ease she carried.

Sofia glanced at her sharply. “What does that mean?”

Elena crossed her arms, the snow catching in her short, pale hair like tiny stars. “You’re... Sofia Morales. Everyone notices you. But not really.” She shifted, crunching the snow underfoot. “Not in the way I hoped you would.”

“Elena,” Sofia started, her words faltering. Guilt knotted in her chest, guilt she couldn’t untangle from the flicker of something else—something more dangerous. “You don’t understand—”

“I don’t?” Elena’s laugh was soft but edged with frustration. “Because it feels like I do. And it feels like you do, too.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia wrapped her arms around herself. The cold was no longer something she noticed. “This isn’t fair,” she whispered, but it wasn’t clear if she meant to Elena or to herself.

“You’re right,” Elena said, her voice steady now. “But fairness doesn’t change anything. I notice you. I see you. I just... wish you’d let me.”

Sofia couldn’t look at her. Instead, she stared at the snow-covered path ahead, her pulse pounding in her ears. “I don’t know if I can,” she said, more to the falling snow than to Elena.

“Try,” Elena said. Her words hung in the air, daring Sofia to respond.

And in the silence that followed, it was Sofia who finally took the first step forward.



SOFIA STOOD MOTIONLESS under the mistletoe, her breath visible in the cold air. The archway’s twinkling lights seemed to shimmer brighter, casting golden hues against Elena’s face. For a moment, the world stilled. Only the faint crunch of snow beneath their boots reminded her this was real.

Elena tilted her head, a playful grin tugging at her lips. “You do know the rule, right?” Her voice was soft, laced with mischief but undercut by something deeper.

Sofia’s laugh sounded hollow to her own ears. “It’s just a decoration,” she managed, taking a step back. Her pulse quickened, betraying her words.

“And yet, it’s making you nervous,” Elena replied, her smile fading as she stepped closer. The gap between them shrank, and Sofia felt the heat radiating from her despite the chill of the night.

Elena reached out, brushing a stray snowflake off Sofia’s shoulder. Her fingers lingered, warm against the fabric. “You don’t have to run

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

from this,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the faint rustle of the wind.

Sofia looked up, her hazel eyes meeting Elena’s unflinching blue ones. The air felt charged, heavy with unspoken words and unacknowledged feelings. Slowly, as if drawn by an unseen force, Sofia leaned in. Their lips met—tentative at first, a soft graze of warmth against the icy backdrop.

The kiss deepened, fueled by days of suppressed emotions. Time stretched, the rest of the world dissolving into nothingness. When they pulled apart, Sofia’s breath hitched, her lips tingling. She glanced away, her cheeks flushed.

“We shouldn’t—” Her words faltered, lacking conviction.

Elena’s gaze softened. “But we did.”



THE WEIGHT OF THE KISS pressed down on Sofia as she stepped back, her hands trembling at her sides. She turned her head, avoiding Elena’s piercing gaze. “This... I can’t...” Her voice trailed off, thick with conflict.

“You can’t or you won’t?” Elena asked, her tone even, though her eyes betrayed a flicker of vulnerability.

Sofia bit her lip, her heart pounding. She felt the weight of a thousand choices she hadn’t made pressing down on her. “I shouldn’t have done that,” she said, though the words felt like a hollow shield. The truth was tangled in her chest, too complicated to unravel.

Elena crossed her arms, her jaw tightening. “You’re not the only one taking risks here,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “But don’t pretend this didn’t mean anything.”

Sofia finally met her gaze, the mixture of longing and regret in Elena’s expression mirroring her own. “I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“You didn’t.” Elena’s reply was immediate, firm. “But don’t shut me out because you’re scared.”

Before Sofia could respond, a noise broke the stillness—a faint crunch of footsteps on the snow-covered path. They both turned sharply, their faces a mix of surprise and dread. A shadow moved at the edge of the courtyard.

Elena stepped back, her voice dropping to a murmur. “We should go.”

Sofia nodded, the warmth of the kiss still lingering on her lips as she turned toward the resort. But as they walked away, the chill of guilt wrapped around her, colder than the winter air.



THE KISS ENDED WITH a breathless stillness, the snow falling around them in fragile silence. Sofia’s eyes darted to Elena’s lips, then away, guilt already blooming in her chest. She stepped back, her boots crunching against the snow.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she whispered, her voice barely louder than the wind. Her fingers fumbled with her scarf as if adjusting it could somehow undo the moment.

Elena tilted her head, her expression soft but guarded. “Then why did you?”

Sofia froze. The question hovered between them, piercing the cold. “I don’t know,” she admitted, though the words felt like a lie even as they left her mouth. She knew exactly why, but saying it aloud felt like crossing another line she couldn’t uncross.

Elena’s lips curved into the faintest smile, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “You’re not the only one who’s confused.”

The faint laughter of the crew echoed from a distance, grounding Sofia in the reality she was already trying to escape. “We should head back,” she said quickly, her voice brittle. She didn’t wait for Elena’s

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

response, turning toward the resort and leaving the younger woman standing in the snow.

Her heart thudded with every step, the weight of the kiss pulling at her, pulling her back. But she didn't turn around. She couldn't.



THE CRUNCH OF FOOTSTEPS broke the uneasy quiet, and Sofia stopped mid-stride, her pulse jumping. She turned to see Alex emerging from the shadows, his smirk as sharp as the icy wind.

"Well, isn't this cozy?" His tone was light, almost playful, but there was an edge beneath it that sent a chill down Sofia's spine.

Elena caught up to them, her expression tightening as Alex's gaze flicked between the two of them. "We were just—" she began, but Alex cut her off.

"Taking in the scenery?" His smirk widened, his green eyes gleaming. "Funny, I didn't think the mistletoe was part of the view."

Sofia's jaw clenched, heat rising to her cheeks. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I?" Alex's voice was low, his amusement clear. "Relax, Sofia. It's Christmas. Everyone deserves a little... cheer."

Elena crossed her arms, her defiance cutting through the tension. "What do you want, Alex?"

He raised his hands in mock surrender, his grin never faltering. "Nothing at all. Just enjoying the holiday spirit."

Sofia's stomach churned as she turned away, heading for the resort without another word. Alex's laughter followed her, light and mocking, while Elena hesitated for a moment before trailing after her.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE CRUNCH OF SNOW underfoot was the only sound as Sofia walked a few steps behind Elena. The cold air bit at her cheeks, but she hardly felt it; her thoughts were elsewhere, tangled and sharp. Elena stopped suddenly, turning to face her.

“You’ve been quiet,” Elena said softly, her words a stark contrast to the brittle tension hanging between them.

“I just needed some air,” Sofia replied, her voice clipped.

Elena studied her for a moment. “It’s more than that, isn’t it?”

Sofia glanced away, the warmth of guilt creeping up her neck. “Why does everything have to mean something?”

“Because with him, it always does.” Elena nodded toward the faint outline of Alex near the courtyard’s edge, where he leaned casually against a snow-dusted bench, watching them.

Sofia sighed. “You’re reading too much into it.”

“Am I?” Elena stepped closer, her tone hardening. “You saw how he looked at us. You felt it.”

Sofia met her gaze, the heat in Elena’s eyes thawing the icy wall Sofia had been trying to build all evening. She wanted to argue, to deny it, but the truth pressed too hard against her chest.

“I don’t play his games,” Sofia said, her voice steadier now.

“No,” Elena agreed, her breath visible in the cold air. “You don’t. But he’s counting on you pretending you’re not in one.”

The words struck deep, and Sofia didn’t have time to respond before Alex’s voice broke through the quiet.

“Ladies, I hate to interrupt,” he called out, his tone teasing, “but don’t wander too far. I’d hate for you to miss all the fun.”

Elena rolled her eyes, the tension between them evaporating as frustration replaced it. “See what I mean?”

Sofia gave a small, reluctant smile. “Let’s just go back.”

Elena hesitated, her shoulders stiffening before she nodded. “Fine. But this isn’t over.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Sofia didn't answer, her gaze fixed on the ground as they walked toward the resort. The warmth of the building loomed ahead, but the cold clung to her, more than just the winter air.

The walk back to the resort felt heavier than the snow-laden air. Sofia trailed behind the group, her thoughts knotted and pulling in opposite directions.

Elena slowed her pace until she fell in step beside Sofia. "You okay?" Her voice was careful, measured.

Sofia glanced at her, the shadows of their earlier tension still etched across Elena's features. "It's just... a lot," Sofia admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah, well, Alex thrives on making things complicated." Elena's jaw tightened as she glanced over her shoulder at him, his figure a dark silhouette against the resort's glowing facade.

Before Sofia could respond, Alex's voice carried back to them. "Don't dawdle, ladies. The snow's charming, but I'm sure the warmth inside is better."

Sofia shot him a glare he didn't see, her hands curling into fists inside her pockets.

As they neared the entrance, Elena stopped abruptly, turning to Sofia. "You don't have to let him control this." Her voice held a quiet intensity. "You know that, right?"

Sofia hesitated, her breath visible in the icy air. The weight of Elena's words—and the truth behind them—pressed heavy against her chest. Before she could answer, Alex called out again, his tone a mix of teasing and command.

"Are you two coming, or should I send someone back to guide you?"

Elena exhaled sharply, her frustration evident, but she didn't say anything else. She turned and followed Alex into the resort, leaving Sofia standing alone for a moment longer. The snow fell softly around her, its silence mocking the storm inside.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL



SOFIA STOOD IN THE dim light of her room, the silence heavy as snow continued to fall outside her frost-touched window. She leaned on the dresser, her fingers grazing her lips. The memory of the kiss clung to her, raw and vivid. It wasn't just the kiss itself—it was the pull of something she hadn't felt in years. A longing that went beyond logic, beyond control.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand. She glanced at it, her husband's name glowing on the screen. For a moment, she hesitated, her hand hovering in midair. The text was mundane, a reminder to pick up gifts for their children. It felt impossibly distant from where she stood now, her heart pounding with guilt and exhilaration.

She dropped the phone and turned to the mirror. Her reflection stared back, accusing and conflicted.

"What are you doing?" she whispered to herself. The question hung unanswered in the room's quiet.

Sofia's mind replayed the scene—Elena's soft laugh, her steady gaze, the spark of electricity when their lips met. It hadn't felt wrong in the moment. It had felt... inevitable. She closed her eyes, trying to push it away, but her thoughts kept circling back.

She exhaled sharply, shaking her head. Grabbing a glass of water from the counter, she stared out into the night, watching the snow fall thick and heavy. The cold seeped through the window, but it couldn't numb the warmth that still burned in her chest.

Elena sat cross-legged on the edge of her bed, the room bathed in a faint golden glow from the lamp beside her. She twisted the ring on her thumb, a nervous habit she hadn't indulged in years.

Her mind was a storm of emotions. The kiss had taken her by surprise—both the act and the fact that it had come from Sofia. She could still feel it, a trace of Sofia's warmth lingering on her lips. She

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

closed her eyes, letting the memory flood her senses, but guilt tugged at the edges.

"This can't just end here," she murmured, her voice breaking the silence.

She thought about the way Sofia had pulled back, the mix of longing and fear in her eyes. It wasn't rejection; Elena was certain of that. It was hesitation, the weight of whatever Sofia was holding onto.

Elena stood abruptly and paced the room. She knew this was risky—messy, even—but she couldn't ignore it. Not when it felt so real, so much more than just a fleeting attraction.

"I'm not giving up," she said, her tone firmer now.

She stopped by the window, watching the courtyard below. Her breath fogged the glass as she leaned closer, searching for clarity in the night.

Elena had never been one to let fear dictate her choices. And she wasn't about to start now.



ALEX LOUNGED IN ONE of the resort's oversized chairs, his legs stretched out in front of him and a glass of scotch dangling loosely from his fingers. The fire crackled in the stone hearth, throwing flickering light onto the polished wood floor. The hall was quiet now, the hum of the evening's festivities fading into distant memories.

He tilted his head back, letting the warmth of the fire sink into his skin. But his mind wasn't at rest. The evening had unfolded in ways even he hadn't fully anticipated.

He swirled the scotch in his glass, the amber liquid catching the firelight. His thoughts replayed the moment he had stumbled upon Sofia and Elena under the mistletoe. Their flustered expressions, the way Sofia's guard shot up instantly—it had been deliciously telling.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“They think they’re subtle,” he muttered, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

A faint shuffle of footsteps from the upper floor caught his attention. His smirk deepened. He didn’t need to look to know who it was. The tension between Sofia and Elena had been simmering for weeks, and tonight, it had reached a breaking point.

He tipped the glass to his lips, savoring the burn. He wasn’t one to meddle without reason, but this was too entertaining to ignore. Besides, he wasn’t above leveraging it if it served his own purposes.

Alex stood, his movements slow and deliberate. He carried his glass to the window and peered into the snow-covered courtyard. The storm had settled, leaving a pristine blanket of white beneath the resort’s glowing lights.

“Let’s see where this goes,” he murmured to himself, his tone laced with amusement.

The fire crackled louder as he turned back to the lounge, his steps echoing softly against the floor. The night was still young, and Alex knew that secrets, like fire, had a way of burning brighter in the dark.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 4. The Captain's Games



THE CLINKING OF SILVERWARE echoed softly through the resort's dining hall, mingling with the warm hum of carols drifting from a hidden speaker. Sofia sat stiffly, her hands folded tightly in her lap as her untouched plate cooled. Across the table, Elena toyed with her coffee cup, her usual easy smile nowhere to be found.

Alex strolled in, his presence commanding attention as his boots clicked against the polished wood floor. He paused behind Sofia's chair, his gaze darting between her and Elena before he broke the silence.

"Rough night?" His voice carried just enough amusement to make Sofia flinch.

She forced a neutral smile. "Just tired."

Elena's jaw tightened, and she leaned back in her chair, her expression betraying irritation. "Some of us value sleep."

Alex chuckled as he took a seat, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. "Sleep is overrated. Especially in a place like this." He gestured broadly to the room, his grin widening. "A night in Prague should be... unforgettable."

Sofia pushed her fork around her plate, avoiding both their eyes. The tension radiating between them felt suffocating, like the thick fog clinging to the windows outside. Alex seemed to revel in it, his smirk deepening as he reached for his coffee.

"Well," he said, raising his mug in a mock toast, "here's to making memories."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena's hand clenched her napkin, but she said nothing. Sofia swallowed hard, her gaze fixed firmly on her plate as her heart hammered in her chest.



LATER, IN THE COZY lounge lit by the crackling fireplace, Alex stood before the gathered crew, his hands tucked casually into his pockets. The snow outside fell in a serene, unbroken flurry, but the room buzzed with restless energy.

"Let's make the most of today," he began, his deep voice commanding their attention. "A tour through the Christmas markets, some gothic landmarks, and maybe even a bit of mulled wine to keep us warm."

A murmur of approval rippled through the group, though Sofia remained silent, her fingers absently tracing the rim of her coffee cup. Elena's gaze flicked to her, then away, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Sounds like a plan," one of the junior attendants said, her enthusiasm breaking the tension.

Alex's eyes gleamed. "Excellent. Let's meet in the lobby in half an hour." He clapped his hands together, the sound sharp against the muffled ambiance of the room. "And remember—Prague rewards those who know how to look closely."

His gaze lingered on Sofia as he spoke, the weight of his words hanging in the air like a challenge. Elena crossed her arms, her stance subtly defensive as she studied Alex with narrowed eyes.

As the crew dispersed, Sofia hesitated near the door, her pulse quickening when Elena brushed past her.

"Stay close today," Elena murmured, her tone soft but edged with something deeper.

Sofia's breath caught, but she nodded, her voice failing her as Alex's knowing smile followed her out of the room.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



THE GROUP STROLLED through Prague's cobblestone streets, bundled against the cold, while Alex positioned himself at the front, naturally assuming the role of a guide. Twinkling lights from the Christmas markets reflected in the windows of nearby cafes, lending the moment an air of festive serenity—at least to the untrained eye.

“So, who knew Prague was this charming?” Alex glanced back, flashing a grin that landed squarely on Sofia. “Though I’d argue the company makes it better.”

The group laughed, except for Elena, who shot a quick glance at Sofia.

“It’s stunning,” Sofia murmured, her eyes lingering on the glowing spires of a cathedral before shifting nervously to the ground.

Elena walked a few steps behind, her arms crossed. “Charming, sure. But I could do without the commentary.”

Alex chuckled. “Ah, but where’s the fun in silence, Elena? You wouldn’t want the experience to go unnoticed, would you?” His words were light, but the challenge in his tone was unmistakable.

As they reached a bustling corner, Alex stopped abruptly and pointed at a café. “They say the trdelník here is unmatched. Sofia, care to join me for a taste?”

Before Sofia could answer, Elena cut in. “She can’t be the only one who tries it. We’re a team, aren’t we?”

Alex’s grin widened. “Of course. I’d never leave anyone out—unless they wanted to be.”

Sofia felt Elena’s presence close behind her as they moved toward the café, tension threading through the cold air.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE MARKET BUZZED WITH life as vendors called out their wares and the scent of roasted chestnuts filled the air. Alex guided Sofia toward a stall adorned with intricately painted ornaments, his movements deliberate, ensuring they drifted just out of the group's earshot.

"Pick one," Alex said, his voice low. "Something that'll remind you of this night."

Sofia hesitated, her eyes darting between the ornaments and the distance where Elena lingered, watching.

"This one," Alex continued, holding up a delicate snowflake. "Unique. Like you."

Sofia's breath hitched, but she didn't respond.

From her vantage point, Elena's jaw tightened. She made her way toward them, the warmth of the market doing little to temper the chill rising in her chest.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," Elena said as she arrived, her voice edged with sarcasm.

Alex smirked, offering the ornament to Sofia. "Not at all. We were just appreciating Prague's artistry. Care to join?"

Elena's eyes flicked to Sofia. "I'd rather not play along."

Sofia, caught between their gazes, handed the ornament back to Alex. "Maybe we should head back to the group."

Alex inclined his head, his smirk never wavering. "Of course. Wouldn't want anyone feeling left out."

As they walked back, the tension between the three of them hummed beneath the surface, unspoken but impossible to ignore.



THE BUSTLING MARKET began to fade as Alex steered Sofia away, his gloved hand lightly brushing her elbow. She glanced back over her shoulder, catching a glimpse of Elena's puzzled expression as she

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

lingered near a stall of intricate hand-painted ornaments. The cold air nipped at Sofia's cheeks, but Alex's presence brought a strange heat that she couldn't entirely shake.

"Gifts for the crew," Alex explained with a disarming smile as they moved through the crowd. "Something small to commemorate this magical layover."

Sofia nodded, her hands stuffed deep into her coat pockets. "You didn't have to drag me along. I'm sure you have impeccable taste."

"True," Alex replied, stopping near a stall adorned with carved wooden trinkets. He picked up a small figurine of an angel, turning it over in his hands. "But I thought you might want a break. It looked...tense back there."

Sofia stiffened but kept her voice even. "I'm fine. Just enjoying the sights."

Alex set the figurine down and leaned closer, his voice dropping. "You deserve more than just fine, Sofia. More than just fleeting moments under mistletoe."

Her breath hitched, and she stepped back, her boot crunching against the frozen ground. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His smile widened, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Come on. We've all got secrets. Just be careful they don't turn into regrets."

The weight of his words settled heavily on her chest, but before she could respond, he was already moving toward another stall, leaving her standing alone, torn between anger and unease.



FROM ACROSS THE MARKET, Elena watched as Alex's hand briefly touched Sofia's arm. The playful ease in his posture didn't fool her—his charm was calculated, a carefully sharpened blade. Her stomach churned as Sofia's head dipped, her expression unreadable.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

By the time Elena reached them, Alex was admiring a display of embroidered scarves, his tone light as he remarked, “You’d look stunning in this shade of red, Sofia.”

“Hope I’m not interrupting something important,” Elena said, her voice sharp enough to slice through the air.

Alex turned, his smirk firmly in place. “Not at all. Sofia and I were just picking out souvenirs. Care to join us?”

Elena ignored him, her eyes locked on Sofia. “We were supposed to stick together. The group’s heading toward the main square.”

Sofia’s lips parted, but no words came out. Her gaze darted between them, caught in a silent tug-of-war. Finally, she nodded. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

“Such a shame,” Alex murmured, his tone laced with mock disappointment. “I was just starting to enjoy our little shopping spree.”

Elena’s glare was icy, her hand brushing Sofia’s sleeve as they walked away. “You don’t owe him anything, you know,” she muttered under her breath.

Sofia kept her eyes forward, her jaw tight. “It’s not that simple.”

