



THE FOUR SEASONS SERIES
BOOK 1

THE
COLDEST
SUMMER

GRACE GERVAS



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CHAPTER 1

I'm standing in the middle of the massive grassland, lost into its view. The wild sun is shining gently, and I can feel the soothing, country breeze flipping my hair swiftly. The feeling is no longer foreign, I've been here before. It's the same place, and he will soon show up; the one with sensual hands, engulfing scent, the only one who constantly makes my heart beat fast, and my curiosity go wild, and my eyes go blind. I wander my gaze into the horizon, taking in every detail of the enchanting, crystal-blue sky, married to the waltzing silver clouds, and that's when I feel his presence behind me; so electrifying, utterly beguiling.

He hugs me tightly, making me melt completely to his touch, my body yielding to his grasp. I close my eyes to indulge the moment, the very same salacious moment, as he whispers in my ears, something I scarcely hear. I try to turn around, to finally have a glimpse of his beautiful face, the one that I've marveled over a million times in my heart, but it doesn't happen. He's always so near, yet so far away. Once again, I fail to see him.

Getting up immediately from my sleep, I run a hand messily through my hair. I'm panting like an injured bull, and I realize that I'm still in bed. So then, it was a dream; the same one I've been having frequently this year.

"I need to get myself a boyfriend," I mutter, turning on the bedside lamp.

Having a proper sleep has been quite a challenge for me. I've lost count of how many nights I've stayed awake, mainly because of a certain nightmare, and this tantalizing dream. I'm an insomniac, and I don't know what else to do about it after trying everything I could possibly do.

Well, maybe I shall heal in time.

A heavy sigh escapes my lungs, marveling the long night awaits. I know I won't easily get asleep right now, I usually don't, and it's only two a.m. Damn my life! I take a deep yawn while grabbing the bottle of water from the nightstand and gulp a bit.

"Ah, that's better," I breathe, my throat refreshed.

Fully aware of the resentment I have towards sweating, the summer has decided to grant me a vengeful visit. I quickly get up and turn on the fan, which allows my body to cool off gradually. The L.A heat is no joke this year.

Well, it's always like this, but then I'd say the same thing next year.

Not knowing what to do in the middle of the night, I grab this adventurous novel, *The journey to the Centre of the Earth*, and try to make my brain tired so as to finally force my body to do the same.

At last, I don't remember when I closed my eyes, until I wake up in the morning wishing it were Sunday. Well, one can only wish sometimes. It's already seven-thirty as I move hurriedly around my room.

I finish tying my natural curls into a simple up-do and slip into a pair of cream pumps. Done with that, I zip up, with much difficulty, the black wrap dress I'm wearing. I quickly run outside and slip in my Old-Benny, just to learn that it's acting up, again.

"Fuck! Why can't you start?" I grunt, wrestling with the engine that's grunting twice as much for almost five minutes. Shit, I'm going to be late. I sigh heavily, leaning on the headrest. "A taxi it is." I grab my handbag and exit the car in a rash.

After hassling with the traffic and all, I manage to hit my workplace, about an hour later. I guess it's one of those terrible mornings that you may wonder how the rest of the day will be. First a haunted night, and then an awful morning.

Good morning, Hollywood.

"Here goes nothing," I breathe, enjoying the free air of this gigantic campus that's already buzzed with people walking in and about.

"Morning, Kira. I'm glad you're early." Dana, our office assistant, regards me as soon as I arrive in the office.

She is dark-skinned, short, slim, and talks like a broken record, but rather very efficient.

"Hey, everything okay?" I reply while putting my belongings atop of my desk, ready to receive the bomb she's about to drop. I know it's a bomb.

I glance up at her, and she looks in quite a frenzy; her short hair all ruffled from a constant scratching, I suppose, for it's what she normally does when things get tough in the office, and fingers are busy scrolling her tablet. God, help me!

"You're supervising the morning exams today, so you better get ready, dear," she urges, and here the bomb explodes. "Only ten minutes left," she adds.

"What? But that's crazy! How come no one told me?" I lament, my voice utterly begrudging; even though it's nothing new.

Dana gives me a hopeless look, fluttering her long lashes. "Because they just announced the changes some minutes ago. Sorry, sweetie." Upon my sullen pout, she graces me an apologetic smile, ready to find her next victim.

Just great! I sigh deeply.

I work as a teaching assistant at the University of California Los Angeles, UCLA. The job I never dreamed of, but it founded me either way. I got a direct recruitment as soon as I graduated here two years ago. Now I've learned to love and enjoy it. Who knows? Maybe it's my call.

I head straight to the auditorium, where the freshmen are already seated. Eyeing them for a while, I end up smiling at the few faces looking so anxious as though approaching the judgment day.

Well, who likes exams?

A bit later, as the students are poking their noses on the papers, my cellphone buzzes. I get a few looks that force me to walk out immediately not to disturb them. It's Samantha, my one and only crazy friend that would never let me live in boredom.

We're like SpongeBob and Patrick.

"Hey, Sam, don't you know it's business hours now?" I snap, half-shutting the door behind me.

"I know, but chill out," Sam quips, her voice full of ecstasy as though she's landed herself a new Mr. Gatsby.

"What is it?" I urge, fully aware that I'm breaking the rule and I may get in trouble in things go west.

"You're taking a leave this time, right?" she asks in her sassy voice.

"Yes, and?"

I can't believe this!

"Okay, listen," she says excitedly. "You and I, are going on a vacation next week," she informs me, and I only frown, wondering what she's talking about now. Damn, I need to get back! "Hey, Kira, don't start playing dead now. I said we are going on a vacation, are you listening?"

"I heard you," I reply absently, my eyes at the classroom through the door. "Sam, I'm supervising the exam right now. How about I call you later, please?"

"Fine," she grunts. "And you better call me, huh?"

"Okay, later." I hang up quickly, and get myself back to work with a smile.

I'm sure she is sulking right now. She really hates when I ditch her, but I've got bills to pay. Plus, I can't risk getting caught on the phone while on duty. And given how chattering Samantha is, she can talk all morning if possible.

Later on after work, which has been longer than I anticipated, I go straight home; it's almost my usual routine. Nothing but the calmness and lavender scent welcome me in my apartment that's furnished in red and white, feeling so great to be home. Sometimes it feels so big that I'm starting to consider buying a pet. Sighing, I kick off my heels, drop my handbag on the couch, and make my way towards the kitchen that's adjoined to the living room. I hope I can find something edible before I lose my balance. I feel like I've survived a hunger disaster.

I make myself a sandwich from whatever I find in my refrigerator, and pretend to have dinner while thinking of Sam's call and her crazy ideas. I better call back before she makes a long distance scene. I'm so glad we live and work separately, or else it'd be a catastrophe. We're like fire and water, yet inseparable.

"Finally," Sam speaks as soon as she picks up, and I throw myself on the red loveseat sofa, feet on the black, wooden coffee table.

"Tell me from the beginning," I urge, biting my sandwich.

"Hey, do you think you're the only one who works hard? I'm an executive assistant to one of the most successful Exporting companies in L.A!"

Here we go.

I decide to turn on the TV while I take in all of my friend's scolding, which I'm already used to. I'm glad it's WWE and it's Roman Reigns kicking some butt.

"Yes, Sam, I know that and I'm sorry about earlier." I roll my eyes. "So, tell me about your grand plans that you didn't consider consulting me first while making." I go sarcastic, and Sam couldn't care less about my whining.

"Look, I met this guy, let's say a client and he invited me to his ranch," she explains. "I kind of like him, Kira, so I accepted."

"Okay, and?" This ought to be good.

"And we're going together, next week," she says, making my eyes widen, but no surprise in them. "I'm not taking no for an answer, just to be clear."

"Huh?" I gasp. Well, she's always bossy . . . or pushy?

"You heard me," she prompts. "And besides, you love country sides and I like him, so it's a fair bargain."

Oh! Why didn't I see this coming? Unsure whether Sam is requesting or informing me, I just swallow it as it comes, and take a deep breath coupled with a yawn.

"Sam, that guy, are you dating him?" I ask, my curiosity highly aroused.

"I think so," she returns with faint surety, and I frown bemusedly. "We had lunch, dinner, like two times. We kissed, we—"

Not the intimate details, please.

"Alright, enough," I interrupt her PG-rated talk. "Fine, I'll go with you."

"Really?"

"Yes, Sam. Didn't you say I have no option?" I roll my tired eyes.

Frankly, I prefer to spend my six weeks at home, reading books, watching movies and maybe a beach walk or swimming during sunset. I'm a very simple person, and so is my life. But knowing Sam as I do, she won't ever let that happen.

However, I've been in the comfort zone for two years and perhaps some little change of scenery is all I need to recharge my batteries. Same routine everyday can be toxic, I know, so how terrible would it be to go with her? I sigh heavily.

Three days have passed, and I'm officially granted my leave. Today I return home early, feeling like a school girl on a summer break. To my surprise, however, I find Sam inside my apartment, turning my space into her beauty parlor. She's busy polishing her long nails with a huge manicure kit on the coffee table. Her short bleached hair cascades freely down her giraffe neck, and I only see a fashion model in her. She's quite a beauty, and she knows the fact so well.

"Hi, Kiki!" She beams, and I hate that name. "You're home early. Let me guess, we're going on that trip."

"How did you get in?" Ignoring her excitement, I close the door behind me.

She frowns, and then drops her long legs from the table. "Kira, I told you to stop hiding your keys under the flowerpot, but well, I'm glad you didn't listen."

"Well, I should've guessed," I murmur, pulling a hair clip to free my thick curls. "When did you get here?" I ask her as I head towards the bedroom.

"About an hour ago," Sam replies, "and I'm fine in case you've forgotten about my health!"

Oh my! I smile. "I'm glad you are. Have you had lunch yet? Or still on diet?"

"Depends," she says. "Are you going to cook?" She now gives me one of her severely tempting smiles; Samantha's special, because only she can break my resolutions.

"Lasagna or Spanish omelet?"

"Spanish omelet."

"As long as you wash the dishes," I mutter.

Sam laughs giddily. She's crazy for those two things, but eats only once a month; feminist torture. At times I get the impression that she only visits my place to eat, claiming that I'm the best cook in the world.

About an hour later, I ask Sam about the guy she's supposedly dating. Apparently they've met during work, and Sam volunteered to tour him around the city. Other details follow that I refuse to listen, but she seems to like him.

"He's not just a hang up, Kira. I seriously like him." She sounds sincere, and it's a first.

"Okay, I'm not arguing. Is he rich? Because I don't think he's a pauper if you're that excited." I take off my shoes, laughing.

"No, he's loaded," Sam says, shrugging heedlessly.

"Is he handsome? Like . . . enough to make terrific babies?"

Sam stays silent for a second, as if meditating, before saying, "He's breathtaking."

Okay, now I'm curious to meet this amazing man enough to make my crazy Sam drool over him. I understand she loves playing around with rich dudes and all, but never takes any serious. But now, I think she's serious about this one.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, a few hours before our flight, I bump into Amelia, my next-door neighbor who never stops talking of aura and energy. She's into Tarot reading, and I'm not a believer. As usual, she smiles jovially, her big green eyes shimmering brightly.

"Morning, Kira," she greets with that extra enthusiasm. "You look specifically beautiful today."

I arch my brows. "Amelia, I'm wearing my pajamas, and I'm holding a bag of trash, are you kidding me?"

She waves her chubby hand sassily. "I'm talking about your inner beauty, dear. I can see luck, luck, luck; you're surrounded with nothing but luck!"

"Huh?" I frown, stifling a laugh, for I swear there's no way I'll ever understand her words. "What luck?" I end up asking.

"Love," she says briskly, excited even. "You'll soon be blessed with love, lots of love. It may even feel surreal, dear."

"Huh?" I laugh, staring at the green eyes on my redhead neighbor.

Can she tell that dudes never visit my house and assumes I'm in need of one?

Seeing my puzzled expression, she laughs hilariously. "Oh, I'm so excited for you, Kira." She almost jumps.

This is . . . disturbing.

"Okay. Well, I'm going on a vacation for a while, so I hope you stay safe," I inform her, hoping to just end this session of whatever the name is.

"Oh, that's it!" she says stoutly, her bigger and bright.

"What is?" I ask, scowling bemusedly.

God, I hope this woman is okay in the head.

"No spoiler, Kira," she insists, sounding earnest. "Just enjoy yourself, dear. And remember, if your head doesn't know the answer, then your heart will." She beams, and disappears, leaving me completely stunned.

What is she talking about? I just shake my head, smiling. Sometimes you just have to take people as they are. With my smile intact, I dispose the trash bag, and slowly climb the stairs back inside.

"Why the bikini?" I ask Sam when I find her putting a disturbing one in my suitcase.

"You may need it," she says, looking so radiant in her quest for fashion emergencies, seated on my bed with my suitcase, clothes, and other stuff.

"Really? And where are we going?" I ask again. "Because I don't think there's an ocean in any ranch."

"Maybe a swimming pool? A river?" Sam shrugs, laughing.

"Help me, God," I mutter with a sigh.

"Or maybe not. Let's just leave unimportant stuff." She changes her mind, and I'm not even surprised. "I don't think there'll be swimming over there, right?" she asks and I sigh.

We spend some time packing, making sure we haven't forgotten anything important for a vacation. I'm not really excited about the trip, but I do like the idea of travelling outside California for a change. Good thing I'm so organized so packing doesn't take forever as Sam is in charge of the department.

We are finally heading to L.A International Airport, for our afternoon flight. My friend arranged everything, including the tickets, so I just follow suit like a shadow, no complaint given.

"So, where in the South are we going?" I ask again. It may sound weird, stupid even . . . but I only know that we're heading to Montana.

This is by far the reckless thing I've ever done. I guess I've reached a limit in my dull life that I desire some adventure. However, I know Sam wouldn't plan the trip without any head up.

"You'll see, girl, calm down!" Sam growls, trying up her hair with a rubber band as we're stuck for security check. "And don't worry, I've got all the information I need about this so it's not a mystery or some horror movie."

"Yeah, right. You've successfully made me feel the creep." I huff some air.

She knows what she's doing, I decide. But do you? My subconscious whispers. I don't care. I've been too uptight so let's face the unknown.

Sam can be quite handy, but I always trust her ability to plan things; something that makes her reliable at times.

Apparently we're flying business class, but I couldn't care less even if it were economy. I only want to hit the sky, and see if I can catch some sleep after my usual sleepless nights. I only ask Sam to wake me up when we land, and she too, makes herself busy with her tablet. I somehow realized that we're actually going to Yellowstone, Montana. I've never been there before but I like the idea. I'm excited even.

The plane finally lands at Bozeman Yellowstone Airport, at least two hours later. Smiling, I feel quite rejuvenated after my long nap. I don't understand how I did it, but I slept almost the entire time. We take our suitcases and proceed to the arrivals' curb, with no knowledge of our next move. At least in my case, I guess.

I ask Sam impatiently, "So, what's next?"

"Wait, Liam said he'd send someone to pick us up." She parades around with her phone. "I just need to wait for his call," she tells me absently while tapping on it.

"Send someone? Just great," I mumble, exhausted in manners.

This is seriously crazy. What am I doing, really? I can't help going back to the part of me that's still conscious.

Sam keeps roaming around, then suddenly smiles, and I see her on the phone a minute later. She's now grinning ridiculously that I can't help but shake my head to the sides.

Sometime later a rugged guy approaches us, dressed up in some cowboy attire that speaks loudly of his originality. He must be the one we've been waiting for. I smile when Sam talks to him, and her excitement is beyond explanation.

"No problem, this is all we have," she says, and it's the only thing I manage to hear.

The guy reaches for our suitcases and he finally takes notice of me. He's dark haired, a bit curly, with a serious kind of personality.

"Hi," he greets me with a curt smile. "I'm Peter. Let me help you with these."

"Kira. Pleasure." I let him do his thing before we all head to the van parked outside. My sight gets highly regaled as I'm immediately captured by the wonderful Montana sky.

So smooth, so blue.

"Loving it already?" Sam teases my smiling face, and I only shrug.

Peter places our stuff inside the car with such easiness. I watch his hard, tanned body that seems accustomed to heavy jobs, moving swiftly. He's hot, I guess.

Well, it's impossible not to admire the God's creation sometimes.

"I think I'm going to love this vacation," I think out loud, and all eyes turn towards me. "Well, I'm referring to this place."

"Really?" Sam murmurs, giving me one of her dubious looks.

I'm serious, though.

We hit the two-lane asphalt as soon as we dive away from the city. Sam has been striking a conversation with Peter, as I busy myself with the fascinating view through the half-scrolled window.

"So, are you related to Liam?" I hear Sam asking him.

"No," says Peter. "Sir Liam is my boss."

Attempting to stay oblivious of the two, I grab my camera from the handbag, and start clicking some pictures.

"How long will the ride take?" Again, she continues tormenting the poor guy.

"About one hour," he answers.

"Oh boy," she mutters, exhaling heavily.

She hates long rides, and I absolutely love this one.

Ignoring their voices, I focus my attention on the enchanting snow-capped mountains, and the enormous landscapes covered with serene shades of green. The sight is extremely breathtaking.

I stay awake the whole ride, watching some interesting farm houses, cows and horses grazing into several pastureland we pass by, and two cowboys riding their horses that make me grin like a fool. I think I'm a bit crazy for men in horses because I'm dazzled at the sight of their backs alone. There's something wild about cowboys that I perhaps need to explore. Goodness, what am I thinking now? A sigh lurches out of my lips as I clear my sultry thoughts.

Now we're entering some dusty road in which two fields are separated, bordered with a railing fence that seems to be long. This area is pretty beautiful, also, with yellow and white flowers adorning the green grass.

With the sky so clear, and the wind breezing like an ocean, I can't complain about anything.

"You seem to like this place already, Ms. Kira," Peter says calmly with a faint smile, handling the steering wheel with so much ease.

"Kira, please." I smile back. "And yes, this place is absolutely splendid." I fail to conceal the excitement, and he seems to quite understand.

"It won't be long, we're almost there," he says coolly.

"Oh, that's great." I hope there'll be food, I'm starving and I pray my tummy won't shame me as it usually does. Unfortunately my food goddess is hardly away from her throne.

We ride for extra five minutes, until I finally see a big and beautiful two-storey house, surrounded with a well-trimmed garden and trees capable to draw one's smile without any reason.

"Oh, finally." Sam stretches up, sounding like she'd dodged a bullet. "Are you good, Kiki?" She's now getting off.

"Never been better," I answer while putting my camera inside my shoulder bag.

Peter helps me with the suitcase as I get off, my eyes refusing to stay still in one place. Obeying their wishes, I end up seeing two people emerging from the house, probably to regard our presence. One of the two is a guy, a very good-looking guy in a denim shirt and blue jeans. And the other is a woman, dressed elegantly in a scarlet sweatdress, with some black wedge boots that complement her glossy, black hair.

Sam immediately jogs towards them, or him, smiling like a child facing the Christmas tree full of Santa's treats. The man smiles handsomely at her as their glances collide, but it doesn't last long as our eyes meet. His face turns expressionless, momentarily, making me frown a bit.

Well . . .

"Welcome, Samantha," he utters once he's resumed a bit of his seemingly rare smile.

"Thank you, Liam," Sam replies with her best smile.

Oh, Liam. Nice name. My subconscious seems to finally awake after the short nap. I get stuck in my feet, watching Sam and her Liam exchanging smiley greetings, until the woman throws a mirthful glance my way, a reminder of my impoliteness.