“Make it simple,” Elena snapped, her frustration bubbling to the surface. “Before he makes it impossible.”

The tension between them hung heavy as they rejoined the group, the festive chatter and sparkling lights doing little to thaw the growing frost between their words.



ALEX LEANED AGAINST a lamppost near the edge of the market, his smirk as sharp as the icy wind cutting through the square. He watched Sofia and Elena from a distance, his eyes narrowing whenever their gazes lingered on each other a moment too long. He adjusted his scarf with deliberate ease, pushing off the post as he strolled toward them, his boots crunching through the snow.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Quite the scene over here,” he began, his voice low but charged with meaning. “Mind if I join the party?”

Elena stiffened, her fingers curling tighter around the shopping bag in her hand. Sofia looked away, focusing on the colorful stalls that lined the cobblestone street, but her shoulders gave her away—tense, bracing for his next move.

“Always so serious, Sofia.” Alex chuckled, sidling closer. “You know, it’s a market, not a tribunal.”

Elena stepped forward, blocking his path. “Maybe you should go find someone else to charm, Alex. I’m sure there’s no shortage of admirers.”

His smirk widened as he tilted his head, feigning amusement. “Touchy tonight, aren’t we?” He gestured broadly to the bustling square. “Relax, it’s Christmas.”

“Somehow, you make that sound like a threat,” Elena shot back, her voice edged with sarcasm.

Alex chuckled, his gaze sliding back to Sofia. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. Carry on. Or don’t. It’s all the same to me.”

Without waiting for a response, he turned on his heel and walked away, his laughter fading into the noise of the market.



THE VIEW FROM THE OVERLOOK was breathtaking—Prague Castle bathed in soft, golden light, its silhouette framed by the sparkling city below. The crew gathered for a photo, their voices mingling in casual chatter as they jostled for position. Alex, ever the orchestrator, took control.

“Alright, everyone, squeeze in,” he said, motioning for the group to tighten up. “Sofia, Elena, why don’t you stand right here?” He gestured to either side of him, the suggestion far from innocent.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia hesitated, her eyes darting toward Elena, who had already stepped forward, her expression unreadable. Reluctantly, Sofia moved to Alex's other side, her discomfort palpable.

"Perfect." Alex draped an arm around each of them, his grip light but possessive. The camera clicked, capturing the forced smiles and stiff postures that betrayed the tension beneath.

As the group dispersed, Elena pulled away first, her steps quick and deliberate as she put distance between herself and Alex. Sofia lingered, her eyes fixed on the view, but Alex leaned closer.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" His voice was low, meant only for her ears. "But it's hard to enjoy when your mind's somewhere else."

Sofia didn't respond. She turned and walked away, her breath visible in the cold air. Behind her, Alex's smirk returned, a flicker of triumph dancing in his eyes as he watched her retreat.



THE GROUP PAUSED AT the edge of a festive market square, their breath visible in the chill of the evening. Alex stood slightly apart, his stance casual, but his eyes were sharp as they swept over Sofia and Elena. The captain's presence, as always, dominated, even in the vibrant holiday chaos around them.

"Now this," Alex began, gesturing at the glowing Christmas tree in the center of the square, "is how you capture elegance." He turned to Sofia, his tone dropping into something almost conspiratorial. "Like you, Sofia. Timeless and refined. Don't you agree, Elena?"

Elena, caught mid-step, hesitated, her brows knitting together as she glanced at Sofia. "Sure," she said, her voice tight. "She's... elegant."

Alex grinned, enjoying the slight discomfort his words had created. "And Elena," he continued, his voice soft but pointed, "has that fearless independence. It's refreshing, don't you think, Sofia?"

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Sofia felt her cheeks burn under the weight of their combined gazes. “We all bring something different to the table,” she said lightly, hoping to diffuse the moment.

“Ah,” Alex said, his grin widening, “diplomatic as always.”

The tension hung between them, masked by the lively chatter of the market and the faint strains of a Christmas carol. Sofia’s hands clenched in her coat pockets, her gaze darting toward Elena, who seemed torn between retreating and confronting Alex’s deliberate digs.

“You’re both so... distinct,” Alex added, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. “Makes for an interesting dynamic, don’t you think?”

Sofia’s lips pressed into a thin line. She felt the weight of his words like a challenge, one that Elena clearly picked up on as well. But before either woman could respond, Alex chuckled and strolled ahead, his casual whistle floating back to them, leaving the uneasy silence to fill the void he left behind.



THE QUIET ALCOVE OF the gothic cathedral offered a brief reprieve from the bustling market. Sofia leaned against the cold stone wall, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. Elena approached slowly, her breath a visible puff in the crisp air.

“Are you going to let him keep doing this?” Elena’s voice was low, but it carried an edge that cut through the quiet.

Sofia’s head snapped up. “Doing what?”

“Whatever this is,” Elena gestured toward the market where Alex’s voice could still be heard, laughing with the others. “Pitting us against each other. Playing his games.”

Sofia shook her head, her jaw tightening. “It’s not that simple.”

“No,” Elena said, stepping closer, her frustration evident. “It’s exactly that simple. He’s manipulating you, Sofia. And me. And you’re just... letting him.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“I’m not letting him do anything,” Sofia snapped, her voice sharper than she intended. “I’m trying to keep the peace.”

“By ignoring what’s right in front of you?” Elena’s blue eyes searched Sofia’s face, her voice softening. “By pretending this doesn’t affect you? Because it’s affecting me.”

The vulnerability in Elena’s tone made Sofia’s chest tighten. She looked away, her hands clenching at her sides. “It’s not just about you, Elena.”

Elena exhaled, the sound full of frustration and something deeper—something that made Sofia’s heart ache. “Then who is it about?” she asked quietly, taking a step back. “Because it sure as hell isn’t about you either.”

Before Sofia could respond, Elena turned and walked away, her silhouette disappearing into the crowd. Sofia stood there, her mind racing, Alex’s shadow still looming over everything, even in his absence.



SOFIA LEANED AGAINST the edge of the fountain, her hands gripping the icy stone rim. The laughter and chatter of the crew echoed from the nearby square, but she couldn’t focus on their voices. Elena’s words lingered in the cold air, sharp as the frost biting her skin.

“It’s not that simple,” Sofia muttered to herself, her breath forming a pale cloud. The truth of Elena’s accusation stung. She’d allowed Alex to control the dynamic between them, feeding into his charm and veiled provocations. And yet, breaking free felt impossible.

“You look deep in thought,” Alex’s voice cut through the quiet, smooth as ever. She stiffened but didn’t turn to face him.

“Just taking a moment,” Sofia replied, forcing her tone to remain neutral.

Alex stepped closer, his presence almost tangible. “The Christmas markets can be overwhelming, can’t they? All that energy—it’s easy to

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

get swept up.” His words were casual, but the way his gaze lingered on her said otherwise.

“I can handle it,” she said, straightening. Her shoulders squared as if preparing for battle, though she wasn’t sure which side she was on anymore.

“Of course you can,” Alex said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “But sometimes, Sofia, you need to let go of control. Not everything has to be so... calculated.”

Her jaw tightened. “I’m not calculated.”

“No?” He tilted his head, studying her like a puzzle he was determined to solve. “Then why do I get the feeling you’re holding back? From everyone. From yourself?”

The words hit their mark, leaving her speechless. Before she could muster a response, Alex turned and strolled back toward the group, leaving her with her thoughts and the echoes of his challenge.



FROM THE FAR END OF the square, Alex leaned against a lamppost, the warm glow of the holiday lights illuminating his smirk. The fountain where he’d left Sofia was barely visible through the bustling market, but he didn’t need to see her to know she was still there, grappling with his words.

He sipped from a steaming cup of mulled wine, his eyes drifting to Elena, who stood at a stall nearby. She was pretending to browse the handcrafted ornaments, but her tense posture betrayed her. Alex chuckled under his breath. The tension between the two women was almost palpable, and he reveled in the knowledge that he’d had a hand in creating it.

“She’s too proud,” he murmured to himself, watching Elena’s hand hover over a delicate glass star. “And Sofia... well, she’s too conflicted to make a move.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

He swirled the wine in his cup, the aroma mingling with the scent of roasted chestnuts and pine. It was all playing out exactly as he'd expected. Their cracks were beginning to show, and it was only a matter of time before one of them gave in.

His gaze lingered on Elena as she finally selected an ornament and handed it to the vendor. The determination in her eyes was unmistakable, even from a distance. Alex's grin widened. She was a wildcard, and that made the game even more interesting.

"Let's see how far they're willing to go," he said quietly, taking another sip. The firelight from a nearby brazier reflected in his eyes, flickering like the schemes forming in his mind.



SOFIA LINGERED IN THE resort's hallway, her steps hesitant as the evening's tension clung to her like an unwelcome shadow. The muffled hum of the crew's chatter reached her, but she couldn't bring herself to rejoin them. Her thoughts swirled, tangled between Alex's insinuations and Elena's unspoken pleas.

"Just the person I was looking for." Alex's voice cut through the quiet, smooth and disarming. He appeared from around the corner, his casual stride betraying the intent in his gaze. In his hand, he held a small box wrapped in silver paper, its ribbon tied with a precision that felt almost mocking.

"For you," he said, holding it out.

She stared at the box, her breath catching. "What's this?"

"Just a little something to remember Prague by." His smile was as polished as the snow globe inside the box. She opened it slowly, revealing the delicate dome encasing a miniature of the city's skyline. When she tipped it, snowflakes swirled over a tiny rendition of Prague Castle.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Why?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but the question held weight.

“For memories,” he said, his tone light but his eyes lingering on hers. “You’ve had a lot of them here, haven’t you?”

Sofia’s fingers tightened around the globe. “I don’t know what you’re trying to do, Alex.”

“I’m not trying anything,” he replied, leaning closer. “Just giving you something to hold onto.”

She wanted to respond, to call out the game he was playing, but words failed her. He stepped back, satisfied, and left her standing there, the snow globe cold in her hands.



ELENA WATCHED FROM the shadows as Alex walked away, his retreating figure as smug as ever. She stepped forward, her gaze falling on Sofia, who stood frozen in the dim hallway light. The snow globe in her hand caught the glow, its delicate snowflakes reflecting a softness that felt out of place in the moment.

“Really?” Elena’s voice cut through the air, sharp and brittle.

Sofia turned quickly, startled. “Elena—”

“You’re letting him get to you again.” Elena’s words were laced with frustration, her arms crossing as she closed the distance between them. “Do you even see what he’s doing?”

“It’s not—” Sofia began, but the words faltered. Her fingers tightened around the globe as if it could shield her from the accusation in Elena’s eyes.

“It is.” Elena’s voice softened, but the edge remained. “He’s controlling you, Sofia. Playing with you. And you’re letting him.”

Sofia looked away, her grip on the snow globe loosening. “You don’t understand.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“Then help me understand,” Elena urged, stepping closer. “Because all I see is him pulling you further away. From me. From yourself.”

The vulnerability in Elena’s voice broke something in Sofia. She turned back to meet her gaze, but before she could speak, Elena shook her head and took a step back.

“I can’t keep doing this.” Elena’s voice cracked, and before Sofia could stop her, she disappeared into the shadows, leaving Sofia alone with her guilt—and Alex’s gift.



THE LOUNGE WAS QUIET, save for the soft crackle of the fire. Alex sat in one of the oversized armchairs, a glass of whiskey in his hand. The amber liquid caught the firelight, casting shadows that flickered across his face. He swirled the glass slowly, watching the way the flames seemed to dance within it.

His thoughts drifted to the day’s events, playing them back like a well-directed scene. The tension between Sofia and Elena had been palpable, each exchange sharpening the divide he was carefully cultivating. The snow globe had been a masterstroke, a simple gesture loaded with meaning. He could still picture Sofia’s face—conflicted, vulnerable, and just a little entranced.

He smirked, tipping the glass to his lips. The whiskey burned, a pleasant warmth spreading through his chest. The cracks were forming, just as he’d intended. Elena’s jealousy, Sofia’s indecision—they were pieces on a board, and he was the one moving them.

Footsteps echoed faintly down the hallway. He glanced toward the door, his smirk deepening. Perhaps one of them would come to him, looking for answers or comfort. It didn’t matter which. Either way, it would play into his hands.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Let the games begin,” he murmured, setting the glass down on the table beside him. The firelight glinted off the rim, a silent toast to his quiet victory.

Outside the window, snow began to fall again, blanketing the world in deceptive stillness. Inside, Alex leaned back in the chair, his satisfaction as unwavering as the flames before him.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL



Chapter 5. A Secret Rendezvous

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The resort had settled into an uneasy quiet. The kind of stillness that Sofia once found comforting now felt stifling. Shadows stretched long across the plush carpets as she paced her room, each step echoing her restless thoughts. Outside, the muffled hum of the wind rattled the frosted windows. She pulled her coat tighter around herself, her fingers trembling as she clasped the buttons.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand, breaking the silence. She hesitated, glancing at the screen. A message from Elena glowed in the dim light: “Meet me outside.”

For a moment, Sofia stared, her heartbeat quickening. She shouldn’t go. She knew that. But the walls of her room seemed to close in tighter, and the weight of the night pressed against her chest. With a resigned sigh, she grabbed her scarf and slipped into the hallway.

The resort’s lobby was empty, save for the faint crackle of a dying fire in the hearth. Sofia paused at the doors, the cold air slipping in through the cracks. She stepped outside, her boots crunching against the fresh snow. The night was bright under the moon’s pale glow, the snowflakes glittering like shards of glass.

Elena stood under the streetlamp at the edge of the courtyard, her silhouette framed by the falling snow. She turned at the sound of footsteps, a faint smile curving her lips.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” Elena’s voice was low, carried by the stillness of the night.

Sofia stopped a few steps away, her breath visible in the icy air. “No,” she admitted, her tone heavy. “It’s too quiet.”

Elena’s smile softened, her gaze steady. “I thought I might find you here.”

They stood in silence for a moment, the air between them thick with unspoken words. Sofia finally glanced at the glowing resort behind her and then back at Elena. “What are we doing?”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Elena took a step closer, her boots crunching against the snow. “Whatever this is,” she murmured, “I think we both know it’s not something we can ignore.”



SOFIA TIGHTENED HER scarf against the biting cold, her breath forming fleeting clouds as she stepped out into the quiet night. The snow muffled her footsteps, and the resort’s festive warmth faded into the distance. Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. She pulled it out, the soft glow of the screen revealing Elena’s message: “Meet me outside.”

She hesitated before slipping it back into her coat. The night felt heavier than usual, the silence punctuated by the occasional creak of ice settling. As she reached the cobblestone path leading to the forested edge of the resort, she spotted a figure under a lone streetlamp. Snowflakes danced in the faint glow, falling around Elena like a scene painted for her.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” Elena asked, her voice low but steady, her hands buried deep in her coat pockets.

Sofia stopped a few feet away, her gaze lingering on Elena’s flushed cheeks and the way her platinum hair caught the light. “Too much on my mind,” she replied, her tone betraying her guardedness.

Elena tilted her head, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “Funny. I thought you were always in control.”

The comment hung in the air, playful but pointed. Sofia felt a pang of guilt but forced a smirk. “Everyone’s got their limits.”

Elena stepped closer, her boots crunching softly against the snow. “Good thing I’ve never been a fan of limits.” She gestured toward the path. “Walk with me?”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia hesitated but nodded, the air between them charged with an unspoken promise. Together, they walked into the darkness, the streetlamp shrinking behind them as if sealing their moment in secrecy.



THE PATH NARROWED AS they moved deeper into the sleeping city, the gothic spires of Prague silhouetted against the moonlit sky. Their conversation ebbed and flowed, light enough to disguise the undercurrent of tension that neither dared to address outright. The snow clung to Sofia's boots, her steps careful on the slick cobblestones.

As they approached a low stone wall overlooking the frozen river, Elena's hand brushed Sofia's. It was a fleeting touch, one that could have been accidental, but Sofia knew better. She tensed, unsure if she should pull away or let the moment linger.

Elena didn't wait for her to decide. She closed the distance, her hand sliding fully into Sofia's. Her grip was firm, confident, warm even in the bitter cold. "You're freezing," Elena said, her voice softer now, almost a whisper.

Sofia glanced at their joined hands, then at Elena's face. There was no teasing smirk this time, only a quiet intensity that made Sofia's chest tighten. "I'm fine," she murmured, but her voice lacked conviction.

They stood in silence for a moment, the city's distant lights casting a golden hue over the snow-covered streets. Sofia finally met Elena's gaze, the weight of her decision pressing down on her. For once, she didn't pull back.

"You know," Elena said, her voice breaking the stillness, "I've wanted to do this since the first time we flew together."

Sofia's heart raced, her pulse loud in her ears. She didn't respond, couldn't respond, as Elena's fingers laced more tightly with hers. The snow fell heavier around them, erasing their footprints but not the gravity of the moment they were about to step into.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



THE CITY SEEMED TO hold its breath as Sofia and Elena wandered deeper into Prague's labyrinthine streets. The pale light of gas lamps spilled across cobblestones, casting distorted shadows that seemed to whisper secrets of their own. Snow muffled their steps, but the sound of their breath, quick and uneven, filled the silence. The gothic spires rose around them, sentinels of stone watching their every move.

Elena slowed her pace as they reached the edge of a bridge. She glanced at Sofia, her expression unreadable. "Do you think they're wondering where we are?"

Sofia looked away, her gloved hands gripping the bridge's cold stone edge. "Maybe. Does it matter?"

"Only if you think it does." Elena moved closer, the warmth of her presence cutting through the chill. "You've been quiet. Regrets?"

The words hung in the air, sharp as the frost clinging to the rail. Sofia hesitated, her reflection rippling in the icy water below. "I don't know. It's all... too much."

The wind carried Elena's soft sigh. "Too much, or not enough?"

Sofia turned to her, startled by the intensity in Elena's gaze. Before she could respond, Elena gestured to the looming cathedral in the distance. "Look at this place. It feels like it's watching us."

Sofia gave a short laugh, her voice trembling. "Judging us, maybe."

Their laughter faded quickly, replaced by an uneasy silence. The gothic architecture loomed closer as they walked, the shadows closing in. When Elena reached out and took Sofia's hand, it was hesitant, like testing the strength of thin ice. But when Sofia didn't pull away, Elena tightened her grip, her thumb brushing against Sofia's knuckles. The cold seemed to retreat in that moment, leaving only the warmth between them.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

For a brief second, the world narrowed to just the two of them, the city their unwitting witness. The shadows didn't seem so foreboding anymore, only patient.



ELENA STOPPED SUDDENLY, pulling Sofia to a halt beneath the arch of a quiet passageway. The air felt heavier here, the narrow walls amplifying the sound of their breathing. Elena turned, her face close enough that Sofia could see the faint flecks of gold in her eyes, shimmering even in the dim light.

"I can't pretend anymore," Elena said, her voice low but steady. "I thought I could, for everyone's sake. For yours. But I can't."

Sofia's breath caught, her heartbeat loud in her ears. "Elena..."

"No," Elena interrupted, shaking her head. "Let me finish. I don't care what they think—Alex, the crew, anyone. What I care about is this." She stepped closer, her fingers brushing against Sofia's arm, hesitant at first, then surer. "You."

Sofia opened her mouth, but the words she wanted to say tangled together, too knotted to speak. Elena tilted her head, searching Sofia's face for a sign, a hint of what she was thinking.

"I need to know," Elena said, her voice breaking slightly. "Am I alone in this?"

The city seemed to hold its breath with her. The snow swirled around them, silent witnesses to a moment that felt suspended in time. Sofia closed her eyes, her own emotions threatening to overwhelm her. When she opened them again, Elena was still waiting, vulnerable and brave all at once.

"No," Sofia finally whispered. "You're not."

Elena exhaled sharply, a sound that was almost a laugh, almost a sob. And then she closed the distance between them, her lips brushing against Sofia's in a kiss that felt like both a question and an answer.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

It was tentative, searching, but it deepened with every second, pulling them into something they couldn't deny.

When they finally broke apart, the air between them felt warmer, more alive. Sofia's cheeks were flushed, her breath visible in the cold. "This is dangerous," she murmured.

Elena's smile was small but resolute. "Everything worth it is."



THE SOFT GLOW OF THE moon bathed the quiet bridge in silver light, making the snow glisten like a scattered field of diamonds. Sofia stood frozen, her breath visible in the crisp air as Elena stepped closer. The space between them shrank until it felt non-existent, filled only by the weight of unspoken words.

"I don't want to regret this," Sofia murmured, her voice trembling like the brittle icicles hanging from the nearby eaves.