I pace over slowly, holding the strap of my bag as though my life depends of it. Now I'm starting to wonder if I did right by coming here. I mean, if I think

properly, I don't really have any business here, right? Anyways, I'll just forget it and seize the day.

The woman, who's indeed beautiful even from a distance, hugs Sam happily. I can hear her charming voice as she speaks, and it draws my smile right away. It's that strange feeling of liking someone you know nothing about, in the very first glance and other details like their smiles.

"I'm so glad to meet you," she tells my friend.

"Me, too," Sam replies, her grin impeccable.

Well, someone is so whipped.

"And this one?" the woman queries, her smile intact, and they all face me.

Here goes nothing. Getting closer, I utter, "Hello."

"Oh, this is my best friend, Kira," Sam says pointedly. "Kira, this is Liam and his mother."

"Oh, pleased to meet you." I move towards the mother.

"Kira," she mutters. "What a lovely name. Welcome to our home, darling, I'm Eleanor." She now hugs me, and it feels so heavenly.

Her warmth is so motherly.

"Thank you." I grin, maybe stupidly grinning.

"Liam Darcy," the man says while moving near. "Welcome." He extends his hand towards me, his gaze piercing through my eyes so intensely.

Relax, Kira, he's not so intimidating.

Liam's emotionless voice makes me uneasy for some unknown reasons. Ignoring my unhealthy thought, I shake his hand. Astonishing, I immediately experience something like an electric shock.

It's nerve wracking!

I wince, and we quickly split hands. He frowns, then folds his palm instinctively and subtly inspects it; we both do, before staring back at one another in a strange way. I think he too felt what I've just felt, but what the hell has just happened? Is it real or some kind of imagination?

CHAPTER 3

After exchanging our greetings, Mrs. Eleanor invites us inside her home, to at least have something to eat. I'm glad she does, for my tummy is about to start rumbling, and I'm not sure what our hosts would make out of it. Walking in, we're regarded by the classic foyer with a warm ambience. A brown sofa is installed near the large window, and two wing chairs right beside the fireplace that sends a soothing warmth. I slowly settle on the couch, per Eleanor's cordial instruction, and a soft breath escapes my lips as I try to get relaxed.

For a moment I forget that it's summer time, and right now it's certainly burning in L.A. Being here at this particular moment is like escaping the furnace I call home. I'm now beginning to believe I've made a right decision by stepping out of California. This place is awesome.

So far so good.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" Mrs. Eleanor kindly asks us, her voice gentle.

"Tea will do," Sam replies, and as usual, she looks so comfortable, seated cross-legged like a model. It's like she has no problem adjusting to people she's just met, unlike me who's having hard time keeping up with their presence.

Sam has asked me a countless times on how I manage to teach if I'm this introvert, and well, I'm not sure either. All I know is that once I'm indulged into books and literature in general, everything else ceases to exist; hence it's never been a problem at all.

"What about you, Kira?" Eleanor asks with her sweet smile, her big eyes so bright.

"Coffee, please," I utter.

"Me, too," Liam who has been silent since our extraordinary exchange earlier finally speaks.

"Okay." Eleanor nods, and then disappears to where I suppose to be the kitchen, leaving us in her son's company which is somewhat boring.

Am I took quick to judge? I end up consulting my subconscious who happens to think against my thoughts. Maybe I'm too judgmental and I should hold my horses.

Liam is sitting next to Sam, although they are not talking yet. Throwing a discreet glance at him, I can't help thinking of our handshake. But no, I got to snap out of it. Perhaps I imagined it as I was too distracted by the beauty of this place. There's no way such a thing can happen.

And why is my tummy in knots at the mere sight of him?

"You have a nice home here," Sam says, breaking the awful silence and my unearthly imagination.

"Thank you, Samantha." Liam smiles. "I hope you two had a smooth ride here." He regards me this time. And it's now that I notice he has a British accent.

How charming!

Sam answers, "It was okay. Although I slept the whole way. But I know someone who enjoyed all the scenery." She shoots me a glance, a mischievous smile on her nude lips.

With that, Liam's eyes rest on me as he asks, "Is Yellowstone to your liking, miss--?"

Seriously? Miss? Do I look like a job applicant?

"Jones. Kira Jones," I say.

"Ms. Jones," he mutters, his gaze calm and impassive. "I suppose you do like this place so far."

"Yes, it's a dream come true." I smile widely, and he nods, but remains pensive.

Well, maybe he's like that.

Thankfully, Mrs. Eleanor walks in and settles the tension. I'm glad Sam hasn't noticed the hostility in my voice when talking to Liam, for I'm pretty surprised as why I find his manners rather uncivil. Or maybe a bit . . . unfriendly?

"I hope you can enjoy this, because I personally made them." Mrs. Eleanor places a trayful of chocolate cookies and cream pastries.

"Damn, I love pastries," I utter greedily, ignoring the noble manners that I don't have to begin with.

"Then enjoy, darling," Eleanor says with a bright smile, and they all laugh. Except Liam, whose blue eyes are fixed on mine intensely.

No problem, I'm sure you'll get used to them in time. My subconscious says calmly and I see no thrill to her mock. At the same time, a young woman in a purple dress emerges, carrying the refreshments.

"Thanks, Betty," Eleanor tells her.

Regarding us curtly without a word, Betty places one cup on the table slowly, or too slowly, her long bangs of dark hair guarding her timid face. While at it, the two cups suddenly slip from her tray, and the coffee spills down the seemingly expensive, Turkish carpet.

I feel a sharp heat on my thighs, but not strong enough to be a burn.

"Are you okay, Kira?" Sam looks startled as she jumps from her seat, and at the same moment Eleanor asks, "Are you burnt?"

"No, I'm good." I quickly stand up, trying to fix the stains splattered on the skirt of my yellow sundress. "I'm fine, don't worry," I assure them.

"Oh, Betty, how clumsy," Mrs. Eleanor cries softly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let her carry that."

I see Betty fidgeting apologetically, her palms rubbing together nervously. It's as though she wants to speak but can't. She's most probably a mute, I grasp at the way she opens her mouth to no success of her voice coming out.

"I'm okay, Betty, don't worry," I tell her pointedly, reassuring her with a smile that it's no big deal. She gives me a shy one, nodding. "I think I need to change, though." I collide my gaze with Liam, and for once he looks human; his eyes unguarded.

"Okay, honey. Let me take you to your room." Mrs. Eleanor kindly offers, placing her perfectly manicured hand on my shoulder. "Please, clean up the mess, Betty, and don't hurt yourself," she tells the young lady.

I think Eleanor is pretty nice. Although I've met her only shortly.

Most women in her position tend to act like Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings; super meticulous and overly controlling, but I don't think Eleanor is like that. I wonder how it's like to have a loving mother like her, and I guess I never will.

Growing up without parents, has made me carry a soft spot for the elderly. Even the people I'm close with at work are mostly old professors. Dr. Snape, my

psychiatrist, said that it's natural; given that I must be yearning for the parental love subconsciously. I think she is right.

I'm led upstairs, and I'm immediately awed to catch a glimpse of a huge library from a far end. I'm addicted to books, and I guess it shows right away from my stupid grin. Mrs. Eleanor notices and gives me a smile.

"Do you read books, Mrs. Eleanor?" I ask, my eyes fixed on my subject of interest.

"Me? No way," she responds quickly, and starts laughing. "They belong to Liam. He's the one obsessed with books, and a very good collector as well."

Him? I wouldn't have bet even after my reincarnation.

"Oh, I see," I quip, wandering my gaze around the silent hall accented with stylish bulbs of golden lights, and small paintings. The walls are coated in milky white, blending perfectly with the wooden furniture that seem to dominate the entire furnishing of this house.

We finally halt at the door, and Eleanor swings it open. I think it's the room, judging from my brown, Louis Vuitton suitcase that I come across. "Come in, Kira," she urges, and I comply. "I hope the room is comfortable enough."

To me this room is more than comfortable. It's spacious and luxurious. A nice bed made of wood is standing regal, its mattress covered with lavender blue and white beddings. And mostly, there's a balcony. What else would I need for my lodging?

Well, such luck indeed.

"It's fine, Mrs. Eleanor." I smile wholeheartedly.

"Just call me Eleanor."

"Okay."

"Well then, I'll leave you so that you can change. Meanwhile, I'll prepare you another cup of coffee," she says, and I nod. "And please, dear, don't hesitate to ask for anything you need. I want both of you to feel at home."

"I will, thank you." I watch after her, until the door shuts. What a woman! I like the way she addresses herself. She's old, but yet looks young and beautiful. And smells divine, too.

Okay, I'm not a pervert, I'm just an admiral.

Now that I'm alone, I take my time to catch a deep breath of vigor. I glance around the room for another few seconds, before pacing towards the balcony. The sight of the backyard is so amazing. A set of giant trees streams from a distance and the soft green grass carpets the ground.

Leaning over the handrails, I get lost into the beautiful sunset. The yellow-orange rays pierce through the woods, beaming faintly as the sun slowly walks the sky. I

suck in a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air that coos my skin. And I suddenly learn that there's another balcony to my left.

"Maybe it's Eleanor's room," I breathe.

A while later after a shower, I settle down on the bed. It's now that finally recall that I do have a phone. It's four-forty as I go through my inbox and call logs. Apparently, I don't have a single mail. Good for me. I'm happy the office has cut me some slacks, letting me enjoy myself.

"Hey, Kiki." Sam pops in suddenly, distorting my reverie. "Liam and I are going for a little walk. Wanna come?" she queries, and I frown.

A third wheel? No, I love myself too much.

"Not really. I'm just going to eat something . . . and maybe see what to do next," I retort matter-of-factly, putting my phone on the bedside table.

"Okay," Sam utters with a soft sigh. I see a disappointment hint on her sleepy-like eyes, and it worries me a bit.

"Is something wrong? Why are you brooding?" I ask, and she walks in, shutting the door behind her.

"Well . . ." She sighs again while taking a seat, making me frown bemusedly.

"Okay, tell me already." I move next to her, waiting for the response.

"It's Liam," she utters gently. "Well, what do you think of him?" She now stares at me expectantly.

Huh? What kind of question is this? I mutter mentally. "He's okay, I guess," I reply vaguely.

"Okay? How?" Sam insists.

Now I think it's me who needs a breath. What does she want to hear?

"I mean, he seems cool, awfully handsome, doesn't talk much, likes reading books. I'd give him eight at the scale of ten."

Yes, the two are for the unknown.

"Reading books? Where did you get that?" Sam lifts a single eyebrow.

"I just . . . found out somehow?" I say, feeling flustered.

"Forget it." She decides to ignore my remark, and turns serious. "I don't think he likes me as much."

"Why?" I ask.

"Well, he looks distant. Haven't you noticed? It's as if we don't have anything at all," Sam explains, and I think I've noticed that much.

Well, since Sam is not the type to blabber over a guy, it can only mean she's really into this cowboy. However, evidently, I don't know much of their relationship up until this point. So, what do I comment on this? I wonder.

"Look, Sam," I start after a little thought. "The guy invited you here, it means he wants you here, and that's the whole point. Just go out there, take that walk, and stop beating yourself up."

"Really?" Sam asks, unsure, twiddling her fingers. "What if he thinks--"

"What if he doesn't think whatever you're thinking?" I ask, and she bites her lip.

"How would you know if you don't find out, Sam? He likes you, he likes you not, will you play that game as if you're twelve?"

"Crazy you." She laughs, and I follow suit. "So, I should just be upfront?" she asks me, sounding lost. Which is a first. This is not the Sam I know.

"Be yourself. If he likes you, he should see and accept the real you. You don't need to push it, just let the nature take its course."

Yeah, coming from someone who's never dated properly.

"Okay," says Sam, smiling. "Damn, keep reading those books, my sweet nerdy, they're so helpful."

"Thanks so much for your beautiful words, Samantha Ford. It's exactly what I'll do." My sarcasm is so evident as I mutter this. "Yeah, move it!" I push her to get up, and she obliges with a laughter.

"Love you," she tells me while leaving.

"Love you," I say with a smile, and I know she does. She finally leaves. "I hope it goes well, I really do." I sigh.

Sam has insecurity issues, we all do, but at least I'm living in a bubble. She hides it by freeing herself, and I hide mine by encrypting myself. We're both broken, I know, that's why we need each other.

CHAPTER 4

For dinner we had tasty saffron rice with garden peas, a tender roasted beef with plenty of veggies, and a grand fruit torte for dessert. Eleanor prepared everything herself and I was honored to learn her secret recipe as we exchanged stories in the kitchen.

She's a marvel in the kitchen.

It turns out that they lived in London before moving to Montana a year ago, after her husband's death. It was a rueful revelation. Well, she's such a good conversationalist. Or maybe I've just fallen in love with her motherly warmth and tenderness.

Done with the dinner I head back to my room after a half glass of a vintage red wine from Napa, as I was told. Now the only problem is boredom. Sleeping in a new room can be a little tricky. Not for long after, however, Sam drops by once again.

"Any problem, ma'am? I'm busy chasing after my sleep you know?" I tease, pulling my pajamas from the suitcase.

"I see you've found yourself a new bestie, huh?" Sam grins, drawing herself in.

"I don't follow," I remark, clueless of what she's referring at. I start peeling off the dress and the bra that has been bugging me since earlier.

I hate brassieres. But I need them to swell my little whatever that hides beneath.

"I'm talking about Liam's mother." Sam drops heavily on the bed, untying her hair with a sharp tug of the hairband.

"Eleanor? What about her?" I ask.

"You two are clicking like hell," Sam clears, her tone suspicious. What is she implying? "Did she say anything about me?"

Oh, that's it.

"Not in particular," I reply while folding my dress. "She only asked how long we've known each other, and naturally I told her since childhood."

"Did you mention the orphanage?"

"Yes?"

"Jesus! And what did she say?"

"Nothing. Just the usual words that we must be used to by now," I answer matter-of-factly. "Why, Sam? Were you planning on hiding it?" I just don't understand her reaction.

"No, it's just--" She stammers, a small hint of displeasure clouding her sleepy-like eyes. "Oh, I don't know." She stands up briskly and starts walking in circles, as though pondering about something.

Oh, it's that little disease. "Come here." I hold her hand and pull her down. "Stop thinking about that, okay?"

"About what?" She gives me the I-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about look.

"Sam, I know you're still bothered with the fact that your mother abandoned you in that place," I say and she swallows hard. "But don't let it destroy you, please. It wasn't your fault, and it definitely doesn't mean you should be ashamed of it. You're amazing, and if there's anyone who doesn't see it, then they've got to check their brain. Forget about it."

"Kira . . ." She sighs, fighting the tears in a depressing manner. "I hate this feeling that I may be rejected anytime. I hate feeling this way, but it always gets the best of me."

Damn the tearworks!

"No, don't let it," I say sternly, feeling my own eyes getting wet. "Don't let anything make you feel that way. And guess what, even if the whole world turns against you, I'll always be by your side. We'll grow old together if necessary," I muse, and we both laugh.

At times we both lose to our fears, but in the end we get up again and start over.

"Okay, my Kiki. I love you," Sam says, sniffing.

"I love you bigger," I return as we hug. "And you've said it twice today which means you're nervous. Don't be like that. You know, whenever you do that I go all baby myself."

"Okay." She gets up, all refreshed, and she's even laughing. That's my girl! "No more crying, I came to get something." She starts spinning around.

Ugh, I hate when she does that.

"What are you looking for?" I ask fast do that she stops making me giddy.

"Oh, I get it," she says in apprehension over whatever she's been questing for.

"I'm glad you do," I remark, putting on my sleeping wear.

"I came to get my suitcase." She laughs at her own fish brain. "They have another room for me, is it okay if we sleep separately?" she asks while pulling her large, pink suitcase.

"You think I'm gonna kick you while asleep?"

"Come on, Kira, that's not it," she argues. "The room is opposite to Liam's, so I--"

"Alright, fine! No details!" I stoutly say.

Why does she like tormenting me?

She bursts out laughing, fully aware of my horror regarding her nude talk. "Relax, Kiki. I was only going to say that I wouldn't want to be a bother, in case we take too much time talking while you want to rest."

Oh!

"Works better for me. Have a great time," I tell her, before slipping into a pink top and white pajama pants. I close the window, and then flick off the lights, ready to call it a day.

The place is quite chilly at night. Decidedly I dive under the warm duvet and the sooner I fall asleep the better. I'm deadly exhausted, and for a single lady, why not enjoy the bed? All I need is to get a good sleep if I may.

He approaches me from behind as he normally does, and whispers the words that I usually fail to hear, but not today. I refuse to lose this time. I'm going to hear what he says, and I'm so determined to unravel his face; to finally see him. His strong arms wrap around my tummy, disarming me with a soft brush of his chest against my back, nuzzling my hair smoothly. His touch is something I need badly, his words are the food I'm craving, and his face is all I want to behold.

"I've been waiting forever," he breathes against my neck, and I respire unevenly. "You and I are meant to be; near, far, you're always mine and I yours," he says huskily, making me swallow hard, yet my vocal feels restrained. "I love you, Kira. I always will."

Breathing heavily, I slowly open my eyes, feeling the grand urge to apprehend the proprietor of my unsettling heart. I turn my head in a slow motion, to eventually see the face of this tantalizing stranger who doesn't feel strange at all. He tightens his grip, holding me still. Oh God.

"Please, let me see you," I rasp, my voice barely audible.

"Are you sure, Kira?" His strong hand finds my neck and gently caresses against his velvet lips, sending a shiver down my spine. "Do you think you can handle it?" he asks, his warning so alluring, doubling my desires and curiosity.

"Please," I beg, embracing his soft kisses near my earlobe. He simply drives me insane.

"If you say so," he whispers, and I breathe erratically. Slowly, not wanting to kill the suspense so easily, if not my fears for the unknown, I turn my head around, my heart pounding hard against my chest.

Finally, after the long wait, I manage to grasp his face. He's now standing before me, his smile big and bright, something so beautiful. However, my gaze turn stone-cold when I look at him. I shake my head slowly, denying the sight of him. He's not the one, I mentally scream.

No, it can't be him!

Feeling as though I've skipped a rope, I sit up in bed while running a hand through my messy hair. The dream is still fresh in my head. Why did I see him? Is the only question burning inside me. This is so confusing and I'm losing my mind. Why not someone else of all the people in the States?

Why Liam Darcy?

I swallow convulsively while reaching for the bottle of water, trying to catch a proper breath. It's only one-forty, and this damn insomnia won't go easy on me. What should I do with it? I go for therapies, but I don't think if it helps to cure this, at all. Is it even curable? Now I wonder.

Dr. Snape says it has a connection to the trauma and other hideous words she uses. After surviving the accident, in which my parents died, I barely have a peaceful night. I keep having nightmares, and in addition to that, I started having this crazy dream. Right now I can only come up with one explanation.

I must be going nuts.

Feeling drained, I slowly abandon the bed and walk towards the window. I think I need some fresh air, no matter how cold it may be. I just wrap myself with a blanket for precaution, for I don't want to imagine how the winter treats the folks around here. And finally I step into the balcony.

The Montana night coos me gently as the shining moon and stars relax in harmony, my eyes sticking into their hypnotic beauty. I smile optimistically at the sound of wilderness from the tall trees streaming around this back yard. Sighing, I hug the blanket tightly, staring at the sky above.

Why can't I be up there? I sometimes feel this way, tired of living, exhausted of fighting the unknown awaiting.