Elena reached up, her fingers brushing a stray curl from Sofia's cheek. "You won't," she said, her tone low, certain. The warmth of her breath mingled with Sofia's, her confidence a stark contrast to Sofia's faltering resolve.

Sofia hesitated, the air thick with a tension she couldn't escape. Then, as if drawn by an invisible force, she leaned in. Their lips met softly at first, an exploration as delicate as the snowflakes that fell around them. It wasn't a rush—it was a question, an answer, and a promise all at once.

The kiss deepened, growing more urgent, as though both women knew the fragile magic of the moment could shatter at any time. Sofia's hands found Elena's shoulders, steadying herself as her fears momentarily dissolved into the sensation of Elena's warmth, the softness of her lips.

The snow around them seemed to fall in silence, shielding their stolen intimacy from the rest of the world. When they finally pulled

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

apart, Sofia's cheeks were flushed, her breath uneven. She didn't meet Elena's gaze right away, instead looking down at her gloved hands.

"That felt..." She trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

"Real," Elena finished for her. "And worth it."

Sofia's lips parted as if to protest, but the truth of Elena's words hung heavy in the air. There was no denying it.



AS THE MOMENT FADED, Sofia took a step back, the chill of the night quickly replacing the warmth of Elena's touch. Her gaze darted to the darkened buildings around them, her heart pounding for reasons beyond the kiss.

"This can't happen," she said, her voice shaky, almost pleading. "Not like this."

Elena tilted her head, her expression calm but unrelenting. She reached out, gently placing her hand on Sofia's cheek. "But it already has," she whispered. "And you don't regret it."

Sofia closed her eyes, leaning into the touch despite herself. "It's not about regret," she said quietly. "It's about everything else—what it means, what it could ruin."

Elena's thumb brushed against Sofia's cheek, a soft, reassuring motion. "Do you always think that far ahead?" she asked, her tone light but laced with meaning. "Or just when it comes to things you want?"

The question lingered, challenging Sofia in ways she wasn't ready to face. She stepped away, breaking the connection, her arms crossing over her chest as if to shield herself from the vulnerability Elena had so easily uncovered.

Elena sighed, her breath forming a cloud in the cold night air. "You can't keep running from this," she said, her voice firm but not unkind. "From me."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Sofia's jaw tightened, her eyes finally meeting Elena's. "I'm not running," she said, but the words felt hollow even to her own ears.

Elena held her gaze for a long moment, then nodded as though coming to an unspoken agreement. "Alright," she said softly. "But I won't let you hide forever."

The silence between them felt heavy, the night suddenly colder. Sofia turned away, her mind spinning, her heart torn between fear and the undeniable pull toward the woman standing behind her.



THE BRIDGE STOOD SILENT, its arches framed by the moonlight. Sofia and Elena were still caught in the aftermath of their kiss, their breaths heavy in the cold air. Unseen by either of them, Alex leaned against the shadows of a narrow alley, his figure obscured by the night.

His eyes didn't waver, fixed on the two women as they lingered close, unaware of his presence. The way Sofia's gloved hand hesitated near Elena's shoulder, the subtle tension in Elena's posture—he caught it all, each movement a clue to the unspoken connection between them.

The corners of Alex's mouth twitched into a faint smirk. He straightened, but instead of stepping forward, he turned on his heel. His boots crunched softly against the snow, blending into the quiet murmurs of the sleeping city.

Sofia's nervous laugh broke the silence. "We shouldn't have stayed here so long," she said, glancing around.

Elena tilted her head, studying her. "Why does it feel like you're waiting for someone to catch us?"

Sofia's shoulders stiffened. "I'm not." Her voice carried a sharp edge, but her darting eyes betrayed her unease.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

In the distance, the faint echo of Alex's retreating footsteps faded. He left no trace of his surveillance, no sign that their secret moment was anything but their own.



LAUGHTER RANG OUT FROM a nearby street, sudden and sharp against the quiet. Both women froze, their heads snapping toward the sound.

"Did you hear that?" Sofia whispered, her voice barely audible.

Elena took a step forward, her eyes scanning the empty stretch of cobblestones ahead. "It's probably just tourists." Her calm tone didn't match the tension in her clenched fists.

Sofia reached for Elena's sleeve, stopping her. "No, it felt... closer," she said, her words faltering. The bridge, which moments ago had felt like their sanctuary, now felt exposed, the shadows less comforting.

Another burst of laughter, this time more distant, echoed through the streets. Elena gently removed Sofia's hand from her arm. "We should move," she said, her voice firm.

Sofia nodded, her expression a mix of reluctance and fear. Together, they stepped back into the maze of alleys, their footsteps muffled by the fresh layer of snow. Sofia glanced over her shoulder once, twice, the eerie sensation of being watched refusing to leave her.

Elena noticed. "Sofia," she said, her tone cutting through the rising panic. "No one's following us."

Sofia exhaled shakily, nodding again, but the unease clung to her like frost.



SOFIA'S HEELS CLICKED faintly against the marble floors of the resort's empty hallways. The warmth of the indoors was almost

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

oppressive after the chill of the Prague streets, but it did little to calm her nerves. She moved quickly, glancing over her shoulder every few steps, though the corridor remained deserted.

The memory of the kiss lingered, vivid and electric, on her lips. She paused at the base of the grand staircase, her reflection caught in the polished surface of the banister. Her hand hovered over her chest, fingers twitching as if trying to hold onto something she wasn't sure she deserved.

Upstairs, Elena slipped in through another entrance. Her movements were quicker, more calculated. She tucked her scarf deeper into her coat, masking the flush on her cheeks. With each step, she replayed Sofia's hesitation, the guilt in her eyes as they pulled apart. It had been beautiful and heartbreaking all at once.

Sofia turned, her gaze snapping upward at the faint sound of footsteps. Her breath hitched, and for a moment, she thought she saw someone—a shadow, a flicker of movement down the hall. She froze, her pulse pounding in her ears.

The footsteps stopped. Silence enveloped her again, but the unease didn't fade.

"Get a grip," she muttered under her breath before climbing the stairs.



ELENA'S HAND BRUSHED the inner pocket of her coat, her fingers grazing the folded piece of paper she had written hastily hours before. She hesitated for a moment, then reached out as Sofia turned the corner toward her room.

"Wait," Elena's voice was soft but firm. She reached forward, slipping the note into the pocket of Sofia's coat. Their hands lingered for a second too long before Elena stepped back, her eyes searching Sofia's face.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“What’s this?” Sofia’s voice cracked slightly as she looked down.

“You’ll see,” Elena murmured, her lips curving into a bittersweet smile. Without another word, she turned, disappearing into the shadows of the hallway.

Inside her room, Sofia pulled out the note, her heart racing as she unfolded it. The words, scrawled in Elena’s precise hand, were simple but cut straight to the core: “I don’t regret it. Do you?”

She sank onto the edge of the bed, the note trembling in her hands as she stared at it. The answer was there, undeniable and terrifying.



THE DINING HALL BUZZED with subdued morning chatter, silverware clinking against plates. Sofia sat at a corner table, nursing a cup of coffee that had long gone cold. Her fingers played absently with the edge of her napkin, her mind still tethered to last night. The note was tucked safely in her pocket, its weight growing heavier with every glance across the room.

Alex strolled in, his stride easy, his grin effortless. He grabbed a plate of fruit and joined Sofia without waiting for an invitation.

“Morning,” he drawled, settling into the chair across from her. He took a slow bite of an apple slice, his gaze steady on her. “You’re up early.”

Sofia forced a tight smile, her grip tightening on the mug. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Is that right?” Alex leaned back, his tone light but sharp. “Funny. I thought I saw you slipping out late last night.”

Her stomach dropped. She kept her expression neutral, shrugging. “Needed some air.”

“Alone?” His eyebrows rose, his smirk deepening. “Brave of you, wandering around in the dark. Prague’s streets can be... full of surprises.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Across the room, Elena froze mid-conversation with another crew member. Her head turned slightly, enough to catch Alex's playful but pointed look in Sofia's direction. Her jaw tightened.

Sofia felt the heat rising in her cheeks. "I'm not a child, Alex. I can take care of myself."

"Of course," he said smoothly, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Just making conversation."

He lingered a moment longer, his grin never faltering. Then he stood, tipping an imaginary hat. "Enjoy your coffee."

As he walked away, Sofia's pulse thundered in her ears. She didn't dare glance at Elena.



ELENA CROSSED THE ROOM briskly, her footsteps purposeful. She stopped just short of Sofia's table, her fists clenched at her sides.

"Are you going to tell me what that was about, or do I have to guess?" Elena's voice was low, her words clipped. She didn't sit, her stance radiating tension.

Sofia sighed, her fingers pressing into her temples. "He's fishing. That's all."

Elena leaned closer, her voice a sharp whisper. "He's doing more than fishing. He knows, Sofia."

Sofia flinched at the certainty in her tone but forced herself to meet Elena's gaze. "He doesn't know anything. He's just playing his usual games."

"You think this is a game?" Elena's eyes blazed, her frustration barely contained. "Because it doesn't feel like one to me."

Sofia opened her mouth to respond, but the words wouldn't come. Across the hall, Alex lounged against the buffet table, his smirk firmly in place as he watched them.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena straightened, her hands curling into fists again. “If you won’t handle this, I will.” Without waiting for a response, she turned sharply and walked away, leaving Sofia to stare after her, her chest tight with regret and fear.



ELENA’S KNOCK WAS SOFT but insistent, a rhythm that betrayed her agitation. Sofia hesitated before opening the door, the dim glow of her bedside lamp casting long shadows across the room. Elena stood in the doorway, her arms crossed tightly against her chest, her eyes a storm of emotion.

“We need to talk,” Elena said, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

Sofia closed the door quietly, her pulse quickening. “Now isn’t the time.”

“Then when?” Elena’s voice rose, sharp but still laced with desperation. She took a step closer, her gaze piercing. “How much longer are you going to let him pull the strings?”

Sofia faltered, the words catching in her throat. “It’s not as simple as you think.”

Elena scoffed, shaking her head. “It’s exactly as simple as you make it. He knows, Sofia. And he’s using it against you. Against us.”

Sofia turned away, her hand clutching the back of a chair. “You don’t understand what’s at stake.”

“Then make me understand.” Elena moved closer, her voice softening. “I’m here, aren’t I? Despite everything.”

The room grew quiet, the weight of Elena’s words settling between them. Sofia finally looked up, her eyes brimming with unspoken conflict. “I don’t know how to fight him.”

Elena’s expression softened, her hand reaching for Sofia’s. “You don’t have to. Not alone.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

For a moment, the tension broke. Elena's lips found Sofia's, the kiss more urgent than tender, a desperate plea for connection in the face of unraveling chaos. Sofia melted into it, her resolve slipping as Elena's hands cradled her face.

When they pulled apart, Elena rested her forehead against Sofia's. "We can't keep hiding," she whispered.

Sofia closed her eyes, her breath shaky. "But what if it's too late?"



THE LOUNGE WAS EERILY quiet, the fire in the hearth crackling softly as Alex reclined in a leather chair. A glass of whiskey dangled from his fingers, the amber liquid catching the flicker of flames. His phone rested on the table beside him, the screen glowing faintly with a photo of Sofia and Elena, their silhouettes intertwined beneath the pale moonlight.

He swiped across the screen, enlarging the image. The corner of his mouth lifted in a smug grin as he studied the moment he'd captured. The intimacy was unmistakable, the raw vulnerability written across their faces.

Alex leaned back, swirling the whiskey in his glass. "Well, well," he muttered, his voice low and laced with amusement. "This just got interesting."

His thumb hovered over the delete button. A moment later, he pressed it, the image vanishing from his phone. He didn't need it, not yet. The memory alone was enough to stoke the fire of his next move.

Rising from his chair, Alex downed the rest of his drink in one smooth motion. The glass hit the table with a dull thud as he straightened his jacket and cast one last glance around the empty lounge.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“Let’s see how far they’re willing to go,” he murmured to himself, his smirk widening as he disappeared into the shadows of the quiet resort.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 6. The Ice Begins to Crack

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia's hands trembled as she looped her scarf, the fabric slipping through her fingers like water. The mirror caught her reflection: pale, hollow-eyed, and far from composed. She tightened the scarf with a jerky pull and stared herself down.

A knock at the door jolted her. She froze, willing the surge of panic to settle. Another knock, softer this time, broke through.

"Sofia? It's me." Elena's voice barely carried through the heavy wood.

Sofia turned the lock and opened the door just wide enough to meet Elena's eyes. Soft, questioning eyes, shadowed by unspoken regret. "Are you ready?"

Sofia nodded but avoided Elena's gaze. "Just finishing up."

Elena leaned against the doorframe, her breath forming faint clouds in the hallway's cool air. "You don't have to pretend with me."

Sofia swallowed hard. "We should go. The others are waiting."

Without another word, she slipped past Elena, the faint scent of pine clinging to her coat. Elena hesitated before following, her footsteps deliberately light, as though afraid to break whatever fragile thread still held them together.



THE LOBBY BUZZED WITH subdued energy as the crew gathered, bundled in thick coats and scarves. A towering Christmas tree stretched toward the high ceilings, its twinkling lights casting a warm glow over the room. The air smelled of cinnamon and freshly brewed coffee, though the chill from outside still lingered in the corners.

Sofia stood at the periphery, scanning the room without seeing. Laughter rose from a cluster of crew members near the fireplace, but it felt muted, distant. She shoved her gloved hands into her pockets, her shoulders stiff beneath the weight of Alex's arrival.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

He entered with the practiced ease of someone who knew all eyes were on him. A broad grin split his face, charming, confident, and entirely out of place amidst the tension. His gaze swept over the group before landing on Sofia. His smirk deepened, a subtle flicker of triumph flashing behind his green eyes.

“Good morning, everyone,” Alex called, his tone infused with just enough cheer to demand attention.

Yvonne rolled her eyes from her perch near the piano. “Finally decided to join us, Captain?”

Alex spread his hands, unbothered. “Couldn’t let you all start without your fearless leader.”

Sofia shifted uncomfortably, her scarf suddenly too tight around her neck. Elena’s voice, soft but pointed, came from beside her. “He loves a good audience, doesn’t he?”

Sofia managed a weak smile but stayed silent. Alex’s gaze lingered on her for a beat too long before moving on, his presence an anchor dragging the air heavier with each passing second.

“Shall we?” Alex gestured toward the doors, his tone light, but his smirk aimed directly at Sofia and Elena.

The crew moved to follow, their chatter resuming, but Sofia couldn’t shake the weight of Alex’s unspoken challenge. Elena’s hand brushed hers briefly, a fleeting touch meant to ground her. It didn’t.

The doors opened to the crisp, snow-dusted streets of Prague, but the warmth of the lobby felt miles away.



THE GROUP SPILLED ONTO Prague’s cobblestone streets, their chatter and laughter briefly masking the simmering tension. The air was sharp with the scent of roasting chestnuts from a nearby market, and the gothic spires of the cathedral loomed overhead, cloaked in snow. A

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

local guide led the way, her voice melodic as she wove tales of the city's storied past.

Sofia walked at the edge of the group, her gaze tracing the intricate details of the buildings but absorbing none of it. Her thoughts snagged on the night before, the warmth of Elena's touch, the weight of Alex's smirk when he crossed paths with her that morning.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Yvonne nudged her shoulder, her green eyes sharp beneath her hat. "But you're not really seeing it, are you?"

Sofia startled, forcing a tight smile. "Just tired."

Ahead of them, Alex strode confidently, his presence larger than life as he charmed their guide with an easy grin. Elena trailed near him, her arms crossed against the cold. Sofia's stomach tightened as their gazes met briefly before Elena turned away.

The guide paused by a statue, her words lost to Sofia's distracted thoughts. Snow began to fall lightly, dusting the group's shoulders and hats. Sofia slowed her pace, letting the others drift ahead. Her boots crunched on the cobblestones, a sound oddly loud in her ears.

"Lagging behind?" Tom's voice pulled her back. He matched her step, his warm tone a comfort. "You alright?"

She hesitated, her breath visible in the cold air. "Fine. Just taking it all in."

His nod was slow, doubtful, but he didn't press. Together, they rejoined the group, the festive charm of Prague contrasting the undercurrent of unease threading through Sofia's veins.



THE TOUR WOUND THROUGH the Old Town Square, where a towering Christmas tree glittered with golden lights and crimson ornaments. The group gathered near the Astronomical Clock, their eyes lifting to admire its ancient beauty as the guide began recounting its legend. Sofia kept to the back, her scarf pulled high against the chill.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Elena stood a few feet ahead, her blonde hair bright against the muted tones of the crowd. As the guide's voice carried over the square, Elena's head turned slightly. Her gaze caught Sofia's, soft and searching.

Sofia's breath hitched. She dropped her eyes quickly, her pulse a drumbeat in her ears. A moment passed, heavy and electric, before she dared to glance up again. Elena was still watching her, her lips curving into the faintest of smiles.

"What're you looking at?" Alex's voice broke the moment. He'd moved closer, his posture casual but his eyes sharp. He followed Sofia's line of sight, his jaw tightening as he spotted Elena.

"Just the clock," Sofia replied, her voice steady despite the heat rushing to her face. She stepped back, putting distance between herself and Alex, but the tension lingered, thick as the gathering snow clouds overhead.

Elena turned away, her expression unreadable as she focused on the guide's words. Sofia clenched her hands in her pockets, the weight of Alex's scrutiny pressing against her back.



THE GROUP LINGERED in front of a centuries-old statue, its intricate details barely visible through the delicate veil of falling snow. The guide spoke animatedly about its history, but Sofia's focus splintered. She stood apart from the others, her arms crossed tightly, bracing against more than just the chill.

Alex sauntered over, his footsteps deliberate. He stopped beside her, his gaze fixed on the statue. "Beautiful, isn't it?" His voice carried a honeyed edge. "But some beauty comes with a cost."

Sofia's jaw tightened, her gloved fingers digging into her coat sleeves. "You don't need to explain that to me."

"Don't I?" His tone turned soft, but the weight of his words pressed harder than the snow. He leaned in, close enough for his breath to

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

cloud between them. “Sometimes, we forget what we’ve risked until it’s too late.”

Her heart thudded painfully. She turned to meet his gaze, her voice firm but low. “What do you want, Alex?”

He straightened, his smirk widening. “Just making conversation.” He let the moment hang, the tension stretching taut before he stepped away. “Enjoy the view, Sofia.”

Her shoulders stiffened as she watched him walk back to the group, his charm sliding effortlessly into another conversation. Around her, the world seemed too quiet, the faint crunch of snow beneath her boots a reminder that her every move might already be noticed.



THE GUIDE CLAPPED HER hands, motioning the group together. “Before we move on, how about a photo? Everyone, come closer.”

The group shuffled into position, their laughter faltering as they adjusted scarves and hats. Sofia hesitated at the back, her stomach knotting. Alex’s voice cut through the murmurs. “Sofia, Elena—up front. We need the stars of the show.”

Sofia’s chest tightened as Alex positioned himself between her and Elena, his arm brushing against both. The contact felt deliberate, a silent reminder of his control.

“Smile,” the guide urged. The camera clicked, but Sofia’s lips felt stiff, her smile faltering. Elena’s expression mirrored hers, tension written in the sharp set of her jaw. Alex grinned wide, his ease contrasting starkly with their discomfort.

“Perfect,” the guide chirped. “One more for good measure.”

As the group rearranged slightly, Alex’s hand lingered a moment too long on Sofia’s back. She stepped forward, forcing space between them, but the damage had been done. Elena’s gaze darted toward them, her frustration barely masked.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Alright, onward!” The guide’s cheerful call broke the moment, and the group began moving. Sofia stayed silent, her chest heavy as the laughter around her faded into white noise. Behind her, Alex chuckled softly, a sound meant only for her to hear.



SOFIA PAUSED AT THE edge of the quaint bridge, her fingers gripping the cold iron railing. The group’s chatter had faded into the distance, leaving her momentarily alone. She exhaled sharply, her breath fogging the frosty air.

“Elena?” The whisper made Sofia’s heart lurch. She turned to find Elena standing a few feet away, her cheeks flushed from the cold or something else entirely. The bridge’s old lantern cast a warm halo around her face.

“Are you okay?” Elena’s voice was low, careful. She took a tentative step closer.

“Not here,” Sofia hissed, her eyes darting to the empty street beyond the bridge. The sharpness of her tone cut deeper than intended. Elena stopped in her tracks, her expression flickering between confusion and hurt.

“I just thought—” Elena began, but Sofia cut her off.

“We can’t do this,” she murmured, her voice barely audible over the distant hum of the city. “Not now.”