Thinking of the dream, I just take a deep breath. I refuse to believe it, yet my mind doesn't seem to be playing tricks, at all. I clearly saw Liam's face earlier. He's the man in my dream. But why now? Why him? Why not someone else? This is so crazy.

No, maybe it's just an illusion, Kira. I try my best not to dwell, for it won't do me any good. Not for anyone.

I breathe out in exasperation, hoping to calm down my nerves. There has to be a scientific explanation, I tell myself inwardly. There has to be one, or else I should just admit myself to an asylum. An asylum? My subconscious blinks, and I end up chuckling.

Amidst all this, something else catches my attention. I cock my head to the right side as there's a light coming from the next balcony, and as I fix my eyes attentively, I see Liam standing there. What? I gasp mentally, and he is apparently looking at me, dressed in pajama pants and a polo shirt.

No, this is not real, is it?

Even if it's half-dark, I can tell the intensity of his gaze, which doesn't leave me indifferent. Doesn't he sleep? He should be sleeping. *And what about you?* My sleep goddess mutters, and I decide return inside. I take a sleeping pill, which I've been told not to. I really need to sleep, though. Thinking of Liam Darcy, I just pull myself together and lie in under the warm duvet. It doesn't take longer until I succumb into the world of oblivion, the place I normally wish to get lost into, to shut my eyes and never open. I don't realize when, but I end up into a heavy sleep.

This morning I wake up a bit late and fatigued. A little drowsiness urges me to quest for some coffee so as to regain my vigor. I quickly take a shower and slip into a pair of skinny jeans and sweater. It's a bit cold here. Afterwards, I head to the kitchen, passing by Sam's room without luck. She's already awake, it seems.

On my way downstairs, as I descend the stairs nonchalantly, the memory of last night hits the back of my mind vehemently, dragging me into the same cloud of the never-ending confusion. I'd love to play oblivious, but the dream displays itself in my head treacherously. I truly wish I could tell someone, but no.

I still love my reputation as a sound-minded woman.

"Good morning, Kira, did you sleep well?" Eleanor regards me as I step in the kitchen. She's stunningly dressed in a cream, sheath dress and zebra patterned heels.

"Morning, Eleanor. I slept well," I return with a grateful smile despite the odds.

"Good to hear, darling," she replies gently. "Breakfast outside, Betty. For once in your life, please hurry without breaking a thing, dear." She inspects the kitchen for a while, as though making sure everything in place, her black purse in hand.

"Are you going somewhere?" I find myself asking, and she faces me right away.

"Yes, Kira," she answers. "I have to go to the city and I'm afraid I won't join you for breakfast."

"Oh, is that so?" I utter softly, a bit disappointed at the fact.

"But I want you to have fun and enjoy your stay. And do send my regards to Samantha as well," she says apologetically.

"I will, don't worry." I smile, feeling such a rare kind of joy. Something I forgot since I was seven.

"Okay, let me hurry up." She gives me a kiss on my left cheek before disappearing in a hurry.

What a beautiful morning!

Staring at Betty, struggling with the breakfast charade, I can't contain myself from smiling. She's kind of clumsy, if not slow. Sighing, I decide to give her a little hand with the task.

I feel like she's going to cause an accident.

"Let me help you carry the tray," I tell her, and she shakes her head in denial. "Well, it's not a problem, really," I insist, but she keeps denying. "Alright, but at least be careful, huh?"

I chuckle at the sight of her snail-like movement.

"Hi, Kiki." Sam beams at me sassily, looking great in a floral mini jumpsuit, her hair loose in slight waves. I guess she had a beautiful night, and her mood is as such.

Life is so unfair.

"Hi, Sam," I answer and my eyes find the gentleman in a white sweatshirt and black jeans. He's great, too. I seriously wonder how these two manage to look this beautiful so early in the morning.

And here I am, thinking of my crazed life, looking like overcooked spinach.

"Good morning, Ms. Jones," Liam greets me over his gigantic newspaper. The New York Times, to be more specific, making him exude power for some reasons only myself can understand. "I hope you had a very good night."

You wish.

"Morning, Mr. Darcy. Yes, I had a great one," I reply while taking a seat.

"Very well." He gives me a faint smile and resumes his focus on the newspaper.

My morning begins in such a style as we soon engage into breakfast. At least I get to compensate my disturbing night with some tasty doughnuts and coffee. Fair or not, life can still be funny. While at it, I just appreciate what I have.

CHAPTER 5

I begin suffering from the idleness soon after breakfast. Sam and Liam are talking about business and other uninteresting stuff for my taste. I need something spontaneous; sitting on the porch isn't for me.

"I'm not trying to sell you off, Liam; I'm simply stating the facts. They even offer stock options in such cases," Sam keeps rumbling, and he listens attentively.

Just pretend you're busy, girl. Or at least go and find a book to read. You know nothing about business! I hear my nosy subconscious snorting, and I nearly roll my eyes. *Yeah, so what? Must we all know about Debts and Equities?* I snort back.

"Well, I suppose we shall see how things work. I'm sorry to drag you into this boring conversation, I know you're here to relax," Liam says while taking a cup of coffee to his mouth, soon after placing the newspaper on the table.

"Don't worry," says Sam, flushing scarlet in her cheeks. "It's just a small talk. It's not like I'm typing the report or something."

Oh Lord. I wonder when my friend has become this polite. The Sam I know would kill whoever destroys her idea of having a good time, yet she's here playing professional. I'm not sure what kind of spell this Englishman uses, but it's very effective.

"Ms. Jones," he suddenly utters, shifting his attention towards me.

"Yes?" I reply, lifting eyes up at him.

"Are you enjoying your stay, or would you rather I leave you alone with your friend?" he asks politely, his manners full of gallant.

"Pardon?" I utter, unsure of what exactly is his question. Frankly, I can't even concentrate with everything going on; especially when I stare him in the eyes. He simply puts me in havoc, and I know I need to put a closure.

He's Sam's crush, for God's sake! I shouldn't even look him in the eyes as I constantly feel impelled to, by he, himself. I sigh heavily.

"Are you okay?" He huffs a soft laugh, probably indisposed by my absentmindedness, and Sam gives me a worried look.

Am I? I ask inwardly, and the answer is quite evident.

"Yes, I am okay. You can carry on with your talk. Pretend I'm not here," I answer, grabbing the newspaper from the table.

"Kiki," Sam snaps, half-embarrassed.

"What?" I mouth, and she snarls with her eyes.

"Very well." Liam sighs. "I was curious, Samantha, about the restaurant we dined that day. Did you get the refund? Because you were so determined to get your money back."

"Oh my God! You still remember that?" Sam gasps, and Liam huffs that small laugh of his.

I dare not look at him, after what happened last night. I don't know what to think anymore, hence I'm totally absorbed in the newspaper that I'm probably holding upsidedown; pray that I'm not. My mind is miles away, thinking of just the dream.

"I love you, I always will." This keeps replaying in my ears, and I can't repress the urge to look him in the eyes. But no, I should probably stop thinking of anything related to Liam. It was just a dream, and nothing more.

Suddenly, our attention gets caught by the heavy whirling sound resembling . . . a helicopter? Instinctively, I throw the newspaper aside and travel my glance towards the open field. I'm so right. Well, a lot keeps happening in this place.

A black helicopter with 'Chopper 64' imprint slowly lands at the Darcy's grounds. Oh boy! My subconscious takes off her sunglasses to witness for herself. Sam and I quickly exchange glances, wondering who is gracing us with such a grand entrance.

"I can't believe this," Liam mutters in a low voice, his attention on the same thing as ours. "Excuse me, ladies." He gets up to regard this visitor.

A minute or two later, we see a man jumping off the helicopter with a huge smile on his face. He hugs Liam, and he, too, smiles brightly. Sam looks at me, and I only shrug. The new guy has a medium height, a bit slim but fit, and looks fancy even from a distance.

They're now approaching towards the house, and from here I can see the new guy clearly. He's wearing full black; from his sunglasses, body fit V-neck shirt, to his skinny jeans. His shoes are brown boots, that seem to must have cost a fortune. But none of us knows who he is.

"Any idea?" I ask Sam.

"None," she answers.

We stay put as the boys approach, our curiosity shooting beyond range at each second ticking. I just wonder who this guy is; it's apparent how close he and Liam seem to be.

"Hey, Liam, you never mentioned we have beautiful guests here," the helicopter guy says mirthfully as he finally graces us his close appearance.

"They're my guests, not yours," Liam replies , before resuming his former seat.

Now I'm curious about their relationship. Are they brothers? No, they look nothing in common.

"Relax, brother," the new guy retorts, then turns towards Sam. Like all the other men I know, he gives her an interesting look. Who wouldn't? She's a catch.

"You're not gonna chew me, are you?" Sam asks teasingly, and he bursts out laughing.

We all do.

"No, gorgeous. I'm merely appreciating the wonders of the universe. I'm Malik, the only brother of Liam," he says charmingly, his grin impeccable.

"We're not brothers," Liam mutters under his breath, and I stifle a laugh. This feels like the usual banter and they surely do look like kids.

"Pleasure to meet you, Malik. I'm Samantha," Sam replies with a smile. Malik seems rejuvenated as he kisses her soft knuckles. Oh, some chivalry here! My subconscious cheers excitedly, and I have no comment.

"The pleasure is all mine." Malik bows dramatically, his big grey eyes glistening at the beaming sunshine and his own disposition. He resembles a happy person; his smile so genuine like a child's who sees color in everything.

"So, you're not really Liam's brother, are you?" My friend decides to quench her curiosity. Yes, girl. Is he? I stay attentive myself.

Malik glances pointedly at Liam, who is still frowning and answers, "Unfortunately no."

Oh! "And what are you?" I think out loud, but I don't regret.

"We're very best friends, almost like brothers, right, Liam?" He grins boyishly, and I think he's kind of funny.

"Yeah, sure," Liam says casually, reclining back in his seat. Oh, Liam! Always grumpy. I try hard not to smile at the sight of his handsome, but grouchy face.

Malik moves to my side, nonchalantly, and now that he's close, I grasp that he somehow looks like someone from the Middle East. Like a half-Arab if I'm not mistaken. We stan for diversity, don't we? I love this.

He stares at me intently that I wonder if I appreciate those charming orbs hooded by long lashes fixing me like the last cake in the display. He has nice features; a clean shaved face, a flawless skin, his hair thick and black.

"Hi. I'm Kira," I tell him softly, not knowing what else to do in this kind of situation. Swooned? No, I'm not! I immediately shut my nosy subconscious who's about to spill her nonsense.

"Kira?" Malik mutters thoughtfully. "Beautiful name. What does it mean?" he asks, which takes me a little by surprise. This is a first.

"Means the throne, mistress or the ruler. Let's say . . . same as queen, in Russian," I prompt, and he lifts an amused eyebrow.

"The queen of my heart," he says gallantry, a hand on his chest as he makes a slight bow. I squint my eyes. "I think I've finally found one." He now laughs loudly.

Oh boy! I end up laughing along. I think he's . . . someone you can't stop smiling being around with. I hope he's not a jerk, though, for looks can be deceiving sometimes.

"I thought you came to speak business," Liam snaps, then proceeds, "Why don't we go to the study--"

"Come on, Liam. Business can wait." Malik waves his hand in the air, with his smile intact. "I'm here to relax, and enjoy my summer in peace," he says impishly, sucking in a deep sigh.

He's something else.

"We can give you some space if you have something important to discuss, you know," Sam suggests, and I'm sure she's tired of sitting on this porch like an old lady.

"No, no, no, we are not talking business. Don't mind Liam," Malik says strenuously. He then pulls a chair across from mine, and we're now facing one another, eye to eye.

"Of course we are," Liam insists frigidly, his looks tentative. "Samantha works at Northern Pacific Exporters, and I thought the deal was--"

"You do?" Malik jumps fast, eyeing my friend like he's just seeing her for the first time.

Oh wow! That escalated quickly. I just sit cross-legged, skimming through the New York Times.

"Yes, but I'm not giving you any confidential information, if that's what your excitement suggests," Sam booms, and I laugh out loud.

They all throw a glance at the crazy me. Honestly, I think it's my cue to find some adventure of my own. "Sorry," I tell them politely. "That was excellent, sweetie. Be professional." I get up with my laughter, ready to go wherever my spontaneity leads me to.

"Have we just been snapped, bro?" Malik asks with a dazzled smile, amusement so evident in his voice.

"I guess," says Liam gently, his voice precarious as usual, and I can't tell his true emotions. Our eyes collide as I place the newspaper on the table, and my breath hitches. "We are not like that, Samantha, and that offends me," he adds, serious in manners.

Really, now? Why is he taking it too serious, though? I think to myself. Maybe he knows nothing about joking and other social skills, I decide.

"I didn't mean to sound rude, Liam. It's just that--" Sam stammers, twiddling her fingers. I just stare, amazed. It's epic seeing Sam fretting over a guy, and I can't tell why. Is she that serious about Liam? I can't help but wonder on how deep it is.

"She was merely rendering a warning, gentlemen," I butt in, still at my feet. "It's two against one, and it's totally an unfair game."

"Woah! Now I'm the one feeling offended," Malik says, laughing loudly, making me quirk an eyebrow. "You think we're some kind of swindlers or something?"

"Who knows? Maybe you had a purpose luring us here." I shrug, and Sam gives a baffled smile.

"Well, why don't you stay so that it becomes the fair game, as you prefer," Liam says coolly, fixing his blue gaze directly at me.

Is he challenging me? I stare intently at him. He stills his eyes, totally unfazed . . . his gaze burning me impetuously. Jeez! What is he? My subconscious murmurs, and I don't really have the answer right now.

"I'd love to, really, but unfortunately it's not my scene," I reply truthfully, rejecting the challenge. "I'm a literature teacher and it's what I'm good at. Plus, Sam can handle you two, that I'm sure of." I give my friend a vote of confidence, and she gives me a fond smile.

Good girl! No need to dance his tunes, my subconscious whispers softly, making my lips twitch into a tiny smile as my eyes, once again, meet Liam's.

"I like her," Malik utters, and it acts as a cue for me to get out of here. I need something worthwhile to do, anything just to stop making a fool out of myself. I feel stirred up, the reason unfathomable.

Damn, what am I doing? Since when do I enjoy challenging men?

Leaving them talking business, I head inside and stride into my room. Immediately, as though I'm in a big hurry, I take off my sweater, and on a red swing top, leaving my jeans untouched. When done, I grab my camera and lead the way back outside. Now where do we go?

My eyes squint with pleasure as it's already sunny. I slowly walk past my ex-companion, still discussing their Merger and Acquisitions in a casual talk. Well, there's always a way to have self-pleasure. Luckily, this ranch is big, so there has to be something befitting somewhere.

"Wait, does it mean you're actually buying the entire company? And not a simple investment as you . . ." I manage to hear Sam who's practically astonished.

"Preach, sister," I mumble to myself.

"Where to, Kira?" Sam catches me, and I halt in my tracks.

Ah, can't she just stop being a mom now? I frown in a fleeting moment, but quickly unfold my face as I turn around.

"Just around, I need a breather," I answer vaguely. "I've got my phone with me; I'll call in case I get lost."

"She's interesting," says Malik, playful in manners. "Don't you agree bro?"

Liam says nothing, but his eyes say it all, that I'm probably sick in the brain.

And why are you so concerned about him? That annoying voice breathes in my head, ruining my ruin my mood. I'm not concerned. Why would I be? I mentally shrug my shoulders.

"Okay, be good," Sam says in a sisterly tone of voice. I nod and leave.

The moment I get familiar with the outside, my nose gets attacked by the fresh scent of trees, grasses, and all the flowers around. The sound of birds and churning leaves mingle, making this day so beautiful. Well, cheers to you, Kira. Perhaps some alone time will do me wonders right now.

Taking a small pause, I watch the brownish grassland from a distance, a place where the helicopter is resting. It's a bit alarming, the sight of it, as it immediately reminds me of the dream. It's like the same place, and an itchy sense of déjà vu overwhelms me.

But no, enough of the dream nonsense!

CHAPTER 6

The sun grazes my bronze skin warmly, doing away the slight cold that's been enveloping me for a while. Walking around, I end up near the sturdy, old-looking barn. Everything's so peaceful at the moment and much to my surprise, I'm welcomed by two beautiful horses grazing inside the railing fence groining the barn.

How I love horses. I grin ridiculously.

Smiling, I grab my old vintage canon and click a few pictures. The horses are both brown, except one has a white patch on the back and neck. I saunter along the fence, nearing them, slowly, as though afraid to startle them. *Now this is what I call having fun.*

"Hi, there." I lean over the fence, drinking in the horse smell that I'm so new at; it put me at ease nevertheless. An infantile giggle escapes my mouth as he responds with a neigh. *Wait, is it a he or she?* "Well, let's pretend you're a boy," I mutter, proceeding with endeavor; patting is smooth hair with delight.

"Excuse me," a boy's voice snaps, startling me. I quickly whirl my head around. "Who are you?" he inquires as he approaches, holding an empty bucket.

"Uh--" I suddenly lose my voice.

"Oh, you must be one of the guests at the big house," he asks, his voice dry.

"Yeah." I smile with relief. "My name is Kira, a friend of . . . Mr. Darcy? Yeah, something like that." I'm not even sure of how I'm related to our hosts.

The boy bursts out laughing, in seemingly amused manner, and I gape, blinking clueless. "You're dumb, aren't you?" he asks, and momentarily I wonder whether he is being serious or not.

"Why? Do I look dumb?" I ask, my composure disturbed.

"You're not even sure if he's your friend. Is he your friend?" he mocks, and I huff exasperatedly. Do I retaliate? I glower at him. "Sir Liam doesn't have lady friends, so are you his girlfriend?" he adds, somewhat curious, judging from the ingenious look of his amber eyes.

"No," I practically snap, and it's he who gapes right now. Oh girl! You never learn, do you? My subconscious sighs heavily. *Okay, be gentle, Kira. He's just a kid and you're an adult.*

"Are you lost, then?"

"Look, kiddo," I start, ignoring his question. "First, work out on your manners, I'm older to be your sister. And second, I'm not dumb."

"Okay." He shrugs, but doesn't look affected.

God, kids nowadays need an ass whoop.

"Good. Do you live here?" I question as my attempt to be on top of the situation fails miserably.

"Over there." He points at the little, well-designed farmhouse from the other side.
"But I work here. I'm Julian, by the way." He jumps over the fence.

"I'm Kira," I return.

"You said it already." He keeps gazing around the area as though making sure of something.

"Jeez!" I just let it pass.

"What are you looking for?" Julian asks me, and the answer is . . . I don't know what exactly I want. I'm always a seeker of the unknown. I sigh mentally as this question has made my inside churn.

"Not sure," I reply while following Julian's moving body. He is young, but quite stout, as though he's been training horses his whole few years of life. He's wearing some grey worn-out jeans, with a green polo shirt.

"You don't know what you want?" He seems regaled by allegation, running a hand through his unkempt brunette hair.

Tell me about it! I sigh in a resigned manner. "Well, maybe I do. Can you tell me a nice place to visit around here?" I utter softly.

"Within the estate?"

"Hmm . . . yeah?"

He takes a breath, thinks for a while, and then says, "Maybe you can come with me to watch the cows."

"What?" I scoff incredulously.

Is this little kidding me? Watching cows? I huff an amused laughter.

"You don't like cows? How about horses? There's more at the stable." He sounds serious, gesturing at the other side of the ranch.

"I do like horses, Julian. And cows, too, but I want something else," I tell him calmly, pitching my gaze around. "So what's great about this place, other than the animals and people?" I face him.

"I don't know. A river, maybe?"

"Where is it?" I ask quickly, my water goddess aroused.

"About twenty-minutes walk from here."

"Where exactly?" I urge.

Julian seems surprised by my enthusiasm, but ends up giving me the direction and an alternative shortcut way through the woods that's only ten-minutes long.

"You're going?" he asks, his sharp gaze quite astute.

"You said it's all within the Darcy's property, and safe, right?" I ask, making sure to be safe and avoid becoming an outlaw.

"Yeah, but are you sure you'll be fine on your own?"

"Yes, kiddo. Thanks." I wave at him with a smile, and follow the tree-trunk path that leads into the woodland. "This is it! An adventure at last." I smile.

Walking through the tall trees, my ears are filled with the sweet sounds of birds twittering and other wilderness that makes my senses active. I love this feeling of independence, as if I own the world. I think it's the only thing that makes me feel unrestrained and powerful.

Finally I approach a marvelous scenery of green-yellow grass and grey stones alongside the running water. Other than the woods, it's just an open space with a

small Yellowstone river channel. I take my time appreciating the tranquil and solitude that I need right now.

"Ah, this feels good." I stretch my arms, accepting the magnanimous cool air . . . it feels so refreshing.

After putting my camera and shoes on the rock, I head immediately towards the water. A smile appears as I slowly place my feet inside, just to taste the feeling of its slight coldness against my toes. It's exquisite. The water is crystal; I can clearly see my reflection. Am I happy? I guess I am.

And when I recall Julian's words that no one comes here, I immediately peel off my jeans and top, leaving my white cotton bra and its matching thong. Done undressing, I throw them on the same rock, feeling that devil in me dancing at this sight of my half-nudity in someone's property.

No problem, Kira, you're just swimming. She whispers in her seductive voice, and like a fool I decide to follow her. She's right, though. I'm all alone, so why not? But I hope nobody busts me and starts thinking I'm in the middle of a ritual like some kind of an Inca tribeswoman or Amazonian.

An hour goes by, and I realize that it may be enough for a day. I run a hand through my soaked curls, feeling so rejuvenated, ready to step out, and that's when I suddenly hear some noises from the woods. I stay alerted, concentrating my ears. Is somebody approaching? I ask myself, and I think I'm right.

My whole body tenses when a brown horse emerges a few seconds later. Good Lord! What's worse is that Liam is the one riding it. What the hell is he doing here?

I duck inside the water, covering my nudity. I'm relieved it works, although it doesn't solve a thing as they are approaching too close.

You wanted an adventure of a lifetime? Here it is, girl. The devil in me is smoothly applying her blood red lipstick, watching the show through her bathroom mirror. I swallow hard as Liam ambles his horse. His face is hidden under a big, brown hat, looking so relaxed and . . . hot? *Oh no.*

But seriously, why is the sight of this cowboy so arresting? My subconscious widens her big hazel eyes, dropping her Popsicle without even noticing. As for me, I really can't help myself from ogling him, for it's quite a rare sight on my part to see a live man on a horse, just right before me.

He's holding the reins in a way that makes my heart flutter. I'm sure any woman would be. And it's as if I'm seeing the Mr. Darcy of Pemberley; *Pride and Prejudice*. No, what I need is to immediately snap out of this stupidity, because I'm living a real life and not some movie or classic romance novel.

"You never cease to amaze me, Ms. Jones." Liam dismounts the horse in a swift move, quite naturally. It's fascinating. "You're something else, I must confess. Aren't you afraid to be here on your own?"

Not really. This place may be much safer than humans, my subconscious answers boldly as I gaze up at Liam. He's now staring directly at me, standing on the same position near his horse.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, ignoring his question. In return, he does exactly the same, neglecting my query by marching closer. *Gosh!* "I'm asking you, Mr. Darcy, why did you follow me here?" I repeat, sternly this time.

"I came to check if you are okay. Your friend is worried," he answers flatly, making a way towards the rock on which all my belongings are.

"Oh," I utter, finding no trifle in his reason. "She could've just called, though," I mutter to myself, still sheltered by the water.

"Only if there's a network around here," Liam replies and returns with my clothes, his eyes so impertinent that I can't understand what's hidden behind his gaze. "And your safety matters, too. I'm unsure why you believe you are secured here, but frankly speaking I doubt you are."

Really, now? "Is that supposed to be a threat or warning?" I quiz, my eyes squinted at his towering frame.

He smirks, amused I believe. "Depends on how you deem to find my act of humanity, Ms. Jones. It is quite easy for anyone to expound words as they see fit. But it doesn't necessarily mean their translations are correct."

Boy! Does he hold a degree in self-defense with words? I'm almost amazed at his quipping ability.

"You may be right. I do have the right, however, to construe any word in the fashion I desire because you could've been clearer if you didn't intend to sound ambiguous with your words, Mr. Darcy," I retort.

His eyes are instantly pooled with a mock, smiling faintly as he abandons the horse so as to match closer. My heart trots at his stride. What is he up to? And why bringing my clothes when I'm not done swimming! My water goddess scowls with a pout.

"Aren't you going to get out?" Liam asks coolly, standing firmly closer to the riverbank.

Fuck, I'm sure he can clearly see my reserves.

"No?" I blurt out.

Liam's eyes widen slightly. "Will you stay in there forever?" He stands at ease, staring at me in a condescending manner.

"I'm not done, though. Must I go right now?"

He smirks. "You are truly a resemblance of a child at this particular moment, Ms. Jones. Would you like me to sit here and wait for your tantrum to pass before you finally decide to finish your endeavor? Or should I just leave now that I am certain you are onto something of your delight?" His voice is a perfect mix of mock and humor.

A child? Should I be offended? I glare at him undecidedly.

"Okay, I think it's enough for today so you have no reason to keep patronizing me!" I utter with menace, and to my dismay he only sighs. Jerk! "Well, would you mind turning around, maybe? I can't simply do it if you're doing that."

"Why would I?"

"What the fu—" I halt, pressing my lips together. He's definitely challenging my good manners. I mean . . . why does he always stir my agitation? And why do I always yield to it? Why can't I simply ignore him? I grunt mentally.

Liam smiles with delight. He turns his head to another side and extends a hand that's holding my clothes. Finally! He could've done this sooner.

As fast as I can I emerge from the water, making sure he's not going to shift his head, and grab them. I try hard to slip into my tight jeans, while eyeing him, and as treacherous as my momentum could ever be, I suddenly trip on them.

"Aargh!" I scream pathetically.

I'm almost flat on the ground, if not into the water, when I feel a pair of strong hands holding me by the waist. My heart skips a beat and I gulp at this weird feeling of déjà vu that I can't quite understand.

It's a new feeling, but not foreign . . . it's almost unnerving.

Snap out of it, Kira. My subconscious warns, and I just stare as Liam's eyes search mine as though we're doing a flipping move in a salsa dance.

My breathing gets jerky, and so does his. Oh God! His gaze trails down my caramel skin, from the neck to my cleavage, my brassiere wet and revealing. Stop staring, please.

Liam looks hypnotized for a moment, but shortly after he raises his gaze back to my face, and I'm slowly out of his grip. What the heck!

I feel hot as I clear my throat, Liam's tempestuous eyes still on me. Do I need a fan? That devil in me whistles inside, utterly happy to feel the damn muscles.

"Thank you," I utter, my voice barely audible.

"I'll wait over there, hurry up," Liam instructs. I nod slightly. While leaving, he glances down on my bottom, and I could swear to have seen a cynic smirk at the corner of his peach lips.

Ugh, all men naturally pervert.

My eyes shut from embarrassment. Out of all the days, why did I succumb to that little devil in me and wore this disturbing pair of underwear, today?

You always wear those troubling things despite having no one to see them. My subconscious laughs heartily, hitting the bullseye.

Once I'm done dressing up, I follow Liam and find him fastening the reins of his horse. He looks so serious that I wonder what's on his mind.

However, my face lights up immediately when I discern that the horse is the brown one I saw earlier. I forget all the mishap as my brain turns jolly at the sight.

"Oh, it's you again." I run quickly towards the beautiful Mr. Horse, who at least seems to have some manners compared to his owner.

Liam looks surprised at the gesture, as I slowly pat the horse's head, a ridiculous grin on my lips. He's almost amused, from the look of his terrific face. He suddenly seems relaxed, warm . . . a little bright to say the least.

Bipolar much? I mentally roll my eyes.

"You've met Charlie?" he asks fondly. We're standing across from one another, the horse in between.

"Charlie? Is that his name?" I quiz.

"Yeah," Liam answers.

"Hey, Charlie, remember me?" I ignore Liam and continue pet-whispering the big guy, who apparently seems to like me better. Liam seems enthralled at the sight,

watching me from the corner of his eyes. "Hey, talk to me!" I blurt and the horse kicks his foot in the air. I burst out laughing.

Wait, did I just see Mr. Intense laughing as well?

"Are you a fan of horses?" he asks casually, his guards lowered a bit.

"I guess," I breathe dreamingly, my eyes at Charlie. "They are . . . enchanting, I think. Big animals who feel small at heart." I chuckle lightly.

Again, I see a very faint smile coming from someone's lips. My, oh my! Why can't he just smile nonchalantly and let the flowers bloom at the sight of it?

"Let's go," Liam snaps, and I take back what I just thought.

"Yeah sure, Sir." I nearly roll my eyes. Jeez, how can a gorgeous like him be this grumpy, hot-and-cold, something so unpredictable? Is this a new trend?

Leaving me stuck to my thoughts, Liam jumps on Charlie's back so easily. Wow! And this is where I come to knowledge that I have to ride the horse, as well, and with him. *What's so strange about it, Kira? It's just a ride.* I take a deep breath.

"Aren't you coming?" Liam asks, pulling me back from my careless trance.

"I'm coming." I wear the strap of my camera around my neck and try to climb up. Apparently it's not as easy as it looks. "Help me," I beg.

Liam offers me his hand, and I grab it without fretting. In a blink, I'm seated on the saddle, ready for my first horseback ride. Oh yeah! Dreams do come true, after all. Here I am, ready to live one of my long life dreams. Who would've thought?

"Hold me," Liam says.

"What?" I gasp, somehow dazzled by the statement. Hold me? I blink.

"Are you listening, Ms. Jones? I said hold me," he snaps, "so that you won't fall."

"Uh, okay," I answer. He should've said hold onto me, right? Why confusing me with the hold-me kind of thing? I wrap my arms around his waist as Charlie starts moving.

CHAPTER 7

I feel Liam's sculptured abs beneath his shirt as we bounce up and down in rhythm, following the horse's move. My breath stills when I lean towards his sturdy, wide back, searching for my balance. To my sweet dismay, his muscles tense, responding to my touch.

Oh boy! I draw back stoutly.

"If you continue like that, you're surely going to fall down." Liam's voice startles me, and his words almost come true when the horse speeds up.

Shit! I tighten my grip, bumping up, then down, in turns . . . a rough, exciting pace. "Like this?" I ask, stifling a laugh.

"Whatever fits you, Ms. Jones," Liam replies, his voice laced with . . . concerns? I can hardly tell, for his emotions are well guarded. "I'm only concerned about your safety; don't find it such a burden," he adds gently.

What an assurance! I sigh softly.

"I hope you can breathe," I utter against his back, almost, because it feels like I'm buckling him a bit too hard.

"Why?" He huffs a small laughter.

Oh, the sound of his laughter!

"I mean, I hope I'm not holding too tight. I wouldn't want suffocation from a clumsy stranger to be the cause of your death in such a tender age." I regret soon after blurting such an excuse for a joke.

What's wrong with my word-filter today?

Liam laughs for real this time, sounding at ease somehow. "It's the right amount, but no more," he replies.

"Okay, Sir. No more," I breathe with a contented smile, my mood strangely in a loft. Liam's abdominal muscles contract, and I believe he's laughing, and it elicits a weird sense of joy in me. "Anything funny?" I query.

"A lot, actually," Liam answers after a short pause of taciturnity. "I think you are, indeed, clumsy . . . Ms. Jones."

"Am I?" I gape, searching for his face with a peek over his shoulder. He gazes back at me, his boisterous blue eyes currently as cool as the soothing beach clouds. His lips curl into a mocking smile, and I stay rattled under his scrutiny of my face, and mostly on my lips.

I breath erratically, my hormones reacting inappropriately, quite unbidden. It's as though he's seeing me for the first time, and I feel the same.

He gently shifts his face ahead on the narrow passage that resembles a clearing of long stubborn leaves, and I clear my suddenly-dry throat, pulling back. Why do I feel hot in the cheeks? I puff some air, my subconscious giving a pitiful look.

"Maybe you should stop being tense and relax your body," Liam says, snapping me from the trance. "You may scare the horse."

"Really?" I frown slightly. He doesn't respond. "Such manners you have," I mutter underneath my breath." I decide to shut up and enjoy the ride. Liam does exactly the same.

"I do have manners. But I wonder if you have any." He pitches a quick glance at me over his shoulder.

"What?" I snap. He laughs for real. "I mean, why?"

"You seem to be speaking too much of your mind," Liam explains, "even the things you don't want to disclose."

Damn, he's right!

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," I argue nevertheless. "I can filter my speech perfectly well, Mr. Darcy. I trust my ability to be poised."

"Oh," he utters, mocking me. "I see that is not the only problem, you also have a war in accepting the truth."

"Okay, enough!" I snap.

"As you wish," Liam breathes and we go silent momentarily, letting myself calm down. "Are you angry at me?" he asks out of the blue.

Am I? Why would I be?

"No, I'm not. But maybe you can stop being too obtuse about stuff," I utter without regret.

"Meaning? I'm not sure if I'm obtuse, by any means, Ms. Jones. In fact, I constantly hear that I'm too harsh."

No, he's not. "No, I hardly find you harsh. You're rather too blatant, and it makes me wonder if it's how you behave with everyone or it's just me who has got into the bad side of you," I add, and his stomach tightens again; he's laughing.

I join in with discretion.

"I prefer keeping my comments to myself, most of the times, as far as someone's character is concerned," he says gently, a hint of melancholy accompanying his voice.

My heart shrinks in comprehension of something deep within him that may be his own demon.

"But that doesn't seem to be the case at the moment," I prompt, feeling like I'm conversing with an old man from an old English era.

Could it be that I'm talking like one of those old ladies right now?

"Maybe you push my limits," Liam remarks mirthfully, and I could feel my stunned eyebrow lifting up.

"Do I?" I tag.

"We shall see about that," he mutters warningly. *Wait, what?* "Stay firm," he instructs.

I hold him tighter as I realize I've been too comfortable. "Do you enjoy riding the horse?" I attempt to prolong the conversation and I'm glad it works.

"I'd say I love it better than driving a Ferrari," he answers, and there's humor in his tone of voice. So strange and exciting! He can make jokes, too.

"You're classic." I laugh heartily.

Honestly, I'm having a blast. I might as well trap us here with a feign of sprained back, so that we don't go back to the house.

Yuck! Now stop being pathetic, girl. Okay, that's true. I shut it, only to realize . . . Wait, this is not the way. Or is it?

"Where are you taking me?" I ask stoutly. I'm not worried, just surprised to see us passing through a different route.

"Home," Liam answers curtly, and I hold my tongue. "What were you expecting? That I'm kidnapping you?"

"It would be your loss, because I'm as broke as a pauper." I smile at the scenario of me being kidnapped for money.

Laughing, Liam remarks, "You really have trust issues, don't you?" I go silent, utterly silent, and so does my subconscious who loves yapping. "I apologize if—"

"There's nothing bad in mistrusting," I utter, interrupting him. "What's the point of trusting if the probability of it being a lie is higher? It's like believing you're happy when you're not."

"Are you unhappy?" Liam queries, and my heart cringes.

"I'm empty," I think out loud, not intending to say.

"Is this your first?" Liam asks, my remark forsaken.

"What?" I frown, bemused.

"Being on a horseback."

"Oh, the ride?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, it's my first."

"No wonder," he mutters.

"Meaning?" I tighten my grip, feeling a little bereft for an unknown reason.

"You seem excited, and scared as well," says Liam, and he's right. "However, you should trust both the horse and the rider, if you want to enjoy more."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Ms. Jones, and I'm not a scam."

So begrudging. "I didn't say that." I beam, my good mood restored.

"You insinuated, and it's the same thing."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Darcy, I was merely communicating my concerns. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You did not. I just wanted to be clear."

"Okay, I understand." I smile, because he sounds like an old man, indeed.

"Are you making fun of me?" he asks, and now I burst out laughing, much to my amusement.

"No, I'm not," I reply. "I'm having so much fun right now. Pardon my display of happiness." I roll my eyes, and I can feel his smile from his back alone. *Wow!*

"Ms. Jones," Liam utters when the silence settles for a minute.

"Yes?"

"We all have fear; you're not the only one."

Why is he nailing my heart? I feel like I'm an open book right now. "I guess," I whisper, and my arms tighten around him instinctively, feeling as though I'd fall mentally and physically if I don't hold onto him.

The ride doesn't last long as we quickly reach the house. I'm surprised that everyone is gathered outside the front porch. Eleanor is back. She walks towards us right away, followed by Sam and Malik, who move side by side.

Peter is standing aside, with that fully brown horse, together with Julian. I comprehend that the former was about to follow us in case we took a minute longer. Only Betty is missing to fill the entire squad.

How charming, I've made myself a grand exhibition.

"Oh, you're finally here," Eleanor regards me with the look of respite. I stare at everyone skeptically; I still don't get what this charade is all about. "Where did you find her, Liam?" she asks her son.

Liam doesn't answer right away, despite his mother's cooled-hysteria. He dismounts Charlie and helps me do the same.

Then finally utters, "She can tell you herself." He walks away, leaving everyone in suspense. Well, I think it's my turn now.

"Kira, darling, where were you? We've been worried sick. And your hair? Why is it wet?" Her face fluctuates with mixed emotions, from my being late, to being soaked wet.

"Did you get lost?" Sam looks concerned, her phone in hand. "I tried to call you and—"

"No, I didn't get lost," I answer fast. "Well, I was swimming?" I say in a low voice.

God, this is so embarrassing.

"Swimming?" Eleanor asks, and I nod agreeably.

A second goes by and to my surprise, everyone burst out laughing. Everyone including Peter who's like Liam's clone when it comes to playing cold. I don't think I understand what's so funny about it, but I'm glad I'm not being reprimanded for my crazy actions.

"I swear I like her," Malik utters simply.

"Oh, Kira, seems like the ranch life agrees quite well with you," Eleanor says, still laughing. "Just go in and take a shower, dear."

"Oh, okay," I answer and start moving.

"Let me go with you," Sam offers to accompany me inside.

I barely enter my room, and she already starts bombarding me with questions about how it all happened and stuff.

"I just walked until I reached the river."

"And you just couldn't resist swimming, could you?" she mutters while lying on the bed, holding my camera.

"Well, it was nothing." My voice is heedless.

"Hey, do you have any idea who Malik is?" she snaps abruptly.

"No, do I have to?" I reply while undressing.

"Of course you should," she answers quickly. "I can tell he has a thing for you."

"Me? I don't think so."

"Trust me, he's into you."

"It's his problem then," I quip.

Wrapping myself with a towel, I get seated on the bed, trying to browse some pictures I took.