Elena’s shoulders stiffened. She looked down, her breath quickening. “Fine.” The word fell heavy, her disappointment as palpable as the chill in the air. Without another glance, she turned back toward the group.

Sofia remained frozen in place, her pulse pounding in her ears. The emptiness left by Elena’s retreat gnawed at her, but she didn’t follow. She couldn’t. Not with everything spiraling so fast.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL



THE QUIET DIDN'T LAST long. As Sofia started to move back toward the group, a voice startled her from the shadows. "Everything alright?"

Her stomach dropped. One of the crew members, a wiry man named Tom, emerged from the dim alley beside the bridge, his expression casual but his eyes sharp.

"Just tired," Sofia replied quickly, plastering on a smile that felt brittle. She adjusted her scarf, her fingers trembling. "Needed a moment."

Tom tilted his head, studying her with curiosity. "Long tour, huh?" His tone was light, but his lingering gaze hinted at unspoken questions. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

"You weren't." Sofia's response came too fast. She stepped forward, her strides purposeful. "We should catch up with the group."

Tom followed, his pace unhurried. "Sure thing," he said, but the way his eyes flicked toward the bridge before falling back on her made Sofia's skin crawl.

Her mind raced as they walked, the weight of his curiosity pressing into her back. Whatever he thought he'd seen or overheard, Sofia could only hope it wasn't enough to unravel what little control she still had.



THE GUIDE'S VOICE FADED into the hum of Prague's bustling square as Alex stepped forward, hands tucked casually into his coat pockets. "You know," he began, his tone warm and engaging, "this reminds me of a layover in Lisbon. Beautiful streets, warm lights, and, of course, the company..."

The crew's attention shifted to him. His charisma was magnetic, drawing them in as he launched into a story about a lost wallet, a

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

charming shopkeeper, and a bottle of Port wine that supposedly solved it all. Laughter rippled through the group, breaking the tension that had been simmering just moments ago.

Sofia stood on the edges of the circle, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She watched Alex perform, his words effortless, his smile disarming. But her focus wasn't on his story. It was on the way his gaze flicked toward her and Elena between sentences, subtle but deliberate.

Elena stood a few feet away, her expression carefully neutral, though her fingers fiddled with the edge of her scarf. She didn't laugh at Alex's jokes. If anything, her posture screamed defiance.

"Wasn't that a risk?" one crew member asked Alex, their curiosity genuine.

"Life's nothing without risks," Alex quipped, his grin widening. His eyes locked on Sofia for just a beat too long. "Isn't that right?"

Her stomach tightened. She forced a polite smile and looked away, ignoring the way Elena shifted uncomfortably at the remark. The crew laughed again, oblivious to the undercurrent running between the three of them.



THE CAFÉ WAS COZY, its walls lined with vintage posters and soft, golden light spilling from antique lamps. The group squeezed into a corner table, the hum of conversation and clinking mugs filling the air. Alex sat at the head, his presence commanding as he gestured for another round of drinks.

Sofia's seat felt far too close to his. She stared down at her untouched cup, willing the tightness in her chest to ease. Elena sat diagonally across, her fingers tracing patterns in the condensation on her glass. She hadn't looked up once.

"You know," Alex began, his voice cutting through the chatter like a knife, "secrets don't last long in a group like ours."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The words landed heavily. Sofia's head snapped up, her pulse quickening. Her fingers gripped the edge of the table, nails pressing into the wood.

"Is that so?" one crew member asked, their tone light but curious.

Alex shrugged, swirling his coffee lazily. "It's just an observation," he said, his eyes flicking between Sofia and Elena. "People talk. Or they slip up. Either way, the truth has a way of coming out."

Sofia's throat felt dry. She tried to focus on the café's warm, comforting scent, but Alex's words clung to the air, suffocating.

"Sounds like you know something," the same crew member joked, their laughter uneasy.

"Just a hunch," Alex replied, his smile sharp. Sofia glanced at Elena, catching her clenched jaw and the fire simmering in her eyes. Whatever Alex was playing at, he was enjoying every second.



THE GROUP TRUDGED THROUGH another cobblestone street, the sound of their footsteps swallowed by the hum of Prague's bustling afternoon. Elena hung back, her gaze locked on Sofia's stiff shoulders. She quickened her steps, closing the distance.

"How long are we going to let him control this?" Her voice was low but sharp, cutting through the space between them.

Sofia didn't turn. Her pace quickened, boots striking harder against the stone. "Not now."

"When, then?" Elena pressed, her tone biting. "When he's completely taken over your thoughts? Your actions?"

Sofia stopped abruptly, spinning to face her. The movement was sudden, drawing the attention of a few crew members ahead. Elena halted, her chest heaving, the weight of her words hanging heavily in the frigid air.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Do you think I don’t see it?” Elena’s voice was quieter now, but no less forceful. “The way you flinch when he looks at you. The way he gets under your skin and twists the knife.”

Sofia’s jaw tightened. Her lips parted as though to speak, but no words came. She turned sharply, continuing down the street without looking back.

Elena stayed rooted for a moment, her fists clenched at her sides. The distant murmur of the group pulled her forward, though her steps felt heavier with each one she took.



THE CREW GATHERED AT the edge of a market square, its stalls lined with trinkets and wafts of cinnamon and roasted nuts filling the air. Sofia lingered on the periphery, her arms crossed as if bracing against the chill. Alex stood at the center, effortlessly charming the others with another anecdote.

“You seem to know something we don’t,” one of the crew remarked, their tone light but laced with curiosity.

Alex tilted his head, the corner of his mouth curling into a half-smile. “I observe. It’s what I do best.”

The group laughed softly, their unease masked by politeness. But Sofia caught the way Alex’s gaze flicked toward her, lingering just long enough to make her stomach tighten.

“Observations can be misleading,” Sofia said, her voice measured. She forced herself to meet his eyes, even as her pulse quickened.

Alex chuckled, stepping closer to her. “Not if you know what to look for.”

Another crew member chimed in, deflecting the conversation with a question about the market. Alex obliged, his demeanor shifting back to easy charm, but the tension lingered like an unspoken secret.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena stood a few feet away, her eyes darting between Sofia and Alex. Her shoulders stiffened, the crease in her brow deepening. Whatever Alex was playing at, she knew he was just getting started.



SOFIA LEANED AGAINST the edge of the lookout point, the cold stone biting through her coat. The rest of the group lingered a few steps away, marveling at the sweeping view of Prague's spires and rooftops dusted in snow. She barely noticed the breathtaking scene, her thoughts tangled and restless.

"Beautiful view, isn't it?" Alex's voice came low, almost a purr, close to her ear.

She stiffened, straightening up. "It is."

"And yet, you look like you'd rather be anywhere else," he observed, stepping closer. His shadow stretched over hers, a subtle dominance she couldn't ignore.

"I'm just tired," she offered, her tone flat.

Alex chuckled, the sound sharp. "How far do you think you can keep this up?"

She turned to him, her heart hammering in her chest. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know." His words hung in the air, thick with implication. He leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Secrets have a way of unraveling, Sofia. Especially when there are... witnesses."

Her breath hitched, but she forced herself to hold his gaze. "I don't know what you think you've seen, but you're wrong."

"Am I?" His smirk widened, his eyes gleaming with amusement. He tilted his head, studying her like a predator circling prey. "Let's hope, for your sake, I am."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Before she could respond, he stepped back, his expression once again charming and disarming as he rejoined the group. Sofia exhaled shakily, her hands trembling as she gripped the edge of the stone wall.



THE GROUP TRUDGED BACK toward the bustling streets, the festive hum of Prague's Christmas markets dulled by an unspoken tension. Alex, ever the charmer, told a lighthearted story about a mishap during a flight layover, his voice carrying above the subdued murmurs of the crew.

No one laughed.

Elena walked a few paces behind, her arms crossed tightly. Her eyes darted between Sofia and Alex, suspicion etched into every line of her face. Sofia kept her head down, her steps hurried, as if distance could protect her from Alex's pointed remarks.

"Something's off with them," one crew member muttered to another. The words were low, meant to be private, but the atmosphere was so tense that they carried farther than intended.

"Yeah," the other agreed, glancing between Alex, Sofia, and Elena. "Feels like there's more going on."

Sofia felt the words prick her skin like icy needles, but she didn't turn. She couldn't. Alex caught the exchange, his smirk brief but satisfied. He turned to the group, making another joke that fell flat. Even his charisma couldn't bridge the growing cracks.



THE GROUP DRIFTED INTO silence as they walked the final stretch to the resort. The charm of Prague's festive lights and snow-covered streets was overshadowed by the heavy air between them.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia quickened her pace, her breath visible in the cold air, each step pounding with the weight of her spiraling thoughts.

Elena trailed behind her, the distance between them a chasm. Her jaw was tight, her frustration palpable even without words. She glanced at Alex, who lingered at the very back of the group, his stride leisurely, his hands tucked into his coat pockets. The faint glow of a streetlamp caught the glint in his eye—a glimmer of satisfaction, of control.

Sofia resisted the urge to look over her shoulder. Her fingers curled into fists, hidden in the folds of her scarf. She couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, of Alex's presence looming just out of reach but entirely too close.

The resort came into view, its warm lights promising reprieve from the cold. But Sofia felt no relief as she stepped through the doors. The cold followed her in, settling in her chest as Alex's words replayed in her mind.

Elena hesitated before entering, stealing one last glance at Alex. He caught her gaze, his smirk widening ever so slightly, before he turned away.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 7. Midnight Confessions

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The lounge hummed with quiet festivity. The fire crackled in the oversized hearth, its warmth creeping into the room, casting flickering shadows on the polished wooden walls. Candles lined the tables, their light soft and intimate, while a subtle scent of pine and cloves mingled with the faint clink of glasses being filled. Outside, the snow continued its steady descent, muffling the world beyond.

Sofia lingered near the back of the room, her arms folded across her chest. She watched the crew filter in, laughing and chatting as though the tension of the day had melted with the mulled wine. Elena walked in last, her cropped blonde hair still damp from the shower. Her smile was effortless, directed at no one in particular, but Sofia felt its weight.

“Feeling festive yet?” Alex’s voice came from her right. He stood too close, a glass of champagne in hand, his uniform tie loosened just enough to suggest relaxation.

Sofia glanced at him, her face blank. “Working on it.”

He chuckled, raising his glass in mock toast before turning his attention to the rest of the room. “Ladies and gentlemen, what better way to celebrate this charming layover than a proper drinking game?”

Laughter rippled through the group. A few crew members clapped, their cheers fueled by the champagne that flowed freely. Alex’s gaze swept the room, landing briefly on Sofia before moving on, his smile sharpened by something unspoken.

Elena stepped closer, her blue eyes glinting in the firelight. “I’m in,” she said, her voice light but steady. “What’s the game?”



ALEX LEANED CASUALLY against the mantle, twirling his champagne flute between his fingers. “Truth or Dare—with a twist,” he announced, drawing out the last word as though revealing a secret. “No half-hearted answers. And no backing out once you start.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

The group exchanged glances, a mix of curiosity and hesitation. Tom grinned, already sinking into one of the plush armchairs. “Sounds like trouble. I’m in.”

“Trouble is the point,” Alex replied smoothly, setting his glass down and clasping his hands together. “Let’s make some memories.”

Sofia eased into a chair by the window, her fingers tightening around the stem of her glass. Elena perched on the arm of a nearby couch, her knee bouncing subtly as if her body couldn’t stay still.

“Who’s first?” Yvonne asked, her French accent slicing through the growing buzz. She adjusted the collar of her sweater, her green eyes narrowing as they flicked toward Alex.

Alex didn’t hesitate. “Sofia.”

All eyes turned to her. She swallowed, the heat of the fire too close despite the distance. “Fine,” she said, her voice calm but clipped. “Truth.”

Alex’s smirk widened. “Predictable. Alright, here’s one for you. What’s the most reckless thing you’ve ever done?”

The question hung in the air, drawing a few chuckles and murmurs of anticipation. Sofia felt her pulse quicken. Her eyes flicked to Elena, who leaned forward slightly, her expression unreadable.

Sofia cleared her throat. “Missed curfew at seventeen,” she said, her tone deliberately flat. “Grounded for a week.”

Alex raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. “Sounds tame. But we’ll let it slide—for now.”

Elena’s lips twitched in a faint smile, but her gaze lingered on Sofia, as though peeling back the layers of her answer. Sofia looked away, focusing on her glass as the next turn began. The room filled with laughter again, but the undercurrent of tension was impossible to ignore.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE FIRE CRACKLED IN the lounge, casting flickering shadows across the room. Glasses clinked as mulled wine and champagne made their rounds, the warmth of the alcohol loosening inhibitions. Laughter rippled through the crew, their earlier tension buried, if only temporarily, under the festive atmosphere.

Tom leaned back in his chair, smirking as Gabrielle finished a poorly sung carol. “Stick to flying, Gabs. You’re better at it.”

“Better than you at least,” Gabrielle shot back, raising her glass to cheers from the others.

Sofia, seated in the corner, forced a laugh. She swirled her drink, watching as Elena’s face lit up in laughter across the room. Their eyes met for a moment—brief but charged. Sofia quickly turned her gaze to the fireplace, its heat matching the flush in her cheeks.

“Alright, my turn,” Elena declared, standing with an exaggerated flourish. “Dare me.”

Yvonne smirked, her French accent cutting through the chatter. “Dance. Properly. Not that stiff shuffle you call dancing.”

Elena rolled her eyes but stepped into the center of the room, snapping her fingers to the beat of the holiday jazz playing softly. Her movements were fluid, confident, her cropped hair catching the light as she spun. The room erupted into applause as she struck a dramatic pose, arms flung wide.

“Your move, Captain,” Elena teased, bowing mockingly toward Alex.

He raised his glass, his grin smug. “I don’t perform for free.”

The crew erupted in a mix of laughter and groans, the mood light and teasing. But Sofia’s smile felt tight. She caught Alex’s glance lingering on her a beat too long before drifting back to Elena.



PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

THE BOTTLE SPUN, ITS neck pointing squarely at Sofia. She swallowed hard, the heat of the room suddenly oppressive.

“Truth or dare, Sofia?” Alex’s voice carried a lilt of challenge, his gaze predatory.

“Truth,” she murmured, feeling the weight of everyone’s attention shift to her.

Alex leaned forward, his smirk widening. “What’s the most reckless thing you’ve ever done?”

Her grip on the wineglass tightened. Images flashed through her mind—stolen moments, forbidden touches—but she pushed them away. “Sneaking out as a teenager. I broke curfew once,” she said, her voice steady.

The room groaned in mock disappointment, but Alex’s smirk didn’t waver. “Rebellious,” he mused, swirling his drink. “But I don’t think that’s the whole story.”

“I don’t think it’s your turn to judge,” Elena cut in sharply, her tone light but her eyes flashing.

Tom laughed nervously, breaking the tension. “Alright, Captain. Let’s see how daring you are. Truth or dare?”

Alex’s grin widened, shifting the focus. Sofia exhaled quietly, her hands trembling as she placed her glass on the table. Across the room, Elena’s eyes remained fixed on her, concern and something unspoken flickering in their depths.



THE GAME HAD TURNED predictable. Too safe. Laughter rippled through the lounge, but Elena leaned back, her eyes sharp as she assessed the room. The wine in her glass swirled lazily, her lips curling into a sly smile when the bottle landed on her.

“Dare,” she said, her voice firm, eyes never leaving Alex.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Tom leaned forward, his grin mischievous. “Alright, Elena. Kiss someone in this room.”

The chatter quieted, the dare slicing through the lingering humor. Elena’s gaze shifted, landing squarely on Sofia. For a moment, the room faded—just her, the firelight, and Sofia’s flushed face.

“Go on, Elena,” Gabrielle teased, her voice breaking the silence. “We’re waiting.”

Elena’s laugh was light, dismissive, but her eyes lingered a beat too long on Sofia. She pushed to her feet, the movement fluid, deliberate. Her steps carried her toward the group, but she veered at the last second, leaning to press a fleeting kiss on Tom’s cheek.

“There,” she announced, her tone breezy, the tension shattered as the group laughed.

Tom winked. “I expected more effort.”

“You’ll live,” Elena shot back, dropping back into her chair. But her smile faltered when she glanced at Sofia, who was fidgeting with the stem of her glass, her knuckles white.

Across the circle, Alex’s expression was unreadable, his fingers tapping a slow rhythm on the armrest of his chair. “Interesting choice,” he murmured, his tone light but layered. Elena’s jaw tightened, her defiance flaring briefly before she tore her gaze away.



THE BOTTLE SPUN AGAIN, its neck slowing, the anticipation in the room thickening as it landed on Alex. His smirk widened, and he leaned forward, hands clasped like a dealer ready to turn the cards.

“Truth,” he drawled, the word lingering in the air.

Gabrielle pounced. “Is it true you’ve never settled down because you can’t resist the chase?”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

The room erupted into laughter, but Alex's smile remained. "A chase is only fun when the stakes are high." His eyes flicked briefly to Sofia, the weight of his words hanging between them.

"Typical," Tom muttered, shaking his head. "We should've made him pick dare."

"Patience," Alex said smoothly, his gaze shifting to Sofia. "Good things come to those who wait."

The group moved on, but the dynamic had shifted. The dares grew bolder, the truths cutting deeper. A crew member joked about Alex's "effect on women," and the laughter that followed felt forced, brittle.

Alex's sly grin returned. "I can't help it if some find me... captivating."

His eyes locked on Sofia. She shifted in her seat, her discomfort visible. Across the circle, Elena's knuckles tightened around her glass, her jaw clenched.

Tom cleared his throat, breaking the tension. "Let's see if the captain's charm holds up to a real dare next round."

But Alex's attention had already wandered back to Sofia, his smirk deepening as he raised his glass in a silent toast.



THE ROOM'S WARMTH TURNED stifling, the fire casting shadows that danced against the walls. Elena's turn came again. She swirled her glass, the red liquid catching the light as if it held secrets of its own. A faint smile tugged at her lips, but her gaze was steady, sharp.

"Truth," she said, the word laced with defiance.

Tom leaned forward, ready to pounce. "What's something you've never told anyone here?"

Laughter bubbled around the room, but Elena tilted her head, her expression unreadable. The crew leaned in, anticipating a playful anecdote, something light to match the night's earlier mood.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Instead, Elena's voice dropped, low and deliberate. "I've never been good at following the rules... or staying away from what I want."

Her words cut through the noise, silencing the group. Her gaze flickered briefly to Sofia, who froze, the color draining from her face. Then Elena looked away, her focus now on the fire, as though she hadn't just detonated a carefully controlled bomb.

Gabrielle cleared her throat, breaking the tension. "Well, that's... cryptic."

Laughter resumed, nervous and stilted, but Sofia couldn't bring herself to join in. Her hands gripped her drink, her thoughts spiraling. Across the room, Alex leaned back, his smirk widening. His eyes darted between the two women, a predator assessing its prey.

"I think we need another bottle," someone said, shattering the awkward moment.

But the damage had been done. Sofia felt the weight of Elena's words pressing against her chest, impossible to ignore.



THE GAME MOVED ON, but Sofia's pulse thrummed in her ears. The bottle turned again, pointing directly at her. All eyes were on her now, expectant, curious. Alex leaned forward, his smile both inviting and sinister.

"Truth," Sofia whispered, her voice barely audible.

"What's the one thing you regret most?" Alex asked, his tone casual, but the question hung heavy in the air.

Her heart raced. Her mouth opened, then closed, the words sticking in her throat. She glanced at Elena, who was watching her intently, her expression unreadable. Sofia felt trapped, caught between the weight of her past and the pressure of the present.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

"I..." She faltered, the silence growing unbearable. Her cheeks burned under the group's gaze. Finally, she took a long sip of her drink, letting the alcohol scorch her throat. "I don't think I can answer that."

Alex chuckled, his amusement barely concealed. "Interesting."

The group laughed nervously, but the tension lingered. Sofia's hand trembled as she set her glass down, her mind swirling with half-formed thoughts and emotions she didn't want to name.

Elena leaned back in her chair, her jaw tight. She didn't say anything, but her eyes never left Sofia. Across the room, Alex's smirk deepened, as though he had uncovered a secret he couldn't wait to exploit.



THE LOUNGE HUMMED WITH low conversation and the clink of glasses. Alex leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, eyes scanning the group with a mischievous glint.

"This is fun and all," he began, his voice dripping with charm, "but don't you think the setting's a bit... tame?"

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "Tame? We're already pushing our luck."

Alex chuckled, leaning back with a deliberate slowness. "Come on, where's the spirit of adventure? My suite has the perfect ambiance for the kind of fun I think we're all craving."