"Can you believe he is actually trying to buy our company's control rights and the—"

"Can you please speak English, Sam? Don't use those business jargons for God's sake!" I cry, and she enjoys my torments as usual.

She explains to me everything in details, and I try my level best to pick interest on the subject. She says that Malik owns several companies in Europe, plenty of real estates in the US and oil business in UAE.

Frankly, he's somehow surpassed my imagination, I must confess. She also enlightens me about his never-ending articles with women in magazines and gossip tabloids.

Typical player? That much I've gathered.

"He's reputable with ladies," Sam goes on, "so be very careful, my friend. I know he has eyes for you."

And here we go again. "Okay, I will," I answer, just to bury the topic.

"I wonder if Liam is also like Malik, after all they are best friends." She exhales audibly.

"Why don't you ask Malik about that? You're good at digging dirt, aren't you?"

Sam stands up immediately, and looks at me jovially. "You're right, I should do that."

"There, doll." I smile faintly.

"Well, you go on with your shower, I'll be downstairs," she tells me breezily before storming out.

"Good luck," I utter, sighing.

Staring at Charlie on the screen of my camera, my mind quickly teleports back to the Yellowstone river. I remember the moment Liam caught me when I almost fell; his touch felt so sweet and exquisitely familiar.

No, Kira, get a grip! Not Liam Darcy. I quickly shake my head to undo the thought.

I end up thinking of Sam instead. She's obviously falling hard for him, and I understand her. But why do I feel so uneasy about this whole situation? Why am I so afraid that something tragic might happen? I really wish I'm wrong. I think the best thing to do, in order to achieve that is to stay far away from Liam Darcy.

Later on, I join the two ladies in the kitchen, after getting myself presentable once

again. Eleanor is busy tending whatever that smells like pasta, and Betty isn't anywhere to be seen.

However, it's when I hear the sound of the China bowl landing on the kitchen floor, that I realize Betty may probably be around nearby.

"Yeah, keep breaking them, Betty. Just finish them all. We'll just buy the new ones," Eleanor utters, resigned in manners.

"I'm sorry for that," I casually say, while advancing further and take a seat at the wooden countertop with three chairs attached.

"Don't worry, I'm used to all the breakage by now," Eleanor says with a warm smile while gritting the cheese. "Betty and dropping things is nothing big around here at all. Julian calls her *Betty the clumsy*."

We both laugh.

"Then why do you still keep her?" I ask, out of curiosity.

Eleanor thinks for a while and then smiles sheepishly. "I guess she's someone I feel at ease having around. Other than dropping things and trip over her own footstep every now and then, she's a very special girl, and I could trust her with anything around here." She sounds like a school girl talking, and I love how serene she looks, her face placid. "Well, except for cooking and my precious china cups," she adds, and Betty appears with a shy smile.

While helping Betty with the dishes, Eleanor tells me more about Montana and its life compared to London. I gather she hardly has anyone to chat with, and with our being here, she feels great having more people around.

And I'm having a blast telling her about myself, something I scarcely do.

Around eight we settle down for the simple Italian dinner that had my mouth watery since in the kitchen. To my dismay, I find myself face to face with Liam, as

we sit across from one another. Sam is right beside him while grinning stupidly at the sight of Mac and cheese.

"This is terrific, Eleanor," Sam comments on both the food and wine.

"My pleasure, Sam. I also have some credits to my assistant chef here who inspired my new recipe." She gives me a sweet smile.

"Me?" I utter, and she laughs. "Oh, you mean the never-ending tasting session you graced me earlier? Just so you know, I had a pleasure doing it."

Because I worship food.

"You like cooking?" Liam opens his precious mouth at last, and even grants me access to his ocean-like eyes.

"She *loves* cooking," Sam answers on my behalf. "And she's great."

"A little. Cooking is such a rewarding art," I say, and quite faint of a smile appears at the corner of Liam's peach lips.

Honestly, his lips remind me of peaches, and I love peaches.

"So, how often do you come to the ranch, Liam?" Sam asks.

"Twice or thrice a year," he answers.

"I see, you prefer London over here, right?"

"No, I've got commitments in London, that's why I ought to be there most of the times."

"I think London is great," Sam utters.

"It is," he replies.

"I'm sure it is, but Montana is so much relaxing." I think inwardly, only to realize that I've spoken out loud.

"I agree," Liam prompts right away, his gaze shifted solely to my side. "Have you ever been to London, Ms. Jones?"

"No, not at all," I answer quickly, and his eyes stay on mine while sipping his wine nonchalantly.

I've got to work on my big mouth, seriously.

My friend is securing her future here, and I'm busy ruining it.

"I'll be more than happy to take you to London," a familiar voice approaches, and someone I forgot about takes a seat beside me.

"Malik." Eleanor chuckles softly, sounding at her peak having the table full. "I thought you weren't going to wake up soon."

He shrugs while pulling a plate for himself. "'You know how it is, Aunt. I sleep the best when I'm here'"

"I can see that," Eleanor retorts, and it's true he's been sleeping for over three hours.

"I'd love to see London, and the whole of Europe, someday," Sam says with a smile, once the silence takes over.

"I'm sure you do," remarks Liam. "And what other cities fascinate you apart from London?"

"Paris," she answers immediately. "I've been there twice but I can't get enough. Also Amsterdam and Rome."

As they discuss geography, I decide to *indeed* stuff my belly while thinking of the hot chocolate awaiting to be dipped.

I swear I'll end up looking like a whale upon my return to L.A.

CHAPTER 8

The rest of the evening goes smoothly. Seated on the adjoined bench to my bed, with my diary on the lap, I decide to put a few things off my head by scribbling down. It's been the best therapy whenever I can't talk to anyone about something.

Apparently I have plenty of unspoken words that I'd love to let out. Thinking of the few hours that I've been here, my mind gets jagged with enormous feeling of anxiety over something in the immediate future.

Hence I begin:

Dear God,

All I hoped for was a nice and relaxing vacation, which has been the case by far. I appreciate everything I've seen here and our hosts have been very kind to us that I'm afraid I may get too much attached. I like Mrs. Eleanor a lot, if I were to have another mother in this lifetime; I wish she would be just like her. I dare say that all is well, except for one thing . . .

I'm yawning audibly as I place the diary back to my suitcase. I better sleep now that I'm sleepy, for I don't know how long it's going to last. I don't even bother to check the time as I'm already hugging the pillow and slowly drift into drowsiness.

About three hours later or so, I wake up abruptly from a horrible nightmare. It was the accident scene from when I was seven. The blood, the shredded pieces of glass and the fire outbreak. It makes my heart pound fast as I sit comfortably against the headboard of the bed.

It was horrible. Sometimes I wonder why God allowed such a thing to happen. Why can't he just let me forget it altogether? I despise thinking of it, and even less, dreaming of it. I'd rather live in oblivion than experiencing this horrific recollection.

Despite the time passed, I still can't connect all the pieces together. I don't have a clear recollection of some facts, like how I managed to survive and so on. But I do remember something vaguely, that we weren't alone inside the car.

Tired of the past, I pace towards the balcony where I'm welcomed with a gush of soft chilly wind that blows my curls slightly. It's almost midnight and everyone must be asleep. That includes my neighbor next door, whose room seems to be dark for a change.

Maybe he's fast asleep right now, and here I am.

Staring at the twinkling stars, I end up captive of their merriment. I love doing this, and it always hypnotizes my mind. I feel relaxed in an instant, but coming to knowledge that there's still a long way until morning makes me in need of a new strategy.

Perhaps a good or boring book will do, I conclude.

With utmost discretion, I walk towards the Darcy library for the second time, after a little self-tour earlier in the afternoon. I know just what I need and where exactly to find it. Reaching the entrance, my heart almost sinks. The light inside the library are on.

Did they forget to switch off? Or is it that someone is actually inside?

I decide to walk in, only to end up gasping at the sight. "It can't be him again," I mutter soundlessly.

Why is it so hard to escape this man's invisible web?

I find Liam sitting in one of the twin chairs. He's holding a book, and I realize that he's dozed off. I stifle a laugh at this rare scene. He is so calm, so absent, and so handsome. I peek at him closely; he's seated cross-legged, his head resting on the right fist supported by the elbow that's placed on the armrest.

Right now I see zero degree of his cynicism. I smile widely.

I think I should just take my book and leave, I decide, by slowly turn to commence my tiptoe. Either I'm not as discreet as I'd like to be, or someone's never really sleeps at all. I try to leave, and it's when Liam suddenly gets ahold of my wrist, making me shudder to the cores.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, and his voice tone is neither cold nor calm.

But it's still tempestuous.

"I just came to borrow a book, I didn't mean to intrude," I reply, feeling his grip tightening my wrist that it begins to hurt. No!

Liam comprehends and immediately frees my hand, remorseful. "I'm sorry," he utters, panting slightly as though he's been trapped between reality and somewhere unearthly.

"It's okay," I reply, my eyes bored deeply into his unsettled ones.

What wrong with him? A strange wave of disquietude fills me.

"A book?" He tries to compose himself, I believe, and it makes me narrow my gaze. "Shouldn't you be sleeping by now?" he asks while sauntering away from me.

"I could ask you the same thing, Mr. Darcy? Shouldn't you be sleeping in your bed instead of here?" I return boldly, replacing my previous worry.

He whirls his head to my direction with a frown, but doesn't respond to my question. He delicately places the book he was holding on the old, wooden shelf carrying a countless books.

We're few inches apart and his gaze burns my soul. I hear a soft breath escaping his lips and he finally graces me a decent response. "What sort of a book do you want?" He walks past me. I sigh heavily, oblivious of his question. "Ms. Jones?" His calm voice pulls me back to Earth, derailing my blank space.

There's a way he utters that 'Ms. Jones' and I love it. I think I love a lot of things lately, but in short, I love the way he speaks. The combination of his voice and that British accent is such a fine tune to my ears. I quickly dismiss these unhealthy thoughts.

"Um, anything but Shakespeare's," I reply, and he looks a bit astonished. *Okay, new approach.* "I mean, not that I dislike him, I just want something different," I say truthfully, so as to avoid confusion. "Okay, I know you like him, or his works, but I—"

"How do you know that I like him? Or his works?" Liam queries with a faint smile.

Because he's an icon . . . maybe?

"Well," I start my scheme. "There's William Shakespeare's portrait over there." I point at it. "And also, all of his books in this library are arranged in a way that suggests how often they are read. Well, aren't you his fan?"

"Do you have something else in mind?" he asks in a normal tone of voice, ignoring my question.

How rude! I scowl, but I'm hardly affected.

"Um . . . *Northanger Abbey*, *Jane Austen*," I tell him. "Or maybe . . . *Sense and Sensibility*?" I contradict my own choices, and he smiles at it.

"Is Jane Austen your favorite?" he asks, a sweet glow in his cool eyes.

"If we're speaking of Classic romance, then yes, she's my favorite. I prefer happy ending than tragedies, and Jane Austen always grants my wish." I go dreamy; oblivious of whom I'm talking to.

"Are you sure *Northanger Abbey* is what you want?" Liam asks, as though trying to correct my scruple.

Well . . . Looking around, I spot a few of Danielle Steels' books and she's one of my favorite authors.

"Can I just have *Malice*?" I ask, and Liam doesn't budge for a minute.

I try to keep calm, watching him moving graciously, before he plucks a well preserved copy of *Malice*. I think I'm going to stick with the latter tonight. It was my first novel to read, so it's kind of exciting to reread it.

When Liam returns, he hands me the books and says, "Not every story has a happy ending, though. Perhaps William was being realistic."

"Perhaps," I snort, my cold glare fixing him. "But I do believe in happy ending!" I practically snap, and he doesn't seem to mind at all. He smiles even. "Don't you?" I add,

"Does it matter to you?" he queries, and I just stare blankly at his so-sure kind of look. "Okay, good luck with the reading."

"Thanks for the books, but I think I'll just take this one." I return Jane Austen's, and I can tell he wants to argue, but decides against it.

"As you wish," Liam remarks.

"Sure," I prompt. I may have just sounded a bit aggressive, but I don't know why.

I'm about to reach the exit when I hear, "Why do you call me Mr. Darcy?"

Is he serious now?

With a sigh, I return closer to catch a perfect look of his face while I give him my reply. "You started the honorifics yourself, or have you forgotten already?"

Again, he doesn't answer. He moves even closer and looks at me for a minute. "And why do you seem so afraid of me?"

"I'm not afraid of you." I almost laugh ridiculously.

"Are you sure, Ms. Jones? Even after what happened when we shook hands?"

He also felt it?

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say rigidly. "A handshake is no big deal, is it?" I raise a tough eyebrow.

Liam digs his shimmering blue eyes into mine, for a very long moment, as if reading my mind. I use all my power not to weaver.

He's obviously trying to intimidate me with his weird innuendos, but I won't let him.

I simply don't understand what he has against me, that he always gives me the impression that he knows me more than I do myself.

"Goodnight, Ms. Jones," he smoothly says. "I hope you get to sleep well tonight."

"You, too. But before I go, let me ask you something important, may I?" I ask.

"Go ahead," Liam complies smoothly.

"Do you love my friend?" I ask. Okay, maybe I shouldn't have asked such a personal question. I regret as soon as I do. It's not my place after all, right? But I'm very curious of his intentions.

"What did you say?" He frowns, and even seems disturbed, which makes me squint my eyes in confusion.

He sounds . . . displeased? I fail to gather with precision.

"Maybe the word love is a bit too much. Let's say . . . like. Do you like her?" I devise my question, hopefully he'd catch the bait.

His face remains impassive, and it's my turn to frown. "I do not love her," he finally answers, his voice cool. I can't help but gape at his fine precision. He looks mindless, leaving no scruple to his statement. Just wow!

"You don't?" I ask ridiculously because it's quite clear that it can't be love. "Well, you're right; it's too early to be love."

"It's very late, Ms. Jones, you should go to sleep now," he tells me off, completely neglecting my reaction. He doesn't seem to appreciate my inquiries, but I couldn't care less.

I had to know, damn it!

I watch him returning the book he was holding earlier back to its place, as though I'm no longer visible to his eyes. This is strange, so very strange. He doesn't want to talk about Sam, and there my friend is dying with excitement.

What's going on here? My goddess of curiosity scratches her head harder.

Back to my room I climb the bed and my mind is still ablaze. How could Liam say that so bluntly? He and Sam, what do they actually share? Is it friendship? I don't think I understand anything about their relationship. Maybe I should stay out of it.

And why am I so interested? My subconscious quirks her eyebrow at me, saying no word with her twisted lips. I'm nosy, I know, and it's time to mind my own business. I sigh heavily while settling in bed, ready for the first chapter of my novel.

THIS morning during breakfast, Eleanor informs Liam about a wedding party of someone they know. According to her, it's taking place tonight, and wants her son to attend. As always, Liam doesn't seem interested at all.

"You have to go, Liam," Eleanor cries. "The mayor has personally sent me the invitation, but given my schedule, I won't be able to attend tonight."

Oh boy. I can almost feel some trouble coming. I sit straight, my gaze at Mr. Intense.

"I'm afraid I can't do it either," Liam answers blatantly, and he doesn't even pretend to consider.

"But why?" asks Eleanor, her well made up face into a small furrow.

Malik, who has been awfully silent, immersed in his latest iPhone, suddenly barges in, "We're flying to Helena in a few minutes, Aunt. We can't possibly be in two places at the same time, can we?" His grin is such a pacifier.

I smile indulgently.

"Oh. And what are you up to in Helena? Is there something I don't know?" Eleanor sounds pissed, her patronizing tone manifesting through her speech.

"There's an important business to attend there, so we can't go to that wedding," Liam says in a serious manner, strenuously, his gaze quite earnest as he doesn't bat an eye.

I wish I could just leave because it looks like a family matter.

"Well, you can attend your business and return before sunset. Both of you are going to that wedding, and that's it. You can't ignore politicians being the businessmen," Eleanor says sternly, and Liam's brow wrench quizzically. "You know fully well you may need them at some point. Well, at least that is what I learn from your father."

Wow, she looks like an ice queen at the moment.

"Me, too?" Malik snaps, his eyes bigger in stun. I almost chuckle, and Sam doesn't seem indifferent; her lips curled into a humorous, repressed laughter.

"Yes, Malik. And not just you two, Sam and Kira will accompany the two of you so you won't look like tactless bachelors," Eleanor states. *Us, too?* I blink. "Is it fine with you, girls?" She's now facing us.

"Um, why not?" Sam prompts quickly, smiling wider.

Jeez! She loves speaking for the both of us, and it's annoying at times.

Turning towards the boys, I find Malik lifting an amused eyebrow, and Liam has an indescribable look that doesn't tell whether he's mad or elated by the news. Probably the former. His indifferent is already stale news to me, however. He is what he is and I can't even judge him.

Done with breakfast and the unhappy arrangements, the Chopper 64 picks the boys from the ranch grounds. They look great walking side by side like some macho CIA agents on a mission.

You should really quit watching movies, girl! Seeing Tom Cruz in every man and helicopter? My subconscious scoffs at infantile thoughts.

At last the boys fly to wherever they are going, and I'm stuck alone with Sam inside her room so that I can give the piece of my mind without an audience.

"How could you just accept like that? I don't have anything proper to wear at that wedding," I snap, trying hard to conceal my displeasure over the matter.

"What was I supposed to do, Kira?" she says innocently, giving me a puppy eye look. "Besides, I told you a countless times that a Lady should carry at least one evening gown when going for a trip."

Hell, I've failed the fashion extravaganza subject.

"Okay, madam, pardon my naïveté. Look, you can go with the boys, I'll stay right here and enjoy the solace," I decide, and it's the only option.

"Well, I'm not going either." Sam pouts, pursing her lips. "How do I go there without you, huh?"

"Have I just heard some fashion emergency?" A voice interrupts by the door, stealing our attention. Eleanor walks in with a big, hopeful smile. "I'm sorry, the door was open and you were practically yelling."

"It's okay, Eleanor." Sam sits down dejectedly, as though I've taken something precious from her.

"No one is staying home today!" Eleanor states, and Sam's face lights up. "I'll be leaving for Rome tonight, but before that, I'm going to fix your problem first." She now looks at me with an ingenious smile, resembling an enthusiast teenager.

"I don't understand," I mutter, stupefied.

"Get dressed both of you," she says urgently, returning towards the door. "We're going to the city in an hour. Liam and Malik will meet you there later."

"On it!" Sam answers cheerfully, already at her feet.

Apparently I'm the only one who doesn't get the photo.

"What has just happened?" I gape quizzically.

"What happens is that we are going to steal those men's heart tonight. I get my Liam and you get your . . . play boy?" Sam teases and it's a horrible joke. Before our departure, Sam tries on her new ocean-blue Lacey dress that fits her perfectly. She looks amazing as she twirls around. It's a slim-fit, reaching just about the thighs, with long sleeves.

Since she's a bit bustier, it looks even more divine. With her cream strap heels and that giraffe height, she couldn't do better. She's always beautiful and she knows it. Admittedly, at times I feel jealous of her body confidence.

She gives me the how-do-I-look stare and I answer her, "Magnifique!"

"Really?"

"Definitely."

She flushes. "Do you think Liam will like it?" Her eyes are gleaming hopefully.

I swallow hard upon recalling my last night's encounter with Liam at the library. 'I don't love her' He blankly said so.

"Any man in his right mind would." I smile.

What am I supposed to say?

Peter drives us to the city in a calm silence. I never get tired of this place, no matter how long I keep staring. Arriving to the respective place, we spend the chief of the afternoon touring Mrs. Eleanor's businesses.

She has a grand boutique hotel with spa and saloon. Being the boss lady, she assigns someone to give us a tour and make sure we receive any service we desire.

I'm still stunned as the lady leads us to the saloon for hairdressing. We both relax at the comfortable chairs and let the professionals do their jobs. Sam is attended by a woman and I by a guy who's quite sassy.

"Would you like to change your hair color by any chance?" he asks in a cheesy way that I end up chuckling. "Trust me, darling, your curls are beautiful, but you'll look much greater if I put some blonde highlights or light brown ombre," he suggests. "What do you think?"

My hair has been always deep chocolate. I've never changed even once, but well, it won't hurt to try.

"Okay, only if you promise I'm going to like it." I take the risk.

"Oh you surely will, darling," he answers with a contagious enthusiasm, making me smile.

"Let's go with the highlights," I say hopefully, making myself comfortable.

"As you wish, gorgeous." He smiles from ear to ear.

CHAPTER 9

Around five Mrs. Eleanor and I reach the boutique where her office resides. Sam went for a spa after our late lunch, and I have to tend my fashion emergency as soon as possible. This ordeal always gives me a headache, so I literally can't wait for it to end.

Lurking my eyes around this nicely decorated office, I can't cease wondering how a classy woman like Eleanor could be this nice to some poor strangers coming from some part of the country. Maybe not all rich people are as conceited.

I should really graduate from the prejudice school.

"Just a moment, Kira. I need to confirm my flight," Eleanor tells me, holding a telephone receiver.

"Sure," I easily oblige.

A few minutes later we head for the main task. The boutique has two sections, ladies and gents, separated by a ravish lounging area. We go to our respective section, and my eyebrows arch at the sight of all the stocks inside the place.

Eleanor goes through a few dresses in the racks, as though searching for the particular one among the others. She does it so elegantly as she moves slowly while measuring me with her eyes from time to time. Frankly all the dresses look like designer brands. Can I do them good?

"This . . ." Eleanor frowns, undecided. "No, not good." She tosses it aside, then wanders around and plucks another one.

"Thank God!" I suck in a deep breath of relief, for the first one wasn't my scene at all. The next one is an off-shoulders burgundy dress, cascading up to above the knees. Kind of my scene, I guess.

"I'm sure this one will do," says Eleanor, then looks at me expectantly. "What do you think?"

"I think . . . I like it." My smile brightens.

"Okay, go ahead and try it." She hands me the dresses. "I'll be back in a minute; I'm expecting one more important call," she says smilingly.

I slip into the fitting room and take a moment eyeing my reflection through a full-length mirror. It refuses to say a word; it just stares back at me with a pitiful expression. I can't even tell my current demeanor, for it's like I'm living different lifetimes at once. I feel happy, and then I'm not sure if I am when a strange fright seems to be lurking around, like smoldering heat ready to turn into dangerous flames. It's overwhelming.

Sighing, I take off the caftan I'm wearing so as to put on the new dress.

It's simple yet elegant, and goes well with my thick curls; it's exactly what I need, I decide. The silky fabric slides smoothly as I fit in the dress. I like it already. Having hard time pulling up the zipper, I end up cursing out loud. It's always a hassle in my case, which makes me despise dresses with back zippers. I almost growl as I recall that I must treat this dress with utmost respect. However, I suddenly hear some footsteps approaching and I know I can use some help.

"Can you help me with the zipper, Mrs. Eleanor?" I shout amidst my despair. To my horror, Eleanor doesn't respond. Was it not her? I wonder. "Anyone there?" I ask again, still struggling.

Yet, no answer.

I'm about to give up the whole thing when the curtains split open, and Liam walks in.

What the heck!

I freeze on spot as he watches me by the mirror for a second, his gaze luminous in some inexplicable fashion, and then he shifts the intense blue eyes towards my bare back. I feel mute, unable to even ask what he's doing here. Gosh, why can't I get used to his mien? I grumble inwardly.

Without even saying a word, Liam moves closer and shuts the distance between us. I hold my breath, feeling his strong presence behind me. Gingerly, his scent splendid and familiar by now, he takes a hold the mass of my hair and flips it to one side. Cool air hit my skin as my back stays exposed, naked. It's a very simple and normal action, but it's still arresting.

I close my eyes when Liam's warm fingers brush against my skin. He slowly zips up my dress, and I hold his every trail, relishing the feel. It's not even a hard task that takes hours but it feels like eternity until he enwraps my lower back up to the mid.

"It looks good." His voice makes me wake up immediately. It's warm, gentle, yet imperious.

"Eh?" I prompt.

"The dress . . . it looks good," he repeats, his eyes gleaming succulently through the mirror.

"I see," I utter. A small hint of disappointment flushes through my face. I mean the dress? My subconscious sulks.

"And you look remarkably beautiful in it." Liam smiles in a discerning manner, and I can't refrain myself from turning towards him.

Does he read minds?

"Thanks," I hardly voice out, and a tiny silence reigns. I realize that we're alone, behind a small closed room, and for the first time I fail to take charge of my composure.

I feel stirred, both physically and emotionally.

Slowly, our gaze lock hypnotically. Boy, I feel hot! Liam reaches for my hair and replaces it back to their original free-form. I flex, my insides unfurling at this contact, shuddering my skin.

I suck in a deep breath. "What are--"

"And I do like your hair, Ms. Jones," Liam says in a very gentle, hoarse voice. "It smells specifically divine today." My heart beats fast as his words pierce in my eardrums. He only touches my hair but the entire body responds to his advances. He doesn't leave my sight as we slowly close the safe distance between us.

Damn, Kira, aren't you supposed to move away from him? I can clearly hear the yell, and I know it's a red alarm, screaming danger, yet there's a rebel in me who seems to be quite keen with perils, loving the unknown.

My mouth and his stay an inch apart, I feel his tender breath.

Nothing else seems to matter at present, and I feel like I'm living that same dream I've been having. His presence right now, so close to me, is not something new at all. We're almost lost into a deep emotional bond, when I hear a very familiar voice.

"Kira?" Sam calls after me. I pull back as fast as all my five senses reactivate. "Kira, are you there?" Sam's voice keeps approaching, and I fall in a panic.

Shit!

I look at Liam, who is surprisingly calm as though nothing is the matter. His eyes shift towards the exit, then back at me. I blaze, panic sweeping over me. Liam scowls at the sight, and my lips tremble as my voice stops at the mouth.

And suddenly he tries to get out of the fitting room, but I pull him back with all my strengths. I warn him to stay put with my eyes, and he stares back, clueless. He's nearly smiling at my serious face, and I'm freaked.

"Over here! I'm trying on a dress!" I speak aloud, responding at Sam's call.

"Oh you! What took you so long to respond?" I feel Sam's steps getting closer, and I must think fast.

"DON'T COME IN!" I snap, and she halts right before the curtains. "I'm still changing, Sam," I add.

Why am I lying? I'm disgusted with myself.

"And so what if you're changing?" Sam questions, chuckling lightly.

"Um, I'm kind of naked?" I say desperately.

"And since when do you care about that? You always strip without a warning," she casually remarks.

Liam shoots me an inquiring eyebrow at this little piece of information.

God! This is not going well, and I wonder what this Englishman is imagining right now.

I decide to reveal my head through the curtains. "I'm trying on the new dress and I don't want anyone to see me yet," I tell her, and of course it's a big-fat lie.

"Wow, your hair looks nice." She beams jovially, and it breaks my heart that I'm nearly a traitor. "Well, have you seen Liam?"

Oh no! Well, he's right beside me, making fun of the situation like a naughty little boy.

"Um, no, I haven't seen Liam," I reply, and again he lifts another eyebrow.

"Really? That's strange. I thought he came in here," Sam mutters, and I sigh remorsefully. I'm such a bitch! "Okay, I'll go check him to the men's section," she says, and before leaving she adds, "Oh, Eleanor asked you to wait for her."

"Okay," I answer and thankfully she leaves.

Half-relieved, I face Liam, whose face is now blank; it refuses to give out anything. How does he even do it? He stares intently at me.

"Why did you lie?" he asks me all of a sudden, mixed emotions registration on his face. And I just hate that he takes pity on the matter. "You weren't doing anything wrong, right?" he adds.

Maybe not practically, but deep down I know I've sinned with my thoughts.

"I don't know." I sigh, frustrated somehow. "Maybe I'm a horrible person, and a terrible friend, and I think you should go!" I run a hand through my curls, oblivious of the party awaiting and that I need to stay neat.

"No, you're not," Liam says calmly, shifting towards the exit. "But perhaps you should be true to yourself at the very least, Ms. Jones. You look guilty, and I don't understand why."

What is he insinuating now? I growl inside.

"No, I don't," I argue.

He smiles faintly. "There's a mirror right in front of you, look at it." And he leaves.

Like a baby I do as he's just said, staring at my own reflection. It's disgusting. "I just didn't want any misunderstanding," I utter under my breath, suddenly afraid of my immediate future.

It's almost eerie, the thought of staying in this place any longer. Should I just run away while I still can? I ponder, my eyes tentative at the mirror.

"Hey there? Everything okay?" Eleanor's voice cracks my mind open.

"Yeah. I'm done." I fix myself and quickly step out of the fitting room.

Eleanor approves my dress right away, and we are finally done with the charade. For shoes, I only go with black pumps that come with a matching clutch. She also does my makeup, and for a moment I can't help but wonder if there's anything she cannot do.

"I used to work as a beautician before marrying Liam's father," Eleanor announces proudly as she applies some blush in my cheeks. She's smiling brightly, her eyes gleaming with pleasure.

"Really? That explains your talents then." I feel amazing, so dolled up like a beauty pageant.

"Some lipstick?" Eleanor wiggles her eyebrows, searching for the suitable color in the collection.

I don't usually wear lipstick but today I put on an outstanding one, the same color as my dress. I feel so very beautiful when I check myself in the end.

"You look magnificent, dear," Eleanor says while standing right beside me, happy with the result.

"Yeah, I'm looking but I can't believe it's me," I tease, and we share a long laugh.

Oh, these moments are precious. The reminder that I'll soon leave this place and return to my humble abode somehow makes my heart cringe.

"Wait, something is missing," Eleanor utters as we both agree that we're done. She then disappears for a minute and returns with a shiny silver choker and its earrings. "Now this will finalize the magic." Her smile brightens.

"No, Eleanor. This is too much already." I stare at the piece of jewelry with stun, a feel of overwhelm.

"No, it's not," she says insistently, undoing the necklace so as to round it in my neck. "In fact, it's been here for a while so don't give me that."

"Oh my." I feel burdened by this kindness.

"Kira, I've always wanted to do this," she tells me warmly after noticing my slight discomfiture. "If I had a daughter, this is what I would've done on her first outing, or party, or anything. Can't you consider me your mother and just accept it?"

My breath turns ragged, my heart pounding amorously at these touching words.

I feel like tearing up but I conceal my tears with a sniff.

"Okay, I promise to treat them with care." I beam and her face lights up.

When done we head out to join the others. I feel sexy, lively and confident as I find Liam, Malik and Sam in the middle of sharing a laugh.

"Oh my God!" Sam exclaims as soon as I become visible.

"Oh my," Malik utters, his brown eyes shining as he walks around the couch, and reaches before me. "You look beautiful, Kira." He dramatically kisses my knuckles.

"Thanks, Malik." I smile.

I'm slightly nervous. I think it's a bit terrifying when you look too good to be real, and that's exactly how I feel at present.

Malik gentlemanly offers me his left hand. "Shall we?" He smiles deliciously.

"Yes, please," I reply.

Evidently I should've seen this coming. I'm naturally his date tonight, and Sam is Liam's.

Catching up Liam's eye, I'm surprised to see a little smile at my direction. And it's quite enough.

Both boys look breathtaking. Malik is wearing a black tuxedo that compliments his dark hair quite well, and Liam is into a navy blue suit that makes we wish to trade places with Sam.

"Okay, my children." Eleanor clasps her hands abruptly, making us all turn to her like children indeed. "The car is waiting outside, and I hope you have a great fun tonight." She smiles bright.

"And when are you leaving?" Liam asks her.

"Soon," Eleanor prompts. "Peter will take me to the airport, that's why I've booked a limo."

"Wow!" Sam squeaks with excitement. She loves riding in style and I'm not even sure if she's finished paying the mortgage of her red Audi that she was dying to have since we were eighteen.

CHAPTER 10

We finally walked into a classic ballroom of some nice hotel downtown. It's bigger than the Darcy's hotel but rather older in terms of its architecture. Judging from the cars in the parking lot, the Mayor must be very influential around here. After the authentication from the security team we take a seat at a round table for five. The venue is well decorated in cream and gold with plenty of white orchids and mixed colored roses in each table.

"Wow, seems like the town folks know how to do stuff, huh?" Sam comments.

"Well. They are not cavemen," I return.

Settled down comfortably, my eyes immediately search for that subject of my interest. My gaze collides with Liam, and quite a faint smile appears at the corner of his mouth. Oh my! Feeling the rising heat, I quickly turn my gaze.

What's happening to me?

The waiter, immaculately dressed in black and white, passes by with a tray of drinks, and we grab a champagne flute each. I slowly take a sip, savoring the chilly golden liquid as it flows splendidly down my throat. Malik gives me a mischievous glance, laughing at whatever's on his capricious mind.

"What?" I mouth, and his smile broadens.

"Nothing, I just enjoy looking at you," he answers jovially, forcing my eyes to go into a rollercoaster.

He's so playful for God's sake.

Shifting my gaze to the other side, I spot Liam staring at us. He looks so relentless which is so disturbing. Is he mad or something? No, I shouldn't even think about him, for it's not good for my cardiac health.

The ceremony starts and we finally get the honor to see both the bride and groom. Just like all other weddings, it takes several twists and turns until I get to have that delicious meal I've been waiting for subconsciously.

We all talk about anything and everything; making a few comments regarding this wedding specifically.

"What's your dream wedding, Kira?" Sam shoots with a very huge grin, as though doing it on purpose.

"Um, I don't know," I reply. Dream wedding? Perhaps it's weird, but I never give much thought on that.

"Oh come on," Sam cries, and it seems like everyone is on her side.

Both boys fix their eyes expectantly on me. Jeez!

"Well, maybe something simple." I start marveling it in my head. "A small ceremony in the garden, maybe . . . with very few people who actually matter to me. Nothing grand, just simple and beautiful wedding." I smile dreamily, and for once I let fantasy fill my psyche.

"Why am I not surprised?" Sam remarks while sipping her drink.

"Well, I am," Malik utters calmly. "I thought you'd want a big wedding, like all the ladies I know." His voice is rather teasing, and it's easier for anyone to consider it flirty.

But something tells me it's how he is.

"That's not my Kira," Sam takes over, and I laugh at it without much attention as somehow, without any ulterior motive, get preoccupied with my grand curiosity about Liam's idea for a wedding.

"What about you, Samantha?" Liam, who's been a silent observer thus far, finally voices out.

"Me?" Sam smiles coyly, blushing. "I think I'd like a crazy wedding."

"How crazy?" I blurt out, chuckling.

And I can't believe I'm picturing Liam as the guy beside me on that wedding day of my head. Am I going crazy? I gulp my champagne right away, just so I can get rid of these crazed ideas.

"Like getting married in Vegas . . . without a proper wedding preparation," she blurts out, and everyone laugh a bit. "Or some traditional wedding in Hawaii, where I just wear some bikini and sarong."

"With a flora tiara in the head, right?" I add, and she grins incredulously.

We keep our conversation in such design as the party goes on. Without this small talk, I believe I'd be bored to death. I'm not a huge fan of parties, and I guess I'm not the only one.

Liam seems completely out of place, hoping for it to end quickly. Thanks to the chattering box called Sam, at least he gets to nod and smile a tiny bit from time to time.

I, on the other hand, get indulged into my own conversation with Malik who has decided to torture me tonight with his endless questions.

He must know everything about me by now, from where I work, where I live, my hobbies, likes, dislikes, and even my relationship status. Apparently it's impossible to get bored around him.

"Enough about me," I snap, "tell me, where are you really from?" I use his current strategy against him, sitting straighter.

"London." He smiles, placing down his champagne flute.

I scowl. "Stop fooling around, will you? I know you're probably half-Arab, so which country are you from?"

"How do you know I'm Arab?" He is slightly surprised, wincing back.

"I don't know. Maybe you do look like one?" I shrug. "Well, let's call it an innocent guess."

"I'm from Saudi Arabia," he enunciates.

"Oh, Saudi Arabia." I scoff at my drink, which completes a third round. By now I must be a bit tipsy, and Malik likes the fact. "No wonder you look like a prince. A prince from a far kingdom." I laugh at my own humorless joke.

Yes, the alcohol is indeed taking its effect. My communication skills improve tremendously when I drink, and it's something that I usually try to avoid. I'd rather be at my best faculty in order to wisely filter my words, which is far from the case at the moment.

"Is that another innocent guess?" Malik asks, somewhat surprised.

"What?" I squint my eyes.

"Very few people know about that," he says earnestly, probably intrigued as his eyes gleam with wonder.

"Know about what?" I'm confused.

"That I'm a prince?"

"Huh?" I stare at him blankly. Does he think I'm stupid or what? I burst out laughing. "A Prince? That was a good one, Malik." I take another sip, forsaking his allegation.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" he asks in a tease, making me blink several times.

"Why don't you just tell me that the big foot is real while at it?" I retort in disbelief. He raises an amused eyebrow, smiling. Is he serious? My subconscious is unready to settle for less. "Okay, a prince from where? Ottoman empire?" I ask him laughingly.

I've got to admit that I'm having a good time right now. The conversation is pleasing, and Malik isn't so bad after all. At first I thought him very supercilious and conceited, a jerk even, but I think I misjudged him. Well, he is just a charming guy and I'm glad to meet him.

"You surprise me, little professor." He laughs delightedly, tapping his fingers on the table. "But no, I'm not from Ottoman."

"Oh, what a shame." I decline back in my seat, my moods at the peak.

"Yeah, that's an ancient Turkish empire." He replaces himself back and takes another sip without removing his eyes off of me.

"You're not serious, are you?" I whisper, moving closer to him. "You're really a prince?" I think I sound like a child right now, trying to believe whether Santa Claus and Easter bunny are real or not.

"I am," Malik prompts, grinning with amusement. "You can ask Liam if you don't believe me." He gives me his playful smile and I think he's telling the truth.

"Wow! So I'm speaking to the living *shahzad*?" I gawp, and Malik laughs loudly, quite entranced.

"You even know that word?" he asks, stunned.

"I majored in History and Literature so I know that much about Middle Eastern kind of civilization," I tell him matter-of-factly.

"Really?"

"Yeah. But I'm more captivated with the Ottoman empire and the reign of Sultan Suleiman Khan who conquered--" I pause. "Boring, isn't it?" I ask in apprehension.

Who would want to hear this kind of tale in a party, seriously?

"I don't mind listening, Professor." Malik's smile is assuring, and I guess he's not a mundane person after all.

I chuckle lightly.

We continue chatting until we are interrupted by this potty-bellied bulky man in his early fifties or so. He must be the mayor, judging from the way he carries himself. We exchange greetings.

"It's a shame Eleanor couldn't be here tonight," Mr. Mayor tells Liam.