Some groaned, others laughed. Sofia's stomach tightened. She felt Elena's gaze flick to her, a silent question hanging between them.

"It's late," someone muttered, but Alex wasn't deterred.

"Exactly. Late enough to loosen up, forget about rules for a while. Unless..." His eyes sparkled with challenge. "You're all too scared to keep going."

The room filled with a mix of protests and laughter, some agreeing, others resisting. But Alex's magnetism was hard to ignore. One by

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

one, the crew started to rise, picking up their glasses and bottles. Sofia hesitated, her pulse quickening when she saw Elena already standing, her expression guarded but intrigued.

“You coming?” Elena’s voice was low, just for her.

Sofia nodded, the tension in her chest tightening. She avoided Alex’s gaze as they all made their way to the door. The air outside the lounge felt cooler, sharper, and the walk to Alex’s suite stretched endlessly in her mind.

By the time they reached the door, Sofia wasn’t sure if the shiver that ran down her spine was from the cold or the feeling that she’d just crossed a line she couldn’t uncross.



ALEX’S SUITE WAS A study in decadence. Soft lighting pooled around the room, highlighting polished wood and plush furniture. A bottle of something expensive waited on the low table, glasses already set out as if he’d planned this from the start.

“Make yourselves at home,” Alex said, shrugging off his jacket. He moved with easy confidence, pouring drinks without waiting for an answer.

The group settled in, some on the couch, others on the floor. Sofia hovered near the door until Elena brushed past her, her hand grazing Sofia’s arm. It was enough to anchor her, enough to pull her further into the room.

The conversation picked up again, though quieter now, the intimacy of the space altering the energy. Alex handed Sofia a glass, his fingers lingering for a beat longer than necessary.

“You look like you could use this,” he murmured.

She swallowed, taking a cautious sip. The warmth of the drink spread through her, dulling the sharp edges of her nerves. Across the

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

room, Elena perched on the arm of a chair, her eyes darting between Sofia and Alex.

The crew peeled off gradually, their laughter fading into the hall as they slipped away one by one. Sofia didn't know how it happened, but suddenly it was just the three of them. The air was different now, heavy and expectant. Alex leaned back in his chair, his gaze flicking between them with a quiet amusement.

"Well," he drawled, "looks like we're the last ones standing."



THE ROOM HAD GROWN quieter, the hum of soft music blending with the clink of glasses. Alex leaned forward, pouring another round, his movements unhurried, deliberate. The amber liquid caught the low light as he tipped the bottle, his eyes never leaving Sofia.

"This reminds me of Paris," Alex mused, his voice low, smooth. "There was this layover... a night like this." He handed Sofia her glass, his fingers brushing hers. "Good wine, better company. It ended... spectacularly."

Sofia's grip tightened on her drink. She looked to Elena, who sat too still, her hands clasped in her lap. The tension stretched taut between them, a silent current Alex seemed intent on pulling tauter.

"You don't have to share," Sofia muttered, her voice tight.

"Sharing is what makes these nights memorable." Alex leaned back, his smirk sharp. "What's the point of a story if it stays untold?"

Elena shifted, her eyes meeting Sofia's. "Some stories aren't meant to be shared."

"Ah," Alex said, his smirk deepening. "The secrets of the righteous."

Sofia's breath hitched. She could feel the weight of his gaze, the edge of his words. Elena leaned closer, her knee brushing Sofia's. It was a subtle movement, but it grounded her, an anchor against the storm brewing in Alex's presence.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Alex's eyes flicked to Elena, intrigued. "Defending her honor?" His voice carried a note of mockery, laced with curiosity. "Or maybe... something more?"

The question hung heavy in the air, unanswered. Sofia reached for her glass, the burn of the drink a welcome distraction. Alex's chuckle was low, triumphant, as if he'd won some invisible game.



ALEX ROSE FROM HIS chair, his steps unhurried as he moved behind Sofia. His hand rested lightly on her shoulder, his touch both gentle and possessive. "You're too tense," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear. "Let go. Just for tonight."

Sofia's eyes closed, her pulse quickening. Elena's hand found hers beneath the table, her grip firm, steady. "You don't have to listen to him," Elena whispered, her voice low, a lifeline.

"I'm only offering a suggestion," Alex said, his tone teasing, but there was an undercurrent of something darker. "Sometimes, letting go is... freeing."

Elena stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. "Sometimes, holding on is stronger."

Alex's smile was slow, calculated. "Spoken like someone afraid to take a risk."

Sofia looked between them, her thoughts a tangled mess of guilt and longing. Alex's hand slid from her shoulder, his touch replaced by the absence of warmth. He turned to the bar, pouring another drink, his movements casual, but his eyes were sharp, watching them.

"Stay," he said, his voice soft, inviting. "The night's just getting started."

Elena's hand tightened on Sofia's. "It's your choice," she said, her voice steady, but her eyes were pleading.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Sofia hesitated, the weight of the moment pressing down on her. Alex leaned against the bar, his glass in hand, his smirk a challenge. The night felt like a precipice, and Sofia knew that whichever way she stepped, there would be no going back.



SOFIA STOOD FROZEN, caught between the pull of Elena's steady gaze and the weight of Alex's presence behind her. The air in the suite thickened, every sound amplified—the faint hum of the music, the clink of Alex's glass as he set it down, the whisper of Elena's breath as she leaned closer.

"You don't have to choose," Alex murmured, his tone velvet and laced with amusement. He moved closer, his warmth brushing against Sofia's back. "The moment's already chosen you."

Elena's hand rose, hesitant but determined, resting lightly on Sofia's. Her touch was soft but insistent, a silent plea. "Sofia," she whispered, her voice trembling, "just for tonight... stop fighting."

Sofia's breath hitched. The room tilted, the alcohol loosening her guard, the night pressing down on her with its quiet intensity. She glanced between them, Alex's dark amusement and Elena's raw vulnerability pulling her in opposite directions yet anchoring her in the same charged space.

Alex chuckled, a low, knowing sound. He reached out, brushing a strand of hair from Sofia's shoulder. "Why hesitate? You've already crossed the line."

The words stung, yet they also freed her. Sofia turned slowly, her eyes locking onto Elena's. The world narrowed to the space between them, the weight of Alex's presence blurring into the background as Elena's hand slid to her cheek.

Their lips met, tentative at first, a spark igniting where their skin touched. The kiss deepened, urgency replacing hesitation. The faint

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

clink of Alex's glass broke the spell as he moved closer, his gaze sharp and unreadable.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Alex murmured, his voice slicing through the tension. The boundaries dissolved, the lines they had all drawn collapsing under the weight of the night.



THE ROOM SEEMED SMALLER, the walls pressing closer as the three of them moved in sync, a dance born of tension and need. Sofia felt the pull of Elena's lips against hers, soft yet fierce, while Alex's presence loomed, magnetic and unyielding.

Elena's hand trailed down Sofia's arm, grounding her as Alex stepped in, his voice a low murmur in her ear. "Let it go," he urged, his breath warm against her neck. His words weren't a command, but an invitation, laced with a challenge she couldn't ignore.

Sofia turned, her lips parting as Alex leaned in, their kiss sparking a different kind of heat. It was intoxicating, disorienting, the pull of his confidence contrasting with the tenderness she'd just shared with Elena. Her head swam, the alcohol and the weight of their gazes sending her spiraling.

Elena's hand brushed against Alex's as she pulled Sofia back toward her, reclaiming the moment. Her eyes burned with something fierce, possessive yet vulnerable. "This isn't about you," she said, her voice low but firm.

Alex laughed softly, a sound that cut through the haze. "Isn't it?" He stepped back just enough to watch, his gaze sharp and unrelenting.

The night unraveled in layers, the intimacy between them weaving a tangled web of touch, words, and unspoken truths. The tension that had simmered for days erupted into something primal, leaving no space for doubt. The only certainty was the moment, fleeting and charged, as they gave in to the allure of the night.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



THE PALE LIGHT OF DAWN slipped through the heavy drapes, painting the room in muted grays and golds. Sofia stirred, the weight of the night pressing against her chest before her mind caught up. The haze of mulled wine and whispered confessions clung to her, leaving an unfamiliar ache in her muscles and a heavier one in her heart.

She blinked, her gaze landing first on the curve of Elena's shoulder, bare and motionless beneath the rumpled sheets. Elena's breathing was soft, rhythmic, her face turned away. Sofia's pulse quickened as the events of the night rushed back—fragments of touch, heat, and an unspoken surrender that bound the three of them tighter than words ever could.

A quiet movement drew her attention to the window. Alex lounged in a chair, one leg crossed over the other, the morning light catching the sharp edges of his profile. A half-empty glass of whiskey rested in his hand, its amber contents untouched since the night before. His smirk was faint but unmistakable as he turned to meet her gaze.

"Good morning," he murmured, his tone dripping with satisfaction.

Sofia's throat tightened. She pushed herself up, the sheet pooling around her waist. "What now?" The question hung heavy in the room, her voice raw with uncertainty.

Alex shrugged, his eyes flicking toward Elena's sleeping form before returning to Sofia. "Now?" He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "Now, we see how far this little game can go."

Sofia swallowed hard, her stomach knotting as she tried to decipher his words. The weight of Elena's arm across her lap was a sharp reminder of the tangled web they'd spun. Alex's smirk deepened, a glint of triumph in his eyes. The morning air felt colder than it should.

Alex's smirk deepened as he stood, his movements unhurried, deliberate. He set the glass down on the nearby table, the soft clink

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

breaking the silence. The room seemed smaller as he crossed the space, his presence commanding, almost oppressive.

Sofia froze, her pulse hammering in her ears as Alex approached the bed. She couldn't decide whether to pull the sheet tighter around her or let it fall. Her hand instinctively brushed against Elena's arm, as if to tether herself to something real amidst the surreal haze of the morning.

Elena stirred, her lashes fluttering open. Her gaze moved from Sofia to Alex, lingering there for a heartbeat longer. A knowing look passed between them, subtle but undeniable, an unspoken acknowledgment of the night they'd shared.

"You both look entirely too serious," Alex murmured, his voice low, teasing. He sat on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. His hand reached out, brushing a strand of hair from Sofia's face. "This is supposed to be fun, isn't it?"

Elena shifted closer to Sofia, her bare shoulder pressing against Sofia's. Her voice, still husky from sleep, broke the tension. "You have an interesting definition of fun."

Alex's chuckle rumbled softly as he leaned back, his fingers trailing lightly over Elena's arm before resting on Sofia's knee. "I prefer to call it... connection," he said, his tone laced with suggestion.

Sofia's breath hitched. The room felt impossibly warm despite the chill of dawn outside. Alex's touch was deliberate but unhurried, as if he were testing boundaries he already knew would bend. Elena's gaze met Sofia's, her expression conflicted but curious, and Sofia saw her own uncertainty reflected there.

"Are we really doing this?" Sofia finally whispered, her voice barely audible.

Alex's smirk softened, though the glint in his eyes remained. "We already have," he replied, his hand sliding gently up her leg. "The only question now is how far you're willing to go."

Elena's hand found Sofia's, her fingers lacing through in a silent reassurance. There was no more room for words, only the tension of the

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

moment unraveling in an intoxicating mix of desire and vulnerability. The lines between them blurred again, leaving only the pull of connection that defied reason and resisted regret.

Alex leaned back against the pillows, his arm draped casually over Sofia's shoulder as if he belonged there, as if this moment had been inevitable. The early light filtering through the curtains painted soft, golden streaks across their bare skin, casting the scene in a surreal warmth that didn't match the chill of Prague beyond the walls.

Elena traced lazy patterns across Sofia's collarbone with her fingertips, her touch featherlight, deliberate. Her lips hovered close to Sofia's neck, brushing against it with each whispered breath. "You don't need to overthink this," Elena murmured, her voice low and coaxing. Her other hand rested lightly on Alex's chest, her fingers splaying out to feel the rise and fall of his breathing.

Sofia felt herself exhale for what felt like the first time in hours. She let her head fall back against Alex's shoulder, her tension giving way to the pull of their shared moment. Alex's hand moved across her waist, his fingers firm but unhurried as they explored the curve of her hip. He tilted his head, his lips grazing the shell of her ear. "You look stunning like this," he said, his tone soft, almost reverent.

Elena shifted closer, her thigh brushing against Sofia's. The heat of her touch was a stark contrast to the cool sheets pooling around them. She leaned in, pressing her lips to Sofia's, the kiss unhurried yet filled with unspoken understanding. Sofia responded, her hand finding Elena's as she deepened the kiss, their movements seamless, instinctive.

Alex watched them with a satisfied glint in his eyes, his own hand finding its way to Elena's back, tracing the smooth expanse of skin there. He leaned forward, his lips brushing against the line of Elena's jaw before moving lower, trailing kisses down her shoulder. His touch was confident, practiced, but there was a surprising tenderness in the way he navigated the moment, allowing both women to lead without ever relinquishing his presence.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The three of them moved together in a rhythm that felt natural, unspoken. Alex's deep laughter mixed with Sofia's soft gasps and Elena's whispered encouragements, the sounds melding into something intimate, something entirely their own. The room seemed to shrink, the outside world fading into irrelevance as they lost themselves in one another.

Elena broke away briefly, her lips curving into a playful smile as her gaze darted between Sofia and Alex. "Who knew this trip would turn out like this?" she teased, her voice light despite the depth of the moment.

"Life's full of surprises," Alex replied, his hand brushing back Sofia's hair. His smile softened as his fingers lingered, a rare vulnerability flickering across his face before it disappeared.

For a while, the three of them stayed like that, their bodies entwined, the tension of the previous days melting away into something that felt like escape, like freedom. The moment was fleeting, fragile, but for now, it was enough.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 8. Everything Falls Apart

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The resort's common room glowed with warm, festive lights. Garlands wrapped around the beams, and a large Christmas tree stood proudly in the corner, its ornaments catching the firelight. The air carried the faint scent of mulled wine, but the atmosphere felt anything but cheerful. The crew gathered reluctantly, settling into the worn couches and oversized chairs, their voices low and laughter forced.

Sofia perched on the edge of a seat near the fireplace, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She stared at the flames, their movement mirroring the unease roiling in her chest. Across the room, Elena avoided her gaze, her lips pressed into a thin line. The silence between them stretched taut, as fragile as the delicate glass baubles hanging from the tree.

Alex arrived late, of course. He strode in with the ease of someone who had nothing to hide, his shirt unbuttoned at the collar and his sleeves rolled up just enough to seem casual. He surveyed the room like a host welcoming guests to his party. "Well, don't everyone cheer at once," he said, flashing a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Sofia's shoulders tensed. Alex's presence was magnetic and suffocating all at once. He dropped into a chair, sprawling as though he owned the space. The others glanced between him and Sofia, sensing the undercurrent but not daring to speak it.

"Let's get this started," a junior crew member suggested, their voice too bright as they reached for the remote. The opening credits of a Christmas classic rolled, but the film was background noise to the charged silence filling the room.



ALEX LEANED BACK, HIS arm draped lazily over the couch. His eyes glittered with mischief as he spoke, his words sharp under the guise

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

of humor. "It's funny," he began, his tone light but calculated. "Holidays have a way of bringing things to the surface. Don't you think?"

Sofia stiffened, her eyes fixed on the screen as if ignoring him would make him stop. Across the room, Elena's grip on her mug tightened, her knuckles white against the ceramic.

A younger crew member laughed nervously. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Alex replied smoothly, his gaze sliding to Sofia and then to Elena. "Just that some secrets don't stay buried for long. Especially in a group this... close."

The crew exchanged uneasy glances. One of them chuckled awkwardly. "You're being cryptic, Captain."

Alex smirked. "Am I? Maybe I've just had too much mulled wine."

Sofia's chest tightened. Her pulse thudded in her ears as the room seemed to shrink. She risked a glance at Elena, whose expression betrayed a mix of anger and fear. Their silent exchange did not go unnoticed.

Alex's voice cut through the tension like a blade. "Relax, Sofia. You look like you've seen a ghost."



THE ROOM HELD ITS BREATH as Alex's words hung in the air, heavy with implication. Elena sat forward, her mug clattering onto the table as she stood. "Why don't you just say what you mean for once?" Her voice sliced through the strained atmosphere, sharp and trembling.

All eyes turned to her, wide with shock. Elena's usual composure had cracked, and her frustration poured out like water through a burst dam. Her gaze burned into Alex, challenging him.

Alex, unperturbed, raised an eyebrow. "Touchy, aren't we?"

"Stop playing games," Elena shot back, her voice rising. "You've been needling us all night, and I'm done with it."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The crew shifted uncomfortably, their eyes darting between the two. The movie continued to play, its cheerful soundtrack a jarring contrast to the tension in the room. Sofia's heart raced as she watched Elena unravel, her anger a mirror of her own turmoil.

"You're awfully defensive, Elena," Alex said, leaning forward, his smirk infuriatingly calm. "Something on your mind?"

Elena's jaw tightened. Her hands balled into fists at her sides, and for a moment, Sofia thought she might lunge at him. The room was silent, the crackling fire the only sound as the weight of the confrontation pressed down on everyone.

"I'm done," Elena said finally, her voice trembling with barely contained fury. "I'm done with you."

Alex's smile widened. "We'll see about that."

The tension in the room was a living thing, coiled and ready to strike. Sofia's breath came shallow as she realized the worst was yet to come.



ALEX LEANED BACK, ONE ankle resting casually on his knee, his smirk daring Elena to lose her temper further. His voice was velvet-coated steel. "You're awfully defensive, Elena. Something on your mind?"

The room seemed to collectively hold its breath. Elena's glare could have scorched the garlands hanging on the walls. Her fingers twitched at her sides, itching to either storm out or lash out. "You're exhausting," she hissed, her tone sharp enough to cut through the tension. "Always circling, always poking. Why don't you just say whatever it is you're dying to get off your chest?"

Alex tilted his head, his expression a maddening mix of amusement and pity. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just here for some Christmas cheer. Aren't we all?"

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

A nervous laugh escaped one of the junior crew members, but it died quickly as Elena turned her wrathful gaze toward them. Her breathing was heavy, the silence between her and Alex charged like a thunderstorm about to break. Across the room, Sofia's heart pounded. She shifted in her seat, wishing she could disappear into the cushions.

"Enough," Elena snapped, her voice cracking. "If you think you're going to win this game, you're wrong."

Alex's eyes gleamed, his smirk widening as he leaned forward. "Game? Now you're making me curious."



THE TENSION WAS SUFFOCATING. Sofia's voice cracked as she tried to steer the conversation back into safer waters. "Maybe we should just focus on the movie? Isn't that why we're here?"

Her forced smile did little to mask the quiver in her tone. The flickering light from the screen reflected off her wide eyes, betraying her anxiety. She didn't dare look at Elena, and Alex's gaze felt like a weight pressing down on her.

But Alex wasn't ready to let go. "Oh, don't worry, Sofia," he purred, his tone dripping with faux reassurance. "I'm sure the truth will come out eventually. It always does."

Sofia flinched, the blood draining from her face. Across the room, Elena's jaw clenched, her knuckles white as she gripped the armrest of her chair. The others exchanged puzzled glances, their curiosity piqued by the unspoken tension.

"I think we've all had enough of your cryptic remarks, Alex," one crew member muttered, trying to lighten the mood. Their laugh was met with silence.

"Cryptic?" Alex leaned back again, the picture of relaxed confidence. "I think I've been perfectly clear."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia's hands twisted in her lap. The room felt smaller with every passing second, the garish decorations mocking her inability to escape. She risked a glance at Elena, whose eyes were dark with frustration.

"Let's just watch the movie," Sofia pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper.



"ALRIGHT, WHAT'S GOING on here?" The question came from one of the senior crew members, their tone a mix of exasperation and suspicion. They leaned forward, their eyes darting between Alex, Sofia, and Elena. "The tension's so thick you could cut it with a knife."

The room fell into a hush, save for the faint soundtrack from the movie playing on the TV. All eyes turned to Alex, who shrugged with an air of mock innocence. "Just some holiday fun," he said, his voice smooth as silk. "Right, Sofia? Elena?"

Sofia's breath hitched, her throat tightening. She couldn't speak, couldn't even think. Elena shifted in her seat, her movements jerky with barely suppressed anger.

"Don't do this," Elena warned, her voice low and trembling with rage.

Alex raised his hands in mock surrender. "Do what? I'm just saying, it's always interesting what comes to light during the holidays."

The senior crew member frowned, their suspicion deepening. "What exactly are you implying?"

Alex's smirk widened, his eyes gleaming with malice. "I think you'll figure it out soon enough."