"She sends her apology," Liam replies coolly, abandoning his mobile after making a small peek. "She had a last minute trip to Rome, that's why she was not able to attend."

Sam and I take an opportunity to run for the ladies' room. She's retouching her makeup when I get out of the toilet stall and start washing my hands.

She grins at me by the mirror at our front and says, "Spill it."

"Spill what?" I ask, bemused.

"Oh please, Kira Jones," she frantically cries. "Tell me about Mr. Loaded."

"What?" I chuckle at the name.

"I saw how you two flashed together like a match made in heaven," Sam says while applying her cherry lipstick, looking fresh already.

"We were just talking."

"Oh, yeah? Talk about what?" She nudges me.

I don't think she'll let it slide so easily, hence I decide to shut her up. "Nothing much, just the basics," I speak truthfully. "What about you? How is it going with Liam?"

Sam tenses up, and maybe I shouldn't have asked this. It's obvious things aren't proceeding in a steep slope, and I just had to open my drunk mouth.

"I don't know, Kira." She dips her little powder kit inside the purse and continues, "He keeps blowing hot and cold so I'm beginning to think that he doesn't have any interest on me." She exhales and I keep shut, waiting for her to continue.

I'm not aware of their arrangement until this trip, other than what Sam told me at my apartment back in L.A. But something tells me that I should enlighten her about Liam.

Sighing, hesitation flooding my resolution, I decide to go ahead. "Well, I happened to hear—"

"I think I love him," Sam mutters, cutting my speech short. What? I snap inwardly. "I've never liked a guy like I do him, but he's so indifferent."

Damn it! Why am I astounded while it was a matter of time? Why does it feel like a turn off on my part, something I'd rather didn't hear?

"Why don't you just talk plainly with him?" I say suggestively, my eyes on her. She doesn't seem elated by the idea. "I mean . . . don't mind me." I suck in a deep breath, feeling like I'm being nonsensical.

"You're right, though," Sam says thoughtfully, her eyes lost into space. "It's the only option I'm left with."

"Right," I breathe, a pang of discomfort hitting my heart. "Um, can I go back?" I ask.

"Sure. I need a little moment with my face," Sam says, and I smile gratefully.

I step away awkwardly after hearing whatever she's just told me, and I don't know why. I'm welcomed by Ed Sheeran's golden voice the minute I step outside the ladies' room. Marching back to our table, I thank heavens that the Mayor is gone. However, he isn't the only one missing. Malik is nowhere to be seen, which means only Liam is present.

"Um, where is Malik?" I ask Liam while taking a seat.

"He's taking a call outside," he answers nonchalantly, taking a champagne flute to his mouth without leaving my eyes.

"I see," I breathe, trying hard to calm my nerves that are apparently behaving weird.

"Would you dance if I ask you to?" Liam utters.

"Huh?" I gasp, making sure my ears aren't playing tricks with me.

"May I have one dance, Ms. Jones?" he repeats, making my heart erupt, and eyes dart towards the floor where a few people are having a moment under the dim pink lights. "Please?" He gets up, extending a hand towards me.

"Yes," I answer.

Wait, did I just say yes?

"Very well." Liam takes my hand, and slowly leads me towards the dance floor, his manners full of gallant.

The 'Perfect' lyrics fail to help me; on the contrary, the words speed up my heartbeat as my head keeps imagining someone else's voice saying the words. *You need help, Kira!* My subconscious yaps inside, mocking me.

Standing before Mr. Darcy, his gaze so impassive, yet alluring, I feel his hand sliding on my back, and stops about the smallest part of it. It's so electrifying, his soft move. I gulp as my hands rest on his shoulders, and our eyes meet.

Good heavens! He resembles a stormy sea. So dangerous, and yet I wonder why I'm dying to sail into it, regardless its tempest.

"I'm a terrible dancer," I say out of nowhere. But it's the truth.

"I'm the worst," Liam replies, and I find myself laughing.

"So then, what are we doing here?" I ask, firming myself to his side, beholding each other's gaze. Oh my Lord! I quest the wherewith to stay poised and avoid ogling his Greek godly features.

"I'm not sure," he breathes against my neck, leading my steps without a hassle. "I just felt like dancing." He eyes down at me, a succulent smile at the edges of his lips.

"Out of the blue?" I murmur, my voice low and raspy, feeling some sort of déjà vu as his breath caresses my skin.

"Yes, out of the blue," Liam says. "And please relax a bit; I'm sure nobody dances this stiffly." He chuckles.

"Okay." I giggle and relax immediately after steadying my stance, mirroring my moves with his gentle ones.

I feel strange, heavenly strange, as my eyes shut to indulge this moment. Is it okay feeling like this, Kira? My subconscious decides to play the saint card, reminding me of something I'm momentarily forgetting.

I don't know anything, I retort wryly.

I nearly step on Liam's foot as my head hops onto the train of thoughts, but he grabs me right on time. I stumble on his chest, colliding my glance with his hypnotizing eyes. Jeez! I quickly pull myself together with a sorry-look, and he smiles.

"The moment you start thinking is when you step on your partner's foot," he tells me softly, and I smile indulgently. What a philosopher! "You look so beautiful tonight." His voice is hoarse.

My heart skips a beat.

"Thanks." I blush, my cheeks burning with a little fire rising in my heart. "You look handsome yourself." I get lost into the sphere of his blue eyes that are currently sparkling pink, so wild, so fervent. What am I thinking? My sex goddess smirks, peeking from her majestic chamber.

A one-minute silence settles, and everything cease to exist. Just the music and Liam's heartbeat, a perfect combination for my arrested heart. Could there be another sinful distraction than the sight of this beautiful man I've ever come across? I mentally face-palm.

"So, you want a simple wedding?" suddenly, Liam asks, and I bite my lip at the subject. Must we talk about weddings now?

"Yes. And you? I didn't get to hear about yours." I play along, a fitting distraction from the lewd thoughts partaking in my brain.

"Me? I've never thought about it, until a while ago." He smiles at me in a teasing manner, but sincerity laces his voice nevertheless.

I gaze up at him, stunned. What a coincidence! "So then?" I ask, my eagerness evident . . . probably.

"I think . . . whatever my bride would prefer," Liam says softly, a faint smile on his lips. Would? I get stuck at this lack of surety as if there is none at the moment. "Oh, as long as it's not a crazy wedding," he adds, and we both laugh in a discerning manner.

"Well, I have no comment on that," I say, and Sam crosses my mind right away. I cower inside, remorse pooling in my heart.

Throwing my glance towards the table, I see my fake blonde wandering her gaze around and the magic is over.

"Any problem?" Liam asks, a little frown on his face.

"Um, the song is over." I find the perfect excuse as we hear the applause, and the lights come bright.

Sam finally spots us and a little startled look clouds her face. However, she breaks into a smile as another song comes, and quickly marches towards us.

"May I have a little dance as well?" she asks, staring directly at Liam.

"Um, I'll go get myself a drink." I don't wait for him to answer as I know my place so well at this moment.

I give Sam a tight-lipped smile before making my way back towards the table. Nostalgia engulfs me as soon as my body parts Liam's, and it's a bit overwhelming. I down the drink in one go. Malik returns, and at last I'm not alone.

CHAPTER 11

I wake in a good mood this morning, knowing that we're about to hit a road trip to Billings, the largest city in Montana. The boys have an urgent business with some banker over there, and asked if we wanted to tag along with them. But of course, we both answered with a big yes, full of ecstasy. I've decided that since I'm here, I should explore everyplace I can afford.

Isn't that the whole point of a vacation?

"Just wake me up when we arrive," Sam tells me, her voice groggy and lazy. She's seated between Malik and me in the backseat.

"Sure, ma'am. Goodnight," I reply placidly.

"Do you enjoy this, Professor?" Malik asks teasingly upon seeing my smile.

"Yeah, don't you?" I reply, gazing at his big, bright eyes.

"Well, I love the company better." He shrugs, forging some sort of gallant that makes me chuckle. Jeez, he's mood! "And you, brother?" He faces Liam, who's seated at the front passenger seat, lost into his own thoughts.

How you wish to know his thoughts? My subconscious murmurs and I seriously want to deny such baseless accusations. Do I want to be in his head? Surely, why not?

"I like it. That's why I chose this state of all the America," Liam says coolly, gracing us his small glance coupled with a tiny smile.

My poor heart! It just flipped idiotically and I couldn't agree more of his statement.

Like usual, riding in the country side is always awesome; unless it rains, I guess. We arrive before noon and check in at a certain modern hotel since we're spending the night. This time each has their own room, which makes me jump with joy for some unknown reasons.

Since the boys are scheduled for a business dinner, we decide spending the day sightseeing, which takes us around places in the name of tourism. I'm glad my camera is never treacherous to stay far from my handbag, and I love it.

I take pictures of everything and everyone, whatever I see pretty, except one person whom I try every tactic to get the perfect shot of his, without any success. Goodness, this guy. It's like he knows my scheme by heart, considering his arrogant smirk, and I decide to give up with a smile.

We had a grand deal of pleasure visiting places, including the Moss Mansion, a very ravishing historic house that's believed to be haunted during midnights. It reminded me of Alhambra Palace in Spain for some reasons, and I felt like I've travelled back in time.

I once went to Spain on a vacation with my parents. I was young but I clearly remember the train trip from Barcelona to Granada, and the amazing ruins of Alhambra. I was so excited because I already loved history and museums by then; I just didn't know it was going to be my last vacation with them.

It's around ten at night as I head out of the bathroom after a quick shower, before going to bed at last. Removing the shower cap, I shake my head to free my curls, feeling such vigor, and at the same time I hear a bell ring at the door. I can't help but frown, my big plans of huddling in bed distorted.

Sam has left about ten minutes ago, so then who could it be at this hour?

I fasten the bathrobe whilst I pace towards the door. Opening it, a few seconds later, my heart drops when I see Liam standing before me. Oh God! What is he doing here? Gulping, I watch his currently calm blue eyes scanning me from head to toe, guarded as always. I turn completely dumbstruck, unable to utter a syllable. I feel nude.

"May I come in?" Liam asks in a low voice.

"Um, sure," I respond with a startle, moving aside to draw him in. "Is everything okay? Oh . . . I know."

"Oh, do you?" Liam's voice a pure mock, same as his daunting smile.

"Well, you must be looking for Sam, right? But well, she has already left a while ago." I shrug, finding no other possible explanation.

Liam takes his time beholding my room, and I keep my patience while mirroring his gaze. Satisfied with the grand inspection, he turns to me and says, "I didn't come here for her. You're the reason why I'm here."

"Me? Why?" I demand, surprised.

"I believe this is yours." Liam hands me the camera that he's been holding the whole time. How stupid! I mentally chastise myself. "You're lucky the driver was decent enough to bring it back."

"Oh, I must've left it inside the car," I say. And what was I imagining again? My subconscious laughs heartily at me.

"You should be careful with the things you like," Liam says with a pause, his voice taunting, preceding his tempestuous eyes. "You may lose them when you least expect."

I scowl. "Ah, thank you. Losing my camera would be a huge loss."

"You're welcome," Liam breathes. For once I detect the exhaustion portrayed in his face as he yawns, and yet looks reluctant to move.

"You came to just give me this?" I ask without thinking, and then chew on my lip regretfully.

Of course, dummy, why else would he be here? To sing you lullaby?

Smiling feebly, Liam says, "Goodnight, Ms. Jones."

Huh? Just like that? "Oh . . . yeah . . . nights." I sigh.

Am I disappointed? I quiz inside, my heart bereft, and the devil in me huffs amusedly.

With a single glance at me, smiling indulgently, Liam scurries towards the door. And then a sudden urge to retain him overpowers my composure, pushing me towards him as he clutches the door handle. He can't leave like this, I decide. Perhaps I'm crazy, but I run past him and block the doorway. He looks abruptly at me, completely stunned.

"What are you doing, Ms. Jones?" he asks in a normal tone of voice, and I read mixed emotions in his eyes for a change. Startled, stunned, intrigued . . . oh, I don't know.

"I do care about the things I like," I snap, panting softly. What?

"I bet you do," Liam replies, and a little smile appears faintly on his lips. He stands straight, amusement evident on his face. "And what else, Ms. Jones?" He narrows his eyes inquiringly.

"Huh?" I utter.

Liam folds his arms across the chest, and his lips curl into a wider smile. Am I such a clown? "And what else would you like me to know about yourself?" he repeats.

"Um . . . nothing." Damn, what does he want to hear? I clear my throat, putting my stance straighter. "I don't know how it happened but I don't usually lose my stuff—"

Wait! Why am I so busy convincing him about the camera? And he seems to be having so much fun at my expense as he digs his hands inside the pockets of his jeans, staring fervently at me.

"I'm listening, Ms. Jones," he mutters, and I clear my throat resignedly.

"Well, I guess I wasn't careful." I take a deep sigh, and this time Liam laughs at my defeated face. Holy shit! "But I seriously care about the things I like, and the people I like." I still my gaze, letting him take care of my faculty as he stares wordless.

Say something, please! I plead inside, my heart racing crazily, hoping he doesn't find me crazy.

"Ms. Jones . . ." And he suddenly moves closer, his looks intimidating that I gulp stoutly. "Do you have something to tell me?" he questions out of the blue, his voice calm, stirring, indescribable.

"Um, do I?" I breathe.

Liam chuckles at my reaction. "Do you have a question to ask me?" he insists, and I dare say he can read my mind.

I do have a question for him, and it's better I ask now that I have a chance rendered so smoothly by the proprietor himself.

"About Sam," I start confidently, and Liam stares more intently. "Why did you invite her over if you were going to play hard to get?" I cross my arms on the chest.

Yeah that's it, I did it. I press my lips together, impatiently waiting for Liam's answer. Seconds pass by, making my uneasiness growing wild. And finally . . . his lips move, making me inhale sharply.

"Is that how it seems, Ms. Jones?" he utters gently, his eyes narrowed in a confused manner. That I'm playing . . . what do you call it again?"

"Hard to get?" we say in a perfect unison, and he starts laughing.

Damn! I love the sound of him laughing. Probably this is the first time I'm seeing him laughing so lively, his guards thrown away.

"Well, I don't know how else to interpret your actions, Mr. Darcy," I tell him frankly, my confidence restored. "How do you explain a guy who invites a woman to his house, only to feed and take her places?" I add, and he stares at me smilingly.

God knows how sexy he looks when he smiles. It's almost impossible not to get lost into those ocean-like eyes.

Okay focus, Kira.

"What else should the guy do to make sure his guest is having a good time at his home then?" Liam retorts seriously, but I find it more of a mockery.

Or . . . maybe not? He's probably being earnest.

"A guest? Is that all she amounts to you?" I raise my voice, feeling a bit annoyed, and yet he looks totally unaffected.

He's still smiling, to be precise, and I can't say I'm complaining. Well, I think I've lost myself at this point. Indecisive, hot and cold, I can't even tell what I am anymore.

"I clearly told you before, Ms. Jones . . ." Liam moves even closer, startling me, taking me completely off guard. "I don't harbor any special feelings for your friend; not at all. She kindly toured me around Los Angeles, and I was indeed grateful. She needed a nice vacation destination, away from the city, and I gladly offered her my home. Did I commit such a grave sin by so doing?"

He practically raps in my ears, and it's like I can hear but never listen. This closeness, his breath so near, his scent so sweet and intense, he simply steals my composure. I get lost into my carnal . . . my mega desire to hold his face, run a hand on his beautiful stubbles, and maybe his lips? Oh no! I shake off my mind.

What was he talking about again? Oh, about Sam.

"I guess not," I utter softly. Thank God I was able to grasp at least a part of his speech.

"I thought so." Liam's eyes glisten when he momentarily closes the distance between us, his Adam's apple bobbing sweetly, and my heartbeat accelerates. He gets closer, his eyes fixed on me confidently. I freeze.

What the hell is he up to? And why am I anticipating for his next move? I should move away from him, but why am I stuck as though waiting for him to slip off my robe?

"I think—" My breath hitches as I collide my butt with the door.

"Besides," Liam utters softly, making me more attentive, "there's a room for only one woman in my head."

"A woman?" I let out a soft gasp, a trepid sensation running through my blood. This is nothing but danger, yet I'm hardly afraid. "Wh--who is that woman?" I hardly ask, and I'm so eager to hear his answer. What is this if not madness?

Liam is now looking deeply into my eyes within this zero distance, and my breathing is out of range. Placing one hand on the door, making me glance at the glorious muscles rippling on it, he brushes a thumb against his lower lip, in such a manner that leaves me totally disoriented. I look back at him, and his smirk is devilish. He's sexy, so hot and alluring.

Damn, do Greek gods still exist?

"You're in a deep trouble, Ms. Jones," he breathes out the words, as he hauls my waist tightly and presses me softly against onto chest. Dear God!

"Mr--" I swallow hard, startled, but don't make any effort to repulse as I'm feeling hot and cold . . . at once. "We can't--"

"I tried, but you keep pushing me to break my barriers," he claims, his fingers digging in my curls from above my nape, and I'm melting in his grip. "Do you enjoy seeing me losing my mind over you?" He softly brushes his lips near my earlobe, driving me insane than I already am, and the effect is indescribable afterwards.

"What are you talking about?" I manage to ask in a very soft whisper, as I keep experiencing a foreign current running through my blood. Something intense for my poor body. I'm so unused fatal seduction.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Liam says, then plants a tiny kiss at the corner of my mouth. Jesus! I clam my eyes at the tantalizing feeling it entices, letting my boy relish it. His lips are soft, gentle, as they slide against mine, beguiling me. "Don't you?" he whispers.

A soft moan lurches from my lips when he caresses my back, making me anticipate for each move he takes, as though I'm ready for whatever he's planned for me.

Aren't you? My subconscious whispers with a wild grin, so not against this whole predicament as I thought she'd be.

Liam holds me tighter, my breast crush on his chest. God, his hands are electrifying!

"No," I breathe, staring at his intoxicating eyes. "We can't—" I try to retreat from his arms, but he fiercely starts kissing my mouth, his mouth relentless and demanding. I easily succumb, wrapping my arms around his neck. He pushes me roughly onto the door, but I don't mind. Our tongues intertwine molding and swirling coherently with one another.

His skillful kisses on my neck command my entire body to eternal heat, something I've never experienced before. I close my eyes willingly, and loosen my arms around his neck to balance my momentum. His lips are soft in my skin, wet that I feel worshiped. I moan, he grunts . . . we enjoy the forbidden.

I know it's wrong, I'm very much aware of it, but I can't stop having the pleasure of his amazing touch that I've been dying to feel in both my slumber and reality. His strong arms tighten around me, forcing me to surrender myself at his mercy. Oh God . . . if only he were mine!

I could do more than kissing if he asks me to. And atop everything, this feels just right, and it's exactly the same feeling I've known through my freakish dreams. His kiss so deep, utterly possessing . . . makes me needy and vulnerable.

But no, it's still not right.

Something keeps reminding me deep inside. I need to stop this, my head warns me vehemently, yet my body refuses to listen. And if Liam can read my body language, he slowly releases me. I'm panting, ruffled in and out. Liam looks at me for a very long while, saying no word, and then breaks into a smile. I'm suddenly coy, and he takes pleasure it seems.

"Your lips taste heavenly, Ms. Jones," he says with a haughty grin, caressing my mouth with his thumb. "Have a good night," he whispers in my ear as he pulls aside.

My eyes widen, and he gently pulls me aside, away from the door. Our gaze doesn't break as he flings it open, before disappearing through it, leaving me completely out of my mind.