Sofia's pulse roared in her ears as her silence grew heavier, more damning. Elena sat rigid, her fists clenched in her lap. And as the others watched with growing unease, it became clear that the night's festive veneer was about to shatter.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

The room was silent except for the faint crackle of the fire in the corner. Elena's shoulders stiffened, her eyes darting from Alex to the crew and then landing on Sofia. Her voice cut through the tension, trembling but resolute. "You don't get to play games with us, Alex. Not after everything you've done."

Gasps echoed around the room, the crew frozen as if someone had dropped a match onto a gasoline spill. A younger flight attendant whispered, "What's she talking about?" but no one answered. All attention remained on Elena and Alex, their battle of wills captivating and unsettling.

Alex's smirk didn't falter. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, exuding smugness. "Everything I've done? That's a bold accusation. Care to elaborate?"

Elena stepped closer, her voice rising. "You think you're so clever, don't you? Watching, stirring things up, pulling strings like it's all some kind of game. You've been messing with us since day one."

A low murmur rippled through the group as the accusations took shape in their minds. Alex's expression barely shifted, but his eyes gleamed with mischief. "And here I thought we were all just enjoying a little festive bonding. What exactly have I done, Elena? Please, enlighten everyone."

Elena's gaze flicked to Sofia, her resolve faltering for just a moment. Sofia's wide eyes begged her to stop, but it was too late to back down.



THE ROOM'S COLLECTIVE gaze turned to Sofia, and the weight of their stares made her sink deeper into her chair. Her chest tightened, words failing her as she struggled to form a response. She wanted to deny everything, to brush off Alex's games and Elena's confession, but the truth clung to her like a second skin.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Alex seized the moment, his voice smooth as he delivered the final blow. “Careful, Elena. You wouldn’t want to embarrass Sofia, would you?”

The insinuation hung in the air, its meaning as clear as the panic that flashed across Sofia’s face. Her hands clenched into fists on her lap, her knuckles pale. She could feel Elena’s eyes boring into her, searching for some form of solidarity, but she couldn’t look up.

“Embarrass?” One of the senior attendants frowned, their tone sharp. “What the hell is going on here?”

Elena’s lips parted as if to answer, but her gaze softened when she caught Sofia’s expression—pleading, desperate. She hesitated, her anger simmering just beneath the surface.

Alex leaned back, the picture of ease. “Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing. Just a little misunderstanding, right, Sofia?” His grin widened as he tapped his fingers rhythmically on the armrest.

Sofia opened her mouth, but no words came. The silence was deafening, and it told the room everything they needed to know.



“WAIT,” A YOUNGER CREW member blurted, their brow furrowed as pieces began to fall into place. “Are you saying something happened between you three?” The words sent shockwaves through the group, each person recoiling as if physically struck.

Elena’s composure crumbled. She turned to Sofia, her voice cracking under the weight of the unspoken truth. “Sofia, you have to say something.”

But Sofia couldn’t. Her throat burned as she swallowed back the confession that threatened to spill. The room erupted into whispers, shock rippling across every face. It was Alex’s low chuckle that finally broke her paralysis.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

“Oh, come on,” Alex teased, spreading his arms theatrically. “Do you all really think this is such a scandal? We’re adults. People get close. It happens.”

“You’re unbelievable,” Elena spat, her voice trembling. “You orchestrated this—everything—just to watch us fall apart.”

Alex shrugged, unfazed. “Don’t flatter yourself, Elena. You and Sofia made your choices. I just... observed.”

The gasps turned to accusations as the rest of the crew began pointing fingers, the fragile trust they’d shared now in tatters. Sofia’s heart raced as she saw the fallout spiral around her. She wanted to shout, to stop the chaos, but it was too late. The damage was done, and the truth lay bare for everyone to see.



ELENA STEPPED FORWARD, her hand trembling as she pointed at Alex. “You’ve been pulling the strings since the moment we got here,” she accused, her voice sharp and breaking.

Alex leaned against the armrest, completely unfazed. “Pulling the strings? That’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” His tone was casual, but his eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

“You know exactly what I mean,” Elena hissed. “Every look, every comment—this entire trip—you’ve been manipulating us. Stirring things up just to watch the fallout.”

Some of the crew exchanged uneasy glances, while others shifted in their seats, the tension thickening with every passing second.

“And what about you, Elena?” Alex asked, his voice dropping an octave, his smile cold. “Are you saying you had no part in this? That your choices weren’t entirely your own?”

“Don’t you dare twist this back on me!” Elena’s voice cracked, but her fury didn’t waver. “You saw an opportunity, and you took it. You played Sofia and me against each other for your own sick amusement.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Alex chuckled softly, his gaze cutting to Sofia. “Played you against each other? Or was I simply watching you both unravel?”

A gasp rippled through the group as the implications of his words hit home. Sofia’s face flushed as she sank further into her chair, her silence speaking volumes.



THE ROOM EXPLODED WITH accusations. A junior crew member stood, their voice laced with anger. “So, what? All this drama is because of the three of you?”

“Don’t act so surprised,” another snapped. “You’ve all seen how Alex operates. He thrives on chaos.”

Alex raised an eyebrow but said nothing, his calm demeanor only fueling the crew’s outrage.

“And Sofia and Elena,” someone else chimed in. “What were you thinking? You’ve jeopardized everything—the trust, the team—just for... what? Him?”

Sofia flinched at the words but remained silent. Elena, however, refused to back down. “This isn’t just about us! You think Alex hasn’t been doing this for years? Open your eyes.”

“Oh, please,” Alex interjected with a lazy wave of his hand. “Let’s not pretend you’re innocent here, Elena. Or you, Sofia. None of this would’ve happened if you’d kept your emotions in check.”

The group splintered further, voices rising in heated arguments. Some sided with Sofia and Elena, blaming Alex for his manipulations. Others accused the women of recklessness, their actions endangering the entire crew’s camaraderie. The festive atmosphere crumbled under the weight of their discord.



PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

SOFIA COULDN'T TAKE it anymore. Her head throbbed as the shouting blurred into a cacophony of noise. She shot to her feet, her voice trembling but loud enough to silence the room. "Stop!"

The crew froze, their arguments hanging midair as they turned to face her.

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen," Sofia said, her voice cracking with raw emotion. "It just... got out of control."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she pressed a hand to her chest as if trying to steady her breathing. "I thought... I thought I could handle it. But I was wrong."

The room fell into an uneasy silence. Some crew members shifted uncomfortably, guilt flickering across their faces. Others watched Sofia with a mix of pity and frustration.

"You're right," Sofia admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I messed up. We all did. But Alex... he knew exactly what he was doing."

She glanced at Elena, her eyes pleading for understanding, before turning to Alex. "You turned us against each other. You wanted this."

Alex smiled faintly, as if her words were a compliment. "Careful, Sofia. That almost sounded like an apology."

Sofia's knees buckled, but she caught herself on the armrest, her breaths shallow. The crew remained silent, their earlier fury replaced by a heavy, suffocating tension.



THE ROOM SEEMED TO hold its breath as Elena's face twisted with pain and fury. She clenched her fists at her sides, her voice shaking. "You think this is just a game to you, Alex? That you can toy with people's lives and walk away untouched?"

Alex leaned back in his chair, his smirk intact. "Touché, Elena. But don't fool yourself into thinking you're any better. It takes two—or three, in this case."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The jab landed with precision, and Elena's eyes brimmed with tears she refused to shed in front of him. She turned on her heel, her boots pounding against the floor as she made her way to the door.

"Let her go," Alex murmured, his voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "She's always been dramatic."

The remark was a slap to the face, and Elena stopped, her back stiffening. She glanced over her shoulder, her gaze finding Sofia, who stood frozen, her hands trembling. "Don't follow me," Elena warned, her tone sharp and raw. "Not this time."

The door slammed shut behind her, the sound reverberating through the tense silence left in her wake. No one moved, the weight of her departure settling like a shroud over the room.



THE REMAINING CREW began to disperse, their whispers muted, their glances heavy with judgment. No one dared look Sofia in the eye as they shuffled out, the festive air completely extinguished.

Alex stayed behind, his movements slow and deliberate as he poured himself another drink. Sofia lingered near the window, her reflection pale and ghostly in the glass. Snow swirled outside, a silent storm that mirrored the chaos inside her chest.

"You know," Alex began, his voice light, "this isn't the first time I've seen someone crack under pressure. It's almost a science at this point."

She turned to him, her eyes red, her lips parted as if to speak. But nothing came out. His gaze flickered to her, sharp and knowing.

"You'll recover," he added, his tone softening to a mockery of comfort. "Or not. It doesn't really matter to me."

Her jaw tightened, but she didn't reply. Instead, she crossed the room in quick, angry strides, brushing past him as if he were nothing more than a shadow. His laughter followed her as she reached the door.

"Goodnight, Sofia."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



SOFIA SLAMMED HER OWN door shut, the sound too soft to drown out the storm of thoughts in her mind. She collapsed onto the edge of the bed, her hands clutching the sheets as if they could ground her. The night played back in sharp, unforgiving fragments—Elena's departure, Alex's smirk, the shattered trust in every face that had turned to her.

The snow fell outside, a quiet backdrop to the chaos inside her heart. She let out a shuddering breath, her chest heaving as the tears she'd held back all evening finally broke free. They streaked down her face, hot and relentless, as the weight of her choices bore down on her.

She reached for her phone, her fingers trembling, but paused. What could she possibly say to Elena? What words could undo the damage?

The pillow muffled her sobs as she curled into herself, the room dark and unrelenting. Outside, the resort's lights flickered against the snowfall, the magic of the holiday reduced to a cruel irony.

Sofia lay still, her mind refusing to quiet. Sleep wouldn't come easily tonight, if at all.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL



Chapter 9. The Dark Night of the Soul

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The resort had never felt so quiet. The usual laughter, the chatter bouncing off the polished wood walls, was gone, replaced by an uneasy hush. The crew dispersed like ghosts, retreating into their rooms with faces tight and words locked behind sealed lips. Only the muffled sound of footsteps on the carpet betrayed their presence.

Sofia stood frozen outside her door, fingers wrapped tightly around the handle. Behind her, a faint draft carried the scent of pine and something else—her own guilt, weighing heavy. She didn't open the door. Couldn't. Inside lay the suffocating silence she had been avoiding, her thoughts a storm she had no desire to confront.

Tom passed by, his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets, his head low. He didn't speak, only offered a nod as if to acknowledge that words would do no good here. Sofia nodded back, her throat too tight to form a reply. The hallway emptied, and she was alone.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, the screen lighting up with a familiar name—her husband. She stared at it, the vibrating phone like a ticking clock in her hand. But she didn't answer. Instead, she pressed the lock button, silencing the call. Her reflection stared back at her in the screen, eyes wide, mouth slightly open, a woman she barely recognized.

With a deep breath, Sofia turned the knob and stepped inside, closing the door softly behind her.



THE ROOM FELT LIKE a cage. She paced between the bed and the window, her footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. Her coat hung over the back of a chair, untouched since she'd tossed it there earlier in the evening. She grabbed her phone off the nightstand and scrolled aimlessly, pausing on a photo of her husband and the kids they always talked about having someday. Her thumb hovered over the call button, but her hand dropped to her side.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

The weight in her chest grew heavier. She leaned against the window, forehead pressed to the cold glass. Outside, the snow fell in steady, silent waves, blanketing the courtyard below. The Christmas tree's twinkling lights reflected in the glass, fractured and distant.

A knock on the door startled her. She turned, heart hammering, but no one was there. The sound was her own imagination, the guilt playing tricks. She grabbed her coat and scarf and stepped into the hallway. Staying here, in this room, wasn't an option anymore.

Her boots crunched against the fresh snow as she made her way outside. The cold hit her sharply, stealing her breath, but it was better than the suffocating warmth of the room. The city lights glowed in the distance, calling her forward.



THE COBBLESTONES GLISTENED, a mix of ice and melted snow shimmering under the faint glow of streetlamps. Sofia walked aimlessly, the weight of her coat doing little to shield her from the bite of the cold. The festive garlands stretched between the lampposts mocked her, their cheerful sparkle at odds with the storm inside her chest.

She paused at a market stall, her fingers brushing against a delicate ornament carved to look like the Charles Bridge. She held it up, examining the intricate details. The vendor smiled warmly, but Sofia shook her head and placed it back on the display.

The sound of carolers drifted through the air, their voices soft and melodic. It should have brought comfort, but it only amplified the ache in her chest. She shoved her hands deep into her pockets and kept moving, her steps quick and uneven.

When she reached the river, the sight stopped her cold. The water was a sheet of black glass, reflecting the city lights like scattered stars.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The bridge loomed ahead, its arches dark and foreboding. Her breath fogged in front of her as she whispered, “How did I let this happen?”

The night answered her with silence, the snow falling gently, muffling every sound.



ELENA SAT ON THE EDGE of her bed, her hands clasped in her lap. The muffled sounds of Prague’s nightlife filtered through the window, but they did little to distract her from the whirlwind in her mind. The city’s twinkling lights reflected in her eyes as she stared out, their beauty dulled by her lingering guilt.

Her phone rested on the nightstand, the screen glowing faintly. She reached for it, hesitated, and pulled her hand back. The cursor blinked in an empty text message to Sofia: We need to talk. She sighed, pressing the backspace until the words disappeared. Her thumb hovered over the keyboard again, but she set the phone down, shaking her head.

Pushing herself off the bed, Elena grabbed her coat from the chair. The resort felt like a trap, every corner a reminder of the night before. She needed air, needed space to clear the fog clouding her thoughts. With a deep breath, she stepped into the hallway, its dim light casting long shadows that followed her every step.

The cold night air greeted her as she stepped outside, her breath forming small clouds. She walked aimlessly, letting her boots crunch through the fresh snow. The cobblestones beneath her feet were slick, forcing her to focus on every step, which felt like a welcome distraction from the weight in her chest. Her pace quickened as she made her way toward the Charles Bridge, a place that seemed to promise solace, even if fleeting.



PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

THE CHARLES BRIDGE stood solemn under the moonlight, its statues casting elongated shadows over the cobblestones. Sofia leaned against the icy railing, the stone biting through the fabric of her gloves. The Vltava River stretched below, a mirror for the city lights dancing on its surface. It should have been beautiful, but Sofia saw only the fractures in her reflection.

She let her head fall forward, her breath coming out in heavy puffs of steam. “How did I let this happen?” The words tumbled out, barely audible, as though she were confessing to the river itself. Her eyes traced the water’s surface, searching for an answer she knew wouldn’t come.

Behind her, a streetlamp flickered, its light briefly extinguishing before sparking to life again. She turned her head slightly, her senses prickling with the awareness of being watched, but there was no one. Shaking her head, she refocused on the river. The snow drifted lazily around her, catching in her hair and on the folds of her scarf.

The sound of approaching footsteps made her shoulders tense. She straightened, her hands gripping the railing tighter. The echo of boots on the cobblestones grew louder, unhurried but deliberate. Sofia’s chest tightened, half-expecting Alex’s voice to slice through the stillness, but when she turned, it was Elena.



ELENA PAUSED AT THE far end of the bridge, her breath misting in front of her. She stood still, unsure whether to take another step or turn back. Sofia was silhouetted against the streetlamp’s glow, her form slumped but unmistakable. Elena’s hesitation melted as she exhaled deeply and walked forward.

Sofia turned before she could speak, her eyes widening for a brief moment before softening. She didn’t look surprised, only resigned, as if she had been waiting for Elena all along.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“You couldn’t stay either?” Elena broke the silence, her voice a careful balance between casual and concerned.

Sofia turned fully, her hands dropping to her sides. “No,” she admitted. “It’s like everything’s crashing down, and I couldn’t breathe in that room.”

Elena nodded, stepping closer but leaving enough space for Sofia to choose the distance. “I thought I could forget about it all by sitting there. Pretending nothing happened. But... here I am.”

Sofia’s lips twitched in a faint smile, though it didn’t reach her eyes. She gestured to the bridge. “It’s quieter here.”

Elena took the hint and moved closer, her boots barely making a sound on the stone. “Maybe too quiet,” she said softly, her gaze fixed on Sofia’s profile.

For a moment, neither spoke, the silence stretching between them. The snow fell gently, blanketing the world in a hush that seemed meant only for them.



ELENA STEPPED CLOSER, the crunch of her boots on the icy stone breaking the fragile silence. She stopped a few feet away, her hands tucked deep into her coat pockets. Sofia’s head turned, her expression teetering between relief and resignation as their gazes met.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” Elena’s voice carried a softness, as if she were afraid to disrupt the stillness of the bridge.

Sofia exhaled a shaky breath. “No. It’s like everything’s crashing down at once, and I can’t...” She trailed off, her words evaporating into the cold air.

Elena nodded, stepping to the railing but keeping a respectful distance. “I tried to stay in my room. Thought I could sit there and pretend like none of it happened. But I couldn’t.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The glow of the streetlamp above cast their shadows long against the cobblestones. Snow fell lightly, dotting their hair and shoulders like whispers from the night sky.

“You always come here?” Sofia asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elena glanced at the river below, her breath misting. “I guess I do. Something about this place—it’s quiet, but not empty.” She turned her head slightly, her gaze brushing over Sofia’s face. “I didn’t think I’d find you here.”

Sofia’s lips quirked into a faint, humorless smile. “It felt... inevitable.”



THEY FOUND A BENCH near the edge of the bridge, the stone damp from the snow. Elena brushed it off with her gloved hand before sitting down. Sofia hesitated, her fingers gripping the edges of her coat, then lowered herself beside her.

The silence between them wasn’t oppressive—it hung like a thread, fragile but unbroken. Elena glanced at Sofia, her expression a mix of caution and yearning. “I never meant to complicate your life. I just... couldn’t help it.”

Sofia’s shoulders tensed, her breath catching in her chest. She turned her face toward Elena, her features illuminated by the soft glow of the streetlamp. “It’s not your fault. I’m the one who made the choices.”

Elena’s brow furrowed. “You say that like it’s a crime.”

“Isn’t it?” Sofia’s voice cracked, her gaze dropping to her lap. “I can’t even look at my phone without feeling like the worst kind of person.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena reached out, her fingers trembling slightly as they brushed Sofia's. The contact was fleeting, but it sent a shiver through both of them. "Do you regret it? Any of it?"

Sofia didn't answer immediately. Instead, she stared at Elena, her eyes filled with conflicting emotions. The weight of the moment pressed against them, the snow falling heavier now, as though trying to hide them from the world.



ELENA'S HAND REMAINED near Sofia's, her fingers curling slightly against the bench. The question hung in the air, unanswered but not ignored. Sofia's throat tightened as she struggled to find the words that wouldn't come.

"Sometimes I wish I did," Sofia admitted finally, her voice quiet but raw. "It would make things simpler."

Elena tilted her head, her gaze unwavering. "But you don't."

The certainty in Elena's tone made Sofia's chest ache. She shook her head, her lips pressing into a thin line. "I don't."

Their eyes locked, and the tension between them thickened, the cold air doing nothing to cool the heat that simmered beneath the surface. Sofia leaned forward slightly, her breath mingling with Elena's as their faces drew closer.

"You make it hard to breathe," Sofia whispered, her voice trembling with vulnerability.

Elena's lips curved into the faintest smile, her hand finally closing the gap and covering Sofia's. "And you make it impossible to walk away."



THE STREETLAMP'S SOFT glow cast a golden hue on the bridge, illuminating the fine snow that clung to their hair and coats. Sofia's

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

breath caught as she looked into Elena's eyes, the weight of the world momentarily forgotten. The distance between them seemed to vanish, the tension pulling them together like an unrelenting tide.

Sofia's voice trembled, barely audible. "I don't know how to stop this."

"You don't have to," Elena whispered, her hand brushing against Sofia's cheek, her touch hesitant but warm.

The air between them thickened, charged with an undeniable pull. Sofia leaned in, her lips brushing against Elena's in a tentative kiss. It started slow, a question more than an answer, but the moment deepened, the desperation and tenderness blending into something neither could control. Elena's hands moved to Sofia's shoulders, steadying her as if afraid she might disappear.

The world faded—the lights of Prague, the snow-covered city below the bridge. All that remained was the heat of the kiss and the unspoken promise it carried. Sofia's fingers curled into the fabric of Elena's coat, holding on as if letting go would break her.

When they finally pulled apart, Sofia's lips parted as if to speak, but no words came. The silence between them said everything, their breaths mingling in the frigid air.



THE QUIET CORNER OF the bridge offered shelter from the world, the shadows hiding them in plain sight. Sofia's fingers trembled as they trailed along Elena's jawline, the intimacy of the moment stripping away all pretense. Elena closed her eyes, leaning into the touch, her breath hitching as Sofia's lips found hers again.

The kiss deepened, urgency growing between them. Sofia pressed closer, her body seeking warmth against the bitter cold. Elena's arms wrapped around her, pulling her into an embrace that felt both fragile

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

and unyielding. Their breaths quickened, mingling with the faint sound of the river below.

Snowflakes clung to their hair and melted against their skin, unnoticed as the intensity of their emotions overtook them. Sofia's hands moved instinctively, exploring the curves of Elena's back, her touch a mix of need and reverence. Elena mirrored the motion, her fingers brushing against the nape of Sofia's neck, sending shivers down her spine.

The cold stone railing pressed against Sofia's back as they lost themselves in the moment. The world around them blurred, the city's distant lights and faint carols fading into irrelevance. Their connection was raw, a fragile yet powerful tether that neither could deny.



THEY SAT ON THE STONE steps of the bridge, silence stretching between them like the snow-covered expanse of the city. Sofia's coat wrapped tightly around her, a shield against the cold and the storm raging within her. Elena watched her carefully, her expression unreadable.

"What happens now?" Elena's voice broke the silence, barely louder than the whisper of the wind.

Sofia's gaze remained fixed on the cobblestones, her mind racing with possibilities she didn't want to face. "I don't know," she admitted, her voice hoarse. "All I know is this can't be undone."

Elena nodded, her jaw tightening. "Do you want it to be?"

The question hung in the air, heavy with implications. Sofia lifted her eyes to meet Elena's, the conflict in her gaze as clear as the snow falling around them. "No," she said finally, her voice trembling. "I don't."

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

For a moment, the weight of their choices felt lighter, the connection between them undeniable. But as Sofia stood, her shoulders stiffened. “We should go.”

Elena rose, watching as Sofia turned toward the resort, her steps hesitant. “Sofia,” Elena called, her tone gentle but firm. “This isn’t over.”

Sofia didn’t respond, her figure disappearing into the night.



THE QUIET PRESSED AGAINST Sofia as she wrapped her coat tighter around her. The stone steps beneath her were cold, matching the chill sinking into her chest. She pulled her knees up, resting her arms over them as if bracing herself against a storm she couldn’t outrun. Elena sat beside her, her gaze unwavering.

“I don’t know,” Sofia whispered. Her words hung heavy in the frigid air. “All I know is that this can’t be undone.”

Elena nodded slowly, her expression unreadable. She shifted closer, her hand brushing against Sofia’s, hesitant but deliberate. “I don’t want it to be,” she said softly.

Sofia’s breath hitched. The sincerity in Elena’s voice cut through her defenses like a blade. Her stomach churned with the weight of everything—her choices, the lies, the fragile threads of her life unraveling. “How did we get here?” she muttered, half to herself, her voice breaking.

Elena reached for her hand fully this time, fingers trembling as they intertwined with Sofia’s. “Because we couldn’t stop,” she said simply. “And because it was worth it.”

Sofia’s throat tightened. She wanted to argue, to push Elena away, but the words refused to come. Instead, she looked at their joined hands, a quiet storm raging inside her.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE RESORT LOOMED AHEAD, its warm lights muted against the falling snow. Sofia and Elena walked side by side, their footsteps crunching softly on the icy path. Neither spoke, the silence between them heavier than words.

When they reached the door, Sofia stopped, her hand hesitating on the handle. Her shoulders tensed as she turned to Elena. "I need to think," she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elena's lips parted as if to respond, but she caught herself. She nodded, her eyes searching Sofia's face. "Take your time," she murmured. "I'll be here."

Sofia held her gaze for a moment, her expression conflicted, before stepping inside. The door closed behind her, and Elena stood alone, the cold settling around her like a second skin.

Elena lingered outside the resort, her breath forming soft clouds in the night air. Snowflakes danced under the faint glow of the streetlamps, landing on her coat and hair. She stared at the closed door, her chest tight with emotions she couldn't untangle.

Her voice was barely audible as she whispered to the empty night, "This isn't over."

The wind carried her words away, and she turned, walking slowly into the falling snow. The city lights blurred in the distance, and her footsteps faded into the quiet, leaving only the unrelenting hush of winter behind her.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 10. Confrontation at the Lobby

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The heavy wooden doors of the resort groaned softly as Sofia and Elena stepped into the lobby. Their breath, still visible in the cold, mingled and dissipated. Outside, snow fell in thick, lazy flakes, but inside, the air hummed with warmth and cheer. The grand Christmas tree dominated the room, its lights twinkling as a fire crackled nearby. The faint strains of a carol played over the speakers, lending a deceptive tranquility to the scene.

Sofia shrugged off her coat, her laughter from their walk outside still lingering, though it faded as her gaze landed near the bar. Alex sat on a stool, a tumbler of whiskey balanced between his fingers, his piercing green eyes catching the reflection of the tree lights. He noticed them immediately and swiveled slowly, lifting his glass in a lazy toast. His expression—a mixture of mockery and something unreadable—sent a chill through Sofia’s chest.

“Back so soon, ladies?” His voice carried, smooth but laced with insinuation. “Or were you enjoying the night air a little too much?”

Elena stiffened beside Sofia, her jaw tightening. Sofia didn’t respond, instead pressing forward, but her hand brushed Elena’s wrist, a silent signal.

“Let’s just go to our rooms,” Sofia murmured, her voice tight.



ELENA HESITATED, HER eyes fixed on Alex’s figure. He tipped his glass, taking a slow sip, his narrowed gaze never leaving them. The sound of the whiskey meeting the bottom of the glass as he set it down felt deliberate, pointed.

“No,” Elena said suddenly, her voice steady despite the tension crackling in the air. “He wants something. Let’s see what it is.”

“Elena.” Sofia’s tone was half a plea, half a warning, but Elena had already stepped forward. Her heels clicked against the polished floor as

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

she closed the distance between them. Sofia followed reluctantly, her stomach twisting with unease.

Alex rose from his stool as they approached, smoothing the front of his jacket with deliberate ease. “So, did I miss the memo on private after-hours tours?” His smirk widened as he glanced between them. “Or was this a two-person event?”



SOFIA SQUARED HER SHOULDERS, keeping her voice calm but firm. “Don’t start, Alex. Not here.”

Alex’s eyebrows lifted in mock surprise, though his smirk didn’t falter. “Start? I’m just catching up. You know, being a good captain and all.”

Elena moved closer, her presence sharp and unyielding. “Maybe you should mind your own business for once. Not everything revolves around you.”

Her words sliced through the air, leaving the room momentarily still. Nearby guests glanced over from their seats near the fire, sensing the tension.

Alex’s expression darkened, his smirk faltering as he locked eyes with Elena. “Oh, but you made it my business,” he said, his tone icy.



SOFIA PLACED HERSELF between them, her pulse thrumming in her ears. “Let’s go,” she said, reaching for Elena’s arm.

Alex took a step forward, his voice dropping to a murmur that only they could hear. “You think no one noticed? The stolen glances? The disappearing acts?” His smile returned, sharper this time. “You’ve turned this layover into your personal soap opera.”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Sofia's cheeks burned with a mix of anger and humiliation. She turned to face him fully, her voice low but seething. "That's enough."

"Is it?" Alex countered, stepping closer. "Because from where I'm standing, it seems like this is just getting interesting."



ELENA'S HANDS CURLED into fists at her sides. She stepped forward again, her voice sharp enough to draw blood. "You don't get to make this about you. You're a coward, Alex. Flirting, lying, pitting people against each other because you don't have the spine to deal with your own problems."

A muscle twitched in Alex's jaw, the first crack in his façade. He crossed his arms, his smirk hardening into something colder. "Coward?" he echoed, his tone deadly quiet. "Sweetheart, I'm just the one willing to say what everyone else is thinking."

Elena opened her mouth to respond, but Sofia stepped between them again, her voice tight and commanding. "Stop it. Both of you."



ALEX'S VOICE DROPPED an octave, slicing through the festive hum around them. "You think no one noticed? The stolen glances? The disappearing acts?" His smirk sharpened into something colder. "You've turned this layover into your personal soap opera."

Sofia's cheeks burned, her anger threatening to spill over, but shame flickered beneath it, igniting a storm in her chest. She tried to step back, but Alex leaned in, his tone dropping further, cutting through the tension like a knife. "Careful, Sofia. A little discretion might have gone a long way."

Nearby, the soft sound of clinking glasses and murmured conversations dimmed as a few heads turned toward them. Elena

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

shifted closer, her jaw tightening as she placed a hand lightly on Sofia's arm. "Ignore him," she murmured, though her own tension was palpable.

But Alex wasn't finished. "Or maybe you enjoy the spectacle," he continued, his words laced with venom. "I mean, why else would you—"

"Enough," Sofia snapped, her voice shaking but loud enough to cut through his tirade.



THE ROOM'S WARMTH SUDDENLY felt oppressive. A few guests lounging by the fire pretended to avert their gazes, but their stolen glances and murmurs betrayed them. Alex tilted his head, taking in the scene like a cat cornering its prey.

"Should we take this somewhere private?" he asked, his voice louder now, deliberately drawing attention. "Or do you prefer an audience?"

Elena stepped forward, her glare sharp enough to wound. "You're out of line."

"Oh, am I?" Alex's smirk widened, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he pushed further. "Tell me, Sofia, how does a married woman justify sneaking around with her coworker?"

A collective gasp rippled through the room, subtle but unmistakable. Sofia's fists clenched at her sides, and her chest tightened as if the air had been sucked out of the lobby. Beside her, Elena's eyes widened in shock before narrowing into a glare that could freeze fire.

"That's enough," Sofia ground out, her voice low but steady.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

ALEX IGNORED HER, HIS gaze now fixed on Elena. “And you,” he said, his voice dripping with mockery. “Playing the noble protector, are we? Or are you just as complicit?”

Elena’s lips parted, a sharp retort forming, but Sofia cut her off, her voice sharper now. “Alex, stop this. You’ve gone too far.”

But Alex wasn’t done. He turned his focus back to Sofia, his words like a predator’s claws, deliberate and cutting. “Or maybe you’d prefer I spell it out for everyone here? Let them know what you’ve been up to while your husband’s at home waiting for you.”

“Shut up!” Elena’s voice cracked through the lobby, drawing the attention of every lingering guest and staff member. For a moment, even Alex hesitated, surprised by the force of her outburst.



ELENA STEPPED IN FRONT of Sofia, her chest heaving as her voice shook but didn’t falter. “You’re the one who’s been playing games, Alex. Flirting, lying, pitting us against each other. You’re a coward.”

Alex chuckled darkly, his head tilting as he regarded her like an insect under glass. “Coward?” he echoed, his voice soft but deadly. “Sweetheart, I’m just the one willing to say what everyone else is thinking.”

“Don’t,” Sofia interjected, her voice cutting through their exchange. She stepped forward, her hand gripping Alex’s arm, forcing him to turn and face her. “You don’t get to judge me. Not after everything you’ve done.”

Alex raised an eyebrow, feigning innocence. “Oh, please. Enlighten me.”



PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

SOFIA'S HAND TREMBLED, but her grip didn't loosen. Her voice steadied, each word deliberate. "You manipulate people, Alex. You enjoy pulling strings and watching everyone dance. But not anymore."

For the first time, Alex's smirk faltered. His jaw tightened, his mask of confidence slipping just slightly. "Careful, Sofia," he warned, his voice low and cold. "You're treading dangerous ground."

Elena moved to stand beside Sofia, her posture resolute. "She's right. You don't scare us."

Alex's gaze flickered between them, his confidence wavering for just a moment before he stepped back, regaining his composure. "You'll regret this," he muttered, his voice barely audible but dripping with menace.

Sofia's shoulders straightened as she glanced around at the silent audience. The weight of their stares felt oppressive, but it also strengthened her resolve. "We're done here," she said firmly, turning away without waiting for a response.

Elena followed, her head held high. Alex's eyes burned into their backs as they walked toward the elevators, leaving him standing alone in the glow of the Christmas lights.



SOFIA STRAIGHTENED her back, meeting Alex's gaze with a fire she hadn't realized still burned within her. "You manipulate people," she said, her voice steady and cutting. "You enjoy pulling strings and watching everyone dance. But not anymore."

Alex's smirk faltered, his grip on control loosening for the first time. His shoulders tensed as his mask of indifference cracked. "Careful, Sofia," he murmured, his voice cold and measured. "You're treading dangerous ground."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena stepped closer, her presence solid and unwavering by Sofia's side. "She's right," she said, her words sharp as a blade. "You don't scare us."

Alex's eyes darted between the two women, his confidence wavering just enough to reveal the crack beneath. He glanced around the room, noticing the faint whispers and subtle glances from the other guests. His smirk returned, though weaker this time. "You'll regret this," he muttered, his voice low enough for only them to hear.



THE SURROUNDING GUESTS feigned disinterest, their heads tilted just slightly toward the scene unfolding. The faint sound of a Christmas carol drifted through the air, its cheer a cruel contrast to the palpable tension. Sofia glanced around, the weight of the stares pressing down on her.

She inhaled deeply, finding strength in Elena's presence beside her. "We're done here," she declared, her voice firm and resolute. She turned on her heel, her steps measured but decisive as she headed toward the elevators.

Elena followed close behind, her chin held high, not sparing Alex another glance. The two women moved as one, leaving behind the suffocating heat of the confrontation.

Alex stood frozen, his fists clenched at his sides, the fire in his eyes smoldering with barely contained rage.



THE GUESTS IN THE LOBBY shifted uncomfortably, their whispers growing louder now that the confrontation had ended. Some turned back to their conversations, while others watched Alex from the corners of their eyes, curious and cautious.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

The sound of ice clinking in a glass drew Alex's attention. A bartender at the bar polished a tumbler, his gaze averted but his tension clear in his rigid stance. Alex exhaled sharply, brushing past the man as he moved toward the bar.

Behind him, the grand Christmas tree glittered with lights, its presence mocking the unraveling scene that had just played out. The warmth of the room felt suffocating now, the firelight casting long, ominous shadows.



AS THE ELEVATOR DOORS closed behind them, Sofia let out a shaky breath. Elena reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice soft but firm.

Sofia nodded, though the tightness in her chest lingered. "I will be," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "But not tonight."

They rode in silence, the hum of the elevator the only sound between them. When the doors opened, Sofia stepped out first, her stride purposeful but weary. Elena followed, her gaze steady, watching Sofia as though trying to read her thoughts.

Neither of them spoke as they walked down the corridor. When they reached Sofia's door, she paused, her hand resting on the handle. She turned to Elena, her expression a mix of gratitude and exhaustion. "Thank you," she said simply.

Elena nodded. "Goodnight, Sofia."



BACK IN THE LOBBY, Alex downed the rest of his whiskey in one swift motion. The glass hit the bar with a sharp clink, and the bartender flinched slightly before resuming his work.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Alex's gaze drifted to the glowing Christmas tree. The lights reflected in his glass, casting fragmented patterns on the polished wood of the bar. A cold smile curled his lips as he muttered to himself, "This isn't over."

Turning back to the bar, he signaled for another drink, his movements slow and deliberate. The faint hum of the Christmas carol continued to play, but the warmth it once carried had dissolved, leaving only the chill of unresolved tension in its wake.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Chapter 11. A Cold Morning After And Departure

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Soft sunlight filtered through the frosted windows of the resort. Sofia stirred, the stillness of the morning amplifying the echoes of last night. The tangle of passion, anger, and betrayal played on a loop in her mind. Her fingers grazed the screen of her phone, revealing a missed call from her husband. Guilt settled like a stone in her chest.

Her gaze wandered to the snow outside, pristine and untouched. The contrast gnawed at her, each flake a silent reminder of the chaos she'd allowed to unfold. She sighed and swung her legs out of bed, her movements slow, reluctant. The festive cheer of the resort seemed miles away from her current reality.



THE HALLWAYS WERE QUIET, her footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. Sofia's hands fidgeted with her scarf, her mind churning with thoughts she couldn't silence. At the elevator, the ding of the doors startled her.

Elena was inside, her coat half-buttoned, her eyes shadowed by exhaustion.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Elena's voice was soft, tinged with regret.

Sofia nodded, her throat tight. Words felt useless, heavy. As the elevator descended, the silence between them stretched, a gulf too wide to bridge.



THE DINING HALL BUZZED with low murmurs and the faint clinking of cutlery. The crew sat scattered around the grand table, the tension palpable in their forced smiles and averted gazes. Sofia slipped into a seat, her eyes fixed on her untouched plate.

The scrape of a chair made her look up. Alex had arrived, his presence shifting the room's energy. He eased into his seat with

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

exaggerated nonchalance, his smirk just shy of mocking. His eyes scanned the table, lingering on Sofia, then Elena.

Sofia kept her focus on her coffee, the heat of his gaze burning into her. Across the table, Elena shifted, her discomfort evident in the way her hands toyed with her fork.



SOFIA FELT ALEX'S STARE before she saw it. His presence was a constant shadow, and every glance he threw her way felt like a dare. She clenched her jaw, refusing to look up, but the tension in her shoulders gave her away.

Elena's hand brushed against hers under the table. Sofia flinched but didn't pull away. She risked a glance at Elena, whose expression mirrored her own confusion.

Alex cleared his throat, a sound laced with amusement. "Not the liveliest group this morning." His words dripped with implication, his smirk widening as his eyes flicked between Sofia and Elena.

Tom, ever the peacemaker, attempted a laugh. "We all just need some coffee, right?" His attempt to lighten the mood fell flat.

Alex leaned back, his grin sharp. "Coffee doesn't fix everything, does it, Sofia?"

The room froze. Sofia's hands tightened into fists beneath the table, her nails digging into her palms. Her lips parted to retort, but the words died in her throat. She glanced at Elena, who shot Alex a glare, her frustration bubbling to the surface.

Elena's voice cut through the silence. "Maybe you should stop stirring the pot for once."

The dining hall seemed to hold its breath, waiting for what would come next.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE CLINKING OF CUTLERY paused as Elena pushed back her chair with a sharp scrape. The sound reverberated through the dining hall, drawing curious glances from nearby tables. Her shoulders were stiff, her fists clenched against her sides.

“I need some air,” she muttered, her voice unsteady yet edged with resolve. Her chair wobbled before settling as she walked out, her footsteps quick and uneven. Sofia’s chest tightened as she watched Elena’s retreating form.

Sofia’s eyes flicked to Alex, who lounged in his chair, a smug smile tugging at his lips. His gaze followed Elena, then shifted back to Sofia, challenging her to react.



SOFIA EXHALED, SLOW and deliberate, before speaking. “You’ve made your point, Alex. Isn’t it enough?” Her voice was steady, though her hands trembled beneath the table.

Alex leaned back, cradling his coffee cup like a trophy. “Point? I’m just enjoying breakfast. Aren’t you?” His tone was light, but the weight behind his words bore down on her.

Her nails dug into her palms. “You’ve enjoyed this game long enough.”

His smirk widened. “Game? That’s such a harsh word for honesty, Sofia.”



TOM CLEARED HIS THROAT, glancing around the table. “Let’s just get through today,” he mumbled, his voice barely audible.

The others nodded, their expressions a mix of discomfort and exhaustion. Chairs creaked as the crew fidgeted in unison, each one silently willing the moment to pass.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Alex remained unfazed, a self-satisfied grin never leaving his face. “Now, now,” he murmured, sipping his coffee. “We’re all adults here.”



THE CHILL HIT SOFIA like a slap as she stepped outside. She spotted Elena leaning against a tree, the snow dusting her shoulders like fragile armor. Her breath came in visible puffs, her gaze fixed on the ground.

“Elena,” Sofia started, her voice soft. “Are you okay?”

Elena shrugged, her face unreadable. “I thought last night meant something,” she whispered. “But maybe it didn’t.”

Sofia stepped closer, her boots crunching against the snow. “It did,” she replied, her throat tightening. “More than I can explain.”



THE CREW’S LAUGHTER was conspicuously absent as they gathered their luggage. Sofia and Elena sat side by side on the shuttle, their silence thick with unspoken words. The space between them felt like an insurmountable chasm.

Alex, seated at the front, chatted with Tom, his voice light and casual. His relaxed demeanor only fueled Sofia’s frustration. She glanced at Elena, whose gaze remained fixed on the window. The hum of the shuttle engine filled the void as they drove toward an uncertain future.



THE AIRPORT WAS A MOSAIC of movement and sound, but Sofia found herself isolated from it all, her reflection ghostlike in the departure board’s glossy surface. The overhead announcements blurred

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

into the background as she stared at the glowing list of flights, her thoughts circling endlessly.

Elena approached, her steps tentative. She stopped just behind Sofia, her voice barely audible. “Do you regret it?”

Sofia didn’t turn. Her breath fogged the glass as she exhaled slowly. “I don’t know.”

Elena’s reflection in the board was sharper than her own, her eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and sadness. “I do,” she murmured, then shook her head. “No. That’s not true. I regret how complicated it’s all become.”

Sofia nodded, but her lips remained sealed. She felt Elena linger for a moment longer before walking away. The space Elena left felt like a vacuum, pressing heavily against Sofia’s chest.



AT THE GATE, ALEX APPEARED, his presence as unwanted as the delay notice flashing across the screen. He sidled up beside Sofia, his tone deceptively casual. “You look like someone carrying a heavy load.”

She didn’t respond, her hands tightening around the strap of her carry-on.

“Careful,” he added, his voice dropping to a mock whisper. “It might break you.”

Her fists curled, her nails digging into her palms. She shot him a look so sharp it could have cut glass, but she said nothing, turning away without a word. Her silence was the only victory she could claim.



THE PLANE HUMMED SOFTLY, its cabin dim as passengers settled into uneasy quiet. Sofia’s gaze remained fixed on the back of the

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

seat in front of her. She could feel Alex's eyes on her from across the aisle, the weight of his attention as oppressive as turbulence.

Elena, sitting beside her, had retreated into herself. Her movements were robotic, her focus rigidly fixed on completing in-flight tasks. The warmth that once defined her seemed extinguished, replaced by a mechanical efficiency that made her almost unrecognizable.

Sofia clenched the armrest, forcing herself not to glance at Alex. Every shared breath of cabin air felt like a reminder of his presence, his smirk, his control.



ALONE IN THE GALLEY during a brief break, Sofia leaned against the cold counter, her forehead pressed against the window. The clouds below churned like a restless sea, endless and unyielding.

She closed her eyes, replaying the moments in Prague: the laughter, the firelight, the weight of Elena's touch, and the sting of Alex's barbs. Her chest tightened with the realization that some lines, once crossed, could not be undone.

She opened her eyes, but the clouds offered no answers, only questions that refused to settle.



AS THE PLANE'S WHEELS kissed the tarmac, Sofia braced herself for the final act. The cabin filled with the sound of rustling bags and clicking seat belts, but she felt as if she were moving through water, every motion slow and labored.

She glanced at Alex one last time as they exited. His smirk had faded, replaced by something colder, unreadable. It sent a shiver down her spine.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena brushed past her at the jet bridge, their shoulders grazing. Sofia whispered, "I'm sorry." Elena didn't respond, her gaze fixed forward.

At baggage claim, Sofia's phone buzzed. She glanced down to see a message from Alex: "Prague might be behind us, but I'm not."

Her grip tightened on the phone as a chill settled deep in her bones.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR



Final Chapter: Unfinished Business: A New Year's Guilt

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The muffled laughter of her children echoed from the living room, intermingled with the faint sound of her husband humming an off-key Christmas carol. Sofia stood by the window, her hand lightly touching the frost-covered glass. Outside, the world was cloaked in a white silence, pristine and indifferent to the turmoil within her. The cheerful clinking of plates brought her back to the moment.

“Mom! Look what I made!” Her youngest daughter burst into the room, holding a glittering paper star. The smile Sofia summoned felt heavier than it should have.

“It’s beautiful,” she managed, kneeling to kiss the child’s cheek. The warmth of her daughter’s skin was grounding, yet fleeting, as guilt clawed its way back into her chest.

In the kitchen, her husband, clad in an apron dusted with flour, looked over his shoulder. “Dinner’s almost ready. How about you join us and stop daydreaming?” His voice was light, teasing, but it struck a chord.

“I’ll be there in a second,” Sofia murmured, her eyes drifting to the corner where her phone lay charging. The screen lit up briefly—a missed call from her husband during their Prague trip—and the sharp pang of guilt returned. It was an ache that no holiday cheer could dull.

Her fingers hovered over the device, but she turned away. Her children’s laughter grew louder, their voices a discordant harmony with the weight she carried. She straightened, plastering a smile onto her face, and walked toward the din of the living room, where warmth and innocence lived, untouched by the shadows of Prague.



THE EVENING SETTLED into routine, yet Sofia moved through it like a ghost, her actions mechanical. She watched as her husband coaxed the children into a game of charades. Their shrieks of laughter

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

filled the space, but Sofia's gaze was fixed on her phone resting on the countertop.

Dinner had been a blur of stories and plans for New Year's, her husband's steady voice anchoring the family as Sofia nodded along, contributing nothing but faint smiles. Now, in the dim glow of the living room, she couldn't resist the pull of the device.

Sliding into the kitchen under the guise of fetching dessert, she unlocked her phone and scrolled through the photo gallery. Prague stared back at her. The ornate spires, the cobblestone streets, and then Elena—laughing, radiant, her cheeks tinged pink from the cold.

The photo was innocent enough, taken in a group setting, but the sight of her caused Sofia's throat to tighten. Her finger hovered over the screen before she swiped past it, her chest hollow and aching.

"Hey, everything okay?" Her husband's voice startled her, and she nearly dropped the phone.

Sofia spun, forcing a laugh. "Just...checking something for work." The lie came too easily.

He nodded, his focus already shifting back to the game. Sofia watched him leave, her grip on the phone tightening. The laughter from the other room continued, unbroken, while Sofia stood frozen in place, her reflection in the dark screen an unwelcome stranger.



"MOM! SIT WITH US!" Her daughter's voice pulled Sofia from the kitchen and back into the family's warmth. The living room was a chaotic spread of blankets, board games, and half-empty mugs of cocoa. She eased into the couch, letting her youngest climb into her lap.

"What are the New Year's plans, kids?" Her husband's voice carried from across the room, where he lounged comfortably, a throw pillow tucked under his arm.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“Fireworks!” the oldest chimed in, bouncing on his heels. “Can we stay up late?”

Sofia smiled. “We’ll see.”

Her husband chuckled. “That’s a yes, and you know it.”

The conversation drifted into playful negotiations about bedtime and snack privileges, but Sofia remained quiet. She traced the outline of her daughter’s curls absentmindedly, her gaze flitting to the Christmas tree’s twinkling lights. The cheer felt both too bright and too far away, like an elaborate performance she could no longer play her part in.

Her husband leaned forward, nudging her foot with his. “Hey, you’re quiet tonight.”

“Just tired,” she said quickly, her smile thin. “It’s been a long week.”

He nodded, accepting the answer, but his eyes lingered on her for a moment too long before turning back to the children. Sofia’s chest tightened. She leaned into the couch, pulling her daughter closer.

As the children’s chatter filled the room, Sofia looked at the clock. Each tick was a weight she felt deeper than she could explain, as if Prague had followed her home and nestled in the shadows of this perfect family scene.



THE NIGHT HAD SETTLED into a calm rhythm, the kind Sofia wished she could fall into. Her children were tucked away in their rooms, their soft laughter drifting down the hall as they recounted the day’s stories. Her husband was sprawled on the couch, remote in hand, flipping through channels with the contentment of a man untouched by guilt.

Sofia sat at the dining table, her untouched mug of tea cooling in front of her. Her phone buzzed, pulling her attention. The screen lit up, displaying an unknown number. Her chest tightened as she opened the message: “Prague isn’t done with you yet.”

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Her breath caught. The words blurred as her hand began to tremble, her grip on the phone loosening. For a moment, she stared at the message, the weight of its implications pressing down on her like a vice. She quickly swiped to delete it, her fingers moving with an urgency that belied her outward calm. But the words lingered in her mind, sharp and cutting.

“Sofia, are you coming to bed?” Her husband’s voice startled her. She looked up to find him leaning against the doorway, concern flickering in his eyes.

“Yeah, just finishing up.” Her voice was steady, but she couldn’t meet his gaze. She watched as he nodded and disappeared down the hall, the sound of his footsteps fading into the quiet.

Her phone sat on the table, dark and silent again, but the message had etched itself into her thoughts. She pushed the chair back and stood, her movements rigid, her body carrying a weight her mind couldn’t shake.



THE BEDROOM WAS QUIET, save for the soft, even breathing of her husband beside her. Sofia lay still, staring at the ceiling, her mind replaying the message over and over. The dark room offered no solace; it only amplified the chaos inside her.

Her thoughts drifted, unbidden, to Prague. To the Charles Bridge at night, the air cold and crisp. To Elena’s gaze, filled with a mix of defiance and longing. To Alex’s smirk, his words laced with malice that cut deeper than she had anticipated.

She shifted, her fingers clutching the edge of the blanket. The memory of Elena’s touch surfaced, unbidden but vivid. She could feel the warmth of her hand, the press of her lips. Her body tensed with the memory, the longing rising before she could smother it with guilt.

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Beside her, her husband stirred, his hand brushing hers. The familiarity of his touch sent a wave of shame crashing over her. She pulled her hand away gently, her heart pounding in the darkness.

Her gaze flicked to the window, where the faint light of the streetlamp seeped through the curtains. The past refused to stay behind her, its grip relentless. She turned onto her side, away from her husband, and squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself to escape the images that played on repeat.



THE HOUSE WAS STILL, the clock ticking in the background the only sound breaking the silence. Sofia's eyes remained open, her mind unwilling to rest. The weight of her actions in Prague pressed against her chest like a vice.

Elena's face emerged from the fog of her thoughts. Her smile, hesitant yet inviting. The warmth of her breath on Sofia's skin, the way her hands lingered as if memorizing the shape of her. Sofia closed her eyes, but it only made the memory more vivid.

Her heart raced, a dull ache spreading through her chest. The guilt was a constant hum, but beneath it was the undeniable pull of desire. She could still taste Elena's lips, feel the press of her body. It was a craving that refused to be buried, a need that defied reason.

Sofia exhaled shakily, forcing her eyes open. Her husband's peaceful silhouette lay beside her, his breathing steady and oblivious. She turned away, pressing her hand to her mouth as if to stifle the thoughts clawing their way to the surface.

The quiet darkness was suffocating. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood, her movements quiet and deliberate. She needed space, air, anything to push back the tide of emotion threatening to consume her.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Padding softly to the living room, she sank into the couch, her hands gripping the cushion tightly. The ache in her chest didn't subside. If anything, it deepened, leaving her feeling untethered and adrift in the sea of her choices.



THE PARK WAS ALIVE with the sounds of children's laughter and the crunch of boots on snow. Sofia sat on a bench, her coat pulled tightly around her. Her husband was with the kids, chasing them across the frosted grass. Their high-pitched giggles rang out, mixing with his deep, carefree laugh. It should have filled her with warmth, but all she felt was the biting cold.

"Mom! Look at me!" her youngest shouted, waving a stick she'd fashioned into a pretend sword.

Sofia managed a smile and a wave. "That's amazing, sweetheart."

Her husband jogged over, cheeks flushed from the cold. He dropped onto the bench beside her, his breath puffing in the air. "You're awfully quiet. Everything okay?"

She nodded, her smile stretched thin. "Just tired."

He reached out, brushing a stray hair from her face. His hand lingered for a moment, and the tenderness in his eyes made her chest ache. She looked away, focusing on the children.

"They're so happy," he said, his voice soft. "It's been a good holiday, don't you think?"

"Yeah," she replied, forcing the word out. But it felt like a lie.

As he got up to rejoin the kids, Sofia stayed behind, watching them through a haze of detachment. Their joy felt like a scene from a play she wasn't truly part of. She shifted uncomfortably, her thoughts slipping back to Elena, unbidden but insistent.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE STREETS BUSTLED with holiday shoppers, their arms laden with bags and their chatter blending into the hum of the city. Sofia walked slowly, her family a few steps ahead, stopping to admire a window display. Her eyes drifted across the street—and froze.

Elena stood there, her dark coat blending into the crowd. Her hair caught the soft light, framing her face in a way that made Sofia's breath hitch. For a moment, she thought she was imagining it, a cruel trick of her mind. But then Elena turned, their eyes locking.

Neither of them moved. The air between them seemed to hum, the noise of the street fading into nothing. Sofia's pulse quickened, a thousand words forming in her mind, none of them enough. Elena's expression was unreadable, her lips pressed into a thin line.

Before Sofia could cross the street, Elena broke the connection. She turned, walking briskly into the crowd. Sofia took a step forward, her hand lifting as if to call out, but her voice caught in her throat. The moment was gone, Elena swallowed by the tide of people.

Her husband's voice broke through the haze. "Sofia, you coming?"

She turned back to him, her nod automatic. But her chest tightened, the pull of the past too strong to ignore.



THEY WERE ALMOST AT the car when Sofia stopped abruptly. Her husband looked back, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"I just realized I forgot something at that shop." She gestured vaguely toward the street they'd just left. "You go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Are you sure? I can wait—"

"No," she interrupted, her tone sharper than intended. She softened it with a quick smile. "I'll only be a minute."

He nodded, though concern flickered across his face. She watched as he ushered the kids into the car, her heart pounding as she turned and walked back the way they came.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Her feet moved on their own, weaving through the crowd with purpose. Her eyes scanned the street, desperate to catch another glimpse of Elena. The air felt heavier with every step, each breath sharp and cold.

There. The café window caught her attention. Elena sat at a table near the back, her hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee. Sofia hesitated outside, her hand on the door. She inhaled deeply, steadying herself, then pushed it open.

The bell above the door jingled softly as she stepped inside. The warmth of the café enveloped her, but it did little to calm her nerves. Elena looked up, her eyes widening in recognition.

Sofia crossed the room, her voice a whisper when she spoke. "You didn't say goodbye."



SOFIA PUSHED THE CAFÉ door open, the warmth inside rushing to meet the cold that clung to her coat. Elena sat at a corner table, her fingers wrapped tightly around a ceramic mug. She didn't look up right away, but when she did, her eyes widened, and for a moment, something unspoken passed between them.

"You didn't say goodbye," Sofia began, her voice barely carrying over the soft hum of conversation in the room.

Elena placed her mug down carefully. "I didn't think I needed to."

Sofia sat across from her, the table feeling like both a barrier and a bridge. "I looked for you. After everything, I... I needed to talk."

"What would you have said?" Elena's tone was quiet, but her gaze was sharp. "That it was a mistake? That it never should've happened?"

Sofia hesitated, the words stuck in her throat. "I don't know."

Elena leaned back, her arms crossing. "That's the problem, isn't it? You don't know. You never know."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

"I came here because I couldn't let it end like that," Sofia said, her voice trembling. "Not without some kind of closure."

"Closure?" Elena let out a bitter laugh. "Sofia, this isn't something you close. It stays with you. With both of us."



ELENA'S SHOULDERS DROPPED, her earlier defiance fading into something softer, more vulnerable. "I didn't think I had the right to say goodbye," she admitted, her voice quieter now. "Not after everything we've done."

Sofia reached across the table, her hand hovering for a moment before brushing against Elena's. "We both made choices, Elena. Don't put this all on yourself."

"It's not about blame," Elena whispered. "It's about reality. You have a family. A life. I was... a distraction."

Sofia flinched at the word. "You were more than that."

Elena's lips pressed into a thin line, and she shook her head. "Don't make this harder than it already is."

The silence between them felt suffocating, each word left unsaid weighing heavily. Finally, Elena rose to her feet, her chair scraping softly against the floor. She leaned down, her breath warm against Sofia's cheek as she whispered, "Take care of yourself."

Sofia closed her eyes as Elena pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek. When she opened them again, Elena was walking toward the door. She wanted to call out, to stop her, but her voice wouldn't come. The door swung shut, and Elena was gone.



THE COLD AIR HIT SOFIA as she stepped outside, her breath visible in the evening light. She found herself walking aimlessly, her

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

mind replaying Elena's words. Every step felt heavier, her chest tightening with emotions she couldn't fully name.

When her phone buzzed, she pulled it from her pocket, half expecting it to be her husband. Instead, it was Alex. She opened the message, her stomach sinking as she read, "What happens in Prague doesn't stay in Prague. Happy New Year."

Her hand clenched around the device. The weight of Alex's manipulations, Elena's pain, and her own guilt felt unbearable. She deleted the message, shoving the phone back into her coat. The words still lingered in her mind, echoing as if they were etched into her consciousness.

As she turned the corner toward her home, she saw her family through the window. Her husband was helping their youngest hang decorations, their laughter faint but audible. For a moment, she stood outside, her fingers brushing against her cheek where Elena's kiss had lingered. She whispered to herself, "I can't keep doing this."

But even as she stepped inside, the pull of her past refused to let her go.



THE COLD WIND OUTSIDE had numbed Sofia's face, but inside the café, the air was stifling. Elena stood close, her gaze searching Sofia's as if looking for words she wasn't sure she wanted to speak.

"You should go," Elena whispered, her voice trembling. "Your family is waiting for you."

Sofia reached out, her fingers grazing Elena's hand. "I don't want to leave like this."

Elena shook her head, a small, bittersweet smile playing at her lips. "It doesn't matter how you leave, Sofia. It only matters that you do."

Tears pricked at Sofia's eyes, but she blinked them away, her chest tightening. "I don't know how to walk away from this. From you."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

Elena leaned closer, her breath warm against Sofia's cheek. "You have to. For them. For you."

Her lips brushed Sofia's cheek, lingering for a heartbeat longer than they should have. The warmth of that moment was enough to leave Sofia rooted to the spot, her heart pounding in her chest. Then, without another word, Elena pulled away, the distance between them suddenly unbearable.

"Take care of yourself," Elena whispered, her voice breaking. She turned and walked out into the city's chaos, leaving Sofia alone in the quiet hum of the café.



THE SOFT HUM OF LAUGHTER pulled Sofia back into the moment. She stood at the edge of the living room, watching her children sprawled on the carpet, their small hands carefully stacking wooden blocks into an unsteady tower. Their giggles spilled into the room as the tower toppled, scattering the blocks across the floor.

Her husband sat nearby, flipping through a book of holiday recipes. The scent of spiced cider lingered in the air, mingling with the faint strains of a Christmas carol playing from a speaker on the mantle. He looked up, catching her eye.

"Come sit with us," he said, his tone warm but faintly curious. "You've been quiet."

Sofia forced a smile and crossed the room, sinking into the armchair beside him. She reached for the mug of tea on the side table, cradling its warmth in her hands. The weight of the children's laughter and her husband's gentle presence should have felt like home, but it landed as a bittersweet echo in her chest.

Her youngest climbed onto her lap, pressing a sticky kiss to her cheek. "Mama, can we do sparklers tonight?"

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

Sofia smoothed her fingers through the child's hair, her smile tight. "Of course. Sparklers sound perfect."

Her husband chuckled. "Better stock up for New Year's too. These two will burn through them in minutes."

Sofia nodded, her gaze drifting toward the window where the evening sky darkened. In the reflection, she saw herself surrounded by the warmth she'd built, yet she felt like a stranger, a shadow of her own life.



THE HOUSE HAD GONE quiet, the chaos of bedtime replaced by the rhythmic ticking of the clock. Sofia stood at the window in the living room, staring at the darkened street outside. Her phone buzzed on the coffee table behind her. She didn't move at first, the sound a taunt in the silence.

Finally, she reached for it, her fingers brushing the screen. The message glared at her: "What happens in Prague doesn't stay in Prague. Happy New Year."

Her breath hitched. Alex's words were razor-sharp, slicing through the fragile peace she'd tried to wrap herself in. She stared at the message, her thumb hovering over the delete button. A part of her wanted to keep it, to let its weight linger as punishment, as a reminder. But she deleted it, the act offering no relief.

Outside, fireworks exploded into life, bright bursts of color lighting the night sky. She turned toward the window, watching as the display illuminated the neighborhood in flashes of red and gold. Somewhere upstairs, her children squealed in delight at the noise.

Sofia moved to join them, pausing at the threshold of their room. Her youngest reached for her, pulling her down to sit on the bed. The child snuggled into her side, her tiny hands clutching at Sofia's arm as she pointed toward the window. "Look, Mama! It's so pretty."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“Yes, it is,” Sofia whispered, her voice soft. She kissed the top of her daughter’s head, holding her close as the fireworks blazed on.

The clock struck midnight, its chime muffled by the cheers outside. Sofia stared at the glowing embers in the sky, her thoughts drifting to Elena. Her heart ached with the weight of what she couldn’t say, what she couldn’t undo.

“Some lines can’t be uncrossed,” she murmured, the words barely audible. Yet, they echoed in her mind long after the last firework faded into the night.

PRAGUE CHRISTMAS AFFAIR

THE END