"Oh my God. What are you doing, Kira? Have you gone crazy?" I breathe, and slowly drop on the door. "You kissed him, you idiot, and you were probably ready to open your legs, weren't you?"

I pinch my lips to make sure I'm not dreaming, and yes, I'm really not dreaming. I've just had a kiss with Liam Darcy, and he's one hell of a kisser.

I'm about to get up, and proceed with the sleep, which won't be an easy task for sure, when another knock snaps the hell out of me. I ask who it is, and it's Sam's voice that I hear.

Fuck!

CHAPTER 12

"Hurry up, Kiki!" Sam urges, impelling me to snap out of my state of panic.

"Just a sec," I utter while opening the door, my heart still thumping from the earlier incident and this sudden appearance of Samantha. "Um, hi," I breathe, forcing an innocent smile.

Bitch! My subconscious mutters, rolling her eyes at me, and I know she's right. It's just too uncalled for.

"What's up? You look like you've seen a ghost." Sam slips in hurriedly. "It's boring drinking alone, so here." She now reveals a champagne bottle and beams.

"Drinking? Right now?" I ask and she nods. "Why?"

"Why? Stop being a spoilsport! And why not? Do you have classes tomorrow?" Sam mocks, and I hiss with my eyes, making her laugh.

"Well, let's drink." I take a deep sigh, accepting the offer.

I probably need a drink.

"That's my girl." Sam smiles while taking her shoes off in a swift kick. "I bumped into Liam on my way here," she tells me.

My eyes widen. "Oh, and?" I ask, guilt mopping in my heart.

"He seemed happy and I wonder what could've happened to make him grin on the hall as if he'd just finished having some wild sex," Sam blurts out, followed by a huge laugh. I hold my lips sealed. "He hardly smiles so I was intrigued." She now throws a glance at me through her pretty, fake lashes.

"Um, how can I know?" I clear my throat.

What a liar! I ignore the sound that I perfectly recognize.

"Oh well, he's a peculiar guy," Sam proceeds with a flush on the cheeks. "A sexy, peculiar guy. Don't you think so?" She eyes me while opening the champagne bottle.

"I'm not sure." I avoid her gaze and drop myself on the couch.

I'm terrible.

"Of course, how would you know? I'm sorry for the stupid question." Sam seems exhausted with her own mental battles, her voice filled with unspoken words that she probably wants to disclose.

The guilt begins eating me inside for the kiss I just had . . . the best one in my existence. Damn!

"He's probably in a good mood. It happens, right?" I remark, and she only shrugs.

"Well, guess who'd just called me?" Sam takes a seat, looking at her best mood already.

"Who?" My brows wrinkle together.

"Thomas O'Malley."

"The congressman you dated last year?"

"Yeah, that one," she replies. "He's going to Hawaii, and wanted me to go with him."

"What makes him think you'd go? I mean, you broke up, right?" I'm not following Sam's excitement.

"Checking possibilities?" Sam utters. "Waiting for Prince charming is not my thing. What if they never show up?" She now drags her neck backward, facing the ceiling.

"What if they do, but find you in the wrong arms?" I copy Sam's posture.

"Well . . . " She sighs, looking distraught. Her eyes squint in a confound. "I don't know. Should I stay with my arms crossed, waiting for the Prince charming who may not even notice the princess in me?"

We both laugh.

"No, that's not my point," I say.

"So then?"

She's somehow right.

"I'm really not sure, Sam, but I'm sure whatever will be, will be," I say truthfully.

Yeah, I'm kind of a hopeless romantic, who still thinks there's a Romeo for every Juliet.

"Could be," Sam breathes. "I just don't believe in waiting around the corner."

But waiting is the only option to some of us, unfortunately.

"And Liam?" I ask recklessly. "What is he to you?"

"I like him, very much, but I'm not sure how I can make him see that." She sits straight, and then sips the champagne.

My heart tightens, not knowing what to say or feel.

"What will happen if he doesn't feel the same way?" I query.

"I don't know." Sam huffs a short laugh, and I hold my breath. "I don't think I'll be able to take it, maybe it will break me forever. But life is a moment, so I'm not going to be all about Liam and stop enjoying my vacation, no." She throws me a mischievous glance.

"Okay," I say softly.

"Let's forget about guys, and tell me about yourself."

"Myself?" I down my drink.

"Yes, Kira, anything. You hardly talk about yourself, babe. Can't you tell me about your crush or something?"

I swear you don't want to know.

"You said enough of the boys' talk," I remark dismissively.

"Oh." She laughs.

"Besides, there's nothing mega about my life, and you know that. I'm just a boring teacher."

"Not really," says Sam. "You just love playing nun, which has got to stop. You need to live, Kira. Life's too short to be wasted over some useless principles. I can't believe up to now you've never been laid. What are you?"

I don't know.

"Carpe Diem," I think out loud, and slowly hug my feet while watching her.

My mind is quite a mile away, and it's not going to return any time soon, by the look of all the things I'm recalling and even improvising right now.

We are finally back to the ranch, the following day. Unfortunately Malik had to take a detour and flew to New York this afternoon, which means it's only the three of us. I think I miss his mischief a little; for he's quite the spirit of ecstasy.

Reaching the ranch grounds, however, brings me this content as though I am happy to be home. I shouldn't get too comfortable, I know. I fall exhaustedly on the bed, after lazily dropping all my stuff on the couch.

Sam has gone straight to her room after strictly instructed no one to wake her until tomorrow. Her head kept acting up from all the fatigue and I had to call the SWAT for her to accept the painkillers, and yet she adamantly refused.

She can be such a baby sometimes, but when Liam appeared and told her exact same words I did, she took the pills like a big girl she is. Well, what can I say? Absolutely nothing.

It's almost dark, but I bother not flick the lights on. It's been a few eventful days, but fun, to be totally honest. I sigh deeply, especially when that tinkling memory hits the back of my head.

I flush at the memory of him.

My phone rings and I'm surprised to see Dr. Snape on the screen. "Hi, doctor," I greet as soon as I pick the call.

"Hi, Kira," she returns jovially, making me miss her smile somehow. "I suppose you're on a vacation somewhere nice right now, right?" Her voice is warm and humorous.

I'm sure she's surprised that I've muted all this time since our last session back in L.A, and it's so unlike me. Originally I would've called her immediately when I had that dream about Liam, but I shockingly didn't bother.

"Yes, doctor. I'm out of California right now, and I apologize that I couldn't properly say goodbye before leaving," I answer softly, parading around the room with my hand on the waist.

"No worries. I'm aware that you dropped by my office when I was away in a seminar. So, how are you? I know I should take your silence as a good sign, but I can't get too comfortable either. Is everything okay with you?"

"Well, it is okay." I raise stop moving, leaning against the window that's leading to the balcony. "I guess?" I add, unsure of my exact status of mind.

"You guess?"

"Um—" I stutter. Damn, I don't know how to explain it. What if she, too, despite being a psychiatrist, starts to think that I'm crazy?

"Kira, I'm listening," Dr. Snape urges gently. "Still having problems sleeping?" She tries her best to sound friendly.

She uses that trick a lot whenever I'm being opaque.

"Not quite, it's just . . ." I take a deep breath before I decide to tell her everything. She listens all of my rant, including my involvement with Liam. "So, what's your opinion on this doctor?" I ask in the end.

I hear a very long sigh. "Well, Kira, you said you saw his face on that dream," she says haltingly, "but it only happened after you met him, right?"

"Um . . . yeah?" I wonder where this is heading. My eyes focus on the darkness unfolding through the trees.

"Don't you think it's all in your head?"

"I don't understand what you mean by that," I quip, frowning.

"I mean, it's not like you dreamt of him before meeting him. No, you met him first, then had a dream; a usual dream with him as a part of it," she explains and I listen attentively, not knowing what to make out of it.

It's so confusing.

"Oh?" is the only thing I manage to utter.

"Kira, our subconscious should reflect our reality, and not the other way around. What if there's another reason that triggered you to think of him too much that it unfolds through your dream? What if there's something else that you're trying to conceal?"

"Something like what, doctor?" I ask nervously as I resume my seat. I don't think I'm going to like what's coming.

And thinking of him too much? Did I do such a thing? Do I? My brain gets busier.

"For instance, how do you feel about him, Kira?" she asks straight, and I can tell how serious her face must be even from her voice.

What do I feel about Liam Darcy? I try consulting my brain but nothing comes to mind.

I honestly don't know. After sharing that short-lived intimacy in Billings, it's a matter of fact that he'd stirred me up from that delicious kiss. But well, it may be because I'm practically craving for some male touch.

"Um—" I start, but even before I could answer a thing, I hear a background voice of someone talking to her and I decide to halt a second.

"I'm sorry, Kira, but I have to go." Dr. Snape sounds in a sudden rash.

"Alright, doctor. Thanks for calling," I tell her with an indulgent smile.

"My pleasure. Just try to think of what I said, okay? Evaluate your feelings first, and probably you'll understand why he appeared in your dream. When you're back we'll discuss more about it." With that we hang up.

My feelings for *him*?

I make up my mind and decide to put the matter pending for a while. I'm too exhausted to start stressing out about Liam Darcy and all the mystery surrounding him . . . or us? I check the bedside table and I think I'm out of water. Slightly worn-out, I push my feet towards the kitchen downstairs.

Today the house is so empty to the point of fright. I could only hear the sound of wilderness as nothing else seems to be audible. With Mrs. Eleanor miles away, Betty having a day off, and Malik somewhere in New York tending his million-dollar deals, what else could go wrong?

I'd rather they're all here; maybe I could've taken my mind off things.

I yawn audibly as I descend the stairs in a slow motion. I wonder if Liam is back from his immediate tour with the other boys in the stable. He so happens to be very meticulous when it comes to his ranch affairs. But well, he's the boss, and quite an interesting one.

I'm completely astonished when I spot him inside the kitchen when I finally reach the entrance. The guy is everywhere. He's currently talking to someone on the phone while fixing some coffee or tea. I can only see his broad back as he's facing the window, but the sight is enticing.

I stop at the door, unsure whether I should go in or not. *Well, peeking is allowed, isn't it?*

"Good. I'll be expecting the news by tomorrow," Liam says, "and don't forget to review the last clause. I don't like the sound of it at all; we still need to have the

majority control by any means." I arch my eyebrow. "Alright, I'll let you take care of it. Malik is already in New York so put that one pending in the meantime."

I keep listening as though my legs can no longer abide my wishes, until he puts the phone down and I suppose he's done. I'm still on the clouds when I suddenly hear him say, "Need something, Ms. Jones?"

What the fuck! Does he have eyes in the back now?

"Yeah, I've come to get some water," I respond, somewhat startled. Avoiding his gaze, I head for the refrigerator that I'm already familiar with, and grab myself a bottle.

I can still feel his eyes on me as I turn my toes back to the exit.

"Would you like some coffee?" he casually asks, and my heart skips a beat.

"Sure, I'd love some," I answer.

Even if it's a ticket to stay awake like the night watchman.

"Very well," Liam utters. "Aren't you tired with the movements?" He is now rummaging through the cabinets.

"Um, a little," I answer, leaning back against the counter. "And you? Do you ever take a break?" I take a lazy sip of my water.

Liam graces me his blue eyes with a smile that can light up the darkness. "I'm not a vampire, Ms. Jones," he replies comically, and I stifle a laugh. Oh man! "Although I believe even they get tired as well . . . if they exist, that is," he adds, and it's my one-way ticket to laugh.

"That's quite informative, Mr. Darcy," I prompt, capping the bottle as I'm done with it.

Jeez, he's got a way with words.

"Because I know you love information," he replies, staring directly at me. "People who read, love having a lot of information even from a simple question." We both smile.

"Well, I can't say that's a total lie," I mutter, watching his back moving gaily as he opens the cupboard. I feel enthralled, a smile tugged in my lips unbidden.

CHAPTER 13

The coffee has extra cream shot, exactly how I love my stuff. My heart jumps aflutter at the thought of Liam knowing my taste so well.

Could it be that he's taken deliberate to learn of it through our short dining experiences? Dream on, Kira. It costs absolutely nothing to have a lovely dream. I laugh at myself inwardly.

Liam's laptop is on the countertop with the Skype window open on the screen. He was probably video chatting with someone before I arrived. I resume my attention back as he finally hands me the mug.

"Thank you." I feel giddy as I slowly start sipping it. *Hmm, it's exquisite.* Mr. Intense does know how to please a lady.

Or maybe you are just too infatuated, breathes my subconscious with the look of 'oh, we've lost you, girl'. I just smile, enjoying my coffee.

"Shouldn't you be resting by now?" Liam breaks the silence, taking the same stance as mine, facing one another. He is holding a cup himself, concerns written in the depth of his eyes. "Or is it your insomnia again?" His voice comes out careful.

A soft, rueful sigh escape my lips.

"I can ask you the same thing if I may," I reply with a small smile, and he does exactly the same while taking a little sip of his coffee. "I'm just saying. Perhaps my answer will depend on your reasons, after all."

Liam shifts his stance, and he gets closer in the process. Holy cow! "Are you blackmailing me now, Ms. Jones?" He sounds amused, his voice gentle and relaxed, and I like this side of him.

"Oh no! How would I dare do such a thing to you?" I chuckle innocently, and he giggles boyishly. Boy, playful Liam is such a fine creation! "I simply want to have an exchange of facts; *quid pro quo*."

"Oh, do you?" Amused, his one eyebrow creases. "You're quite a bad negotiator. Do you actually think I'd fall for your trick?" His smile assures me of his playfulness, and my cheeks heat up. He takes the cup to his mouth once again, eyes stuck on me, mesmerizing me.

Why can't I be that mug? The devil in me awakes from her beauty somber, eyes wide open, gawking at the fine muscles of Liam's arm. I wonder if he lifts weights . . . Well, he surely does, dummy! My subconscious recoils.

"Um, yes? I mean, can't you at least pretend to fall for it?" I quizzically arch my brows, watching him.

A short silence prevails as Liam watches me mindfully, and only opens his mouth after placing the mug on the cabinet. "Well, I'm going to be generous with you," he says with gallant, and I stupidly move closer so that we level in the same row.

He chuckles again; I bite my bottom lip in similar fashion.

"Okay then tell me, why are you always awake at night?" I ask him, my desire to know him bigger than before. "The truth is, I've been so curious about this; there is

not a single day that I found you asleep in times I couldn't sleep myself. It makes me wonder why."

Staring at me with a faint smile, almost sad, Liam takes a deep sigh. "I'm still adjusting to the time zone, I guess," he says calmly. I don't think I'm buying it, and he discerns right away. Hence he explains, "I've been travelling a lot, so now that I've decided to rest a bit I find it difficult to adjust with time and schedules. Sometimes I need to wake up at night to make international calls and things like that."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." He nods. "Is this worthy enough to have an exchange?"

"I guess." I shrug, my lips stretch into a soft smile.

"You guess?" Liam laughs loudly, and I could pluck a star just to hear his melodious laughter.

"Yeah, maybe I'm going to be generous as well." I surely wish this moment never end. It's as if I can talk to him the whole evening if I could.

"Okay, tell me," he urges while clutching his abandoned cup of coffee.

Frankly, I think he's not lying; although I feel like it's not the entire truth that he's adjusting to the time zone and other gibberish. Sometimes I look at him, and it's like there's a broken part inside of him that really calls for my curiosity.

I should probably stop playing the psychic.

"My reason is simple," I start with a melancholic sigh, my eyes on the scribbled letters engraved on the mug. 'HOME' is what's written in bold red. "I can't get a good sleep at night . . . I just can't, and it's been that way for so long. I'm used to it, I think. Sometimes it gets severe that I have to resolve into sleeping pills, but otherwise it's a part of my life and I've come to terms with it." I lift my eyes up at him.

Liam looks at me blankly with his luminous eyes. As always, I can't tell what he's thinking at all. But to my surprise he only tells me, "I understand."

"You do?" My eyes widen, my voice husky.

"Yes, I do." Liam smiles tenderly, and without another word he drinks his coffee.

Damn, this man! It's as if he understands me more than he should, and I strangely don't mind at all. I take a deep breath as Liam's gaze heads forward, facing the window in front of us.

"Don't you think drinking coffee is a bad idea, though?" I ask after a pause of easy silence. I only want to keep hearing his voice.

"I know it is," Liam replies coolly, "but I can't help it." He glances at me, and we both chuckle.

We stay wordless, watching nothing but the darkness in the backyard through the window. It's so peaceful.

"Have you spoken to your mother?" I break the silence once again, glancing up at Liam.

"I did, a while ago," he answers. "She sends her regards."

"I really miss her. When is she coming back?"

"In two days, I suppose."

"I see," I mutter casually, followed by another sip of my coffee. "And . . . Malik? Will he be back soon?" I think I'm missing him already.

Liam's eyes darken slightly at the question. Wait, did I say something wrong? I blink, unsure of his sudden shift of demeanor.

"I don't know," regardless, Liam answers crisply, and I squint my eyes. "Didn't he tell you about that?" he asks without looking at me, which is quite a drastic turn. I even detect sarcasm in his tone of voice. Oh boy.

"No, he didn't," I reply carefully.

Singing, Liam finally looks at me. "I thought you two became closer enough to tell each other such details, was I wrong?"

Why does he sound like my husband accusing me of adultery?

"Yes, and no, at least we haven't reached that part yet," I say. "Does it bother you?"

Dang it! I'm really searching for trouble.

"You should go back to your room, it's getting late," Liam tells me casually, ignoring my query.

I hate when he does this.

"What? But I'm not finished with my coffee yet and—"

"Then do it when you're done. Goodnight, Ms. Jones," he practically snaps at me before putting his mug in the sink. He grabs his laptop, and leaves without eyeing back.

What the heck! I can't believe he's so childish. Or could it be that he's jealous of his best friend? An apprehension makes me frantic . . . delirious even, of the possible reason behind his reaction.

"Are you jealous?" I shout enough for him to hear, and he halts by the door.

What have I done?

Swallowing hard, I watch Liam taking his steps back gaily, and finally stand before me. Oh God! The masquerade on his face refuses letting on whatever's on his mind, and I'm dying to hear something . . . anything.

"Ms. Jones, I swear you're something else." Liam smiles, and then laughs as though there's something funny in my face.

"Why are you laughing," I breathe. My grip is tight around the mug, prelibation filled in my eyes.

"You're clumsy," Liam says while getting even closer.

"Clumsy? How—" I pause when he leans to my face, making my breath slow its pace as he holds my face.

What is he doing?

"No, you're like a baby," he says, his thumb wiping the corner of my mouth, and my eyes are on his lips that are so near mine. "You've got cream on your lips; only kids do this." His lips curl into a gentle smile.

Oh! "I . . . I didn't notice," I say softly, my blood thrumming vehemently at the sudden shift of my body temperature. Am I getting hot?

"And yet you can notice that I'm jealous?" Liam mocks . . . both his eyes and voice do.

"Well, you--you just lashed at me without any reason." I can feel the quiver of my lips, trembling in a strange design.

"I did?" Liam utters, faking the sleazy surprise on his face. It's so beautiful when he acts comic. His face hardens all of sudden as he adds, "Yes, I am jealous. It makes me mad when you smile too bright at another man."

Oh God, I need an urgent help! Somebody please call 911

"Huh?" I gulp, wide-eyed, and he laughs delightedly.

What the heck?

"Is that what you wanted to hear, Ms. Jones?" His is voice is beguiling, much to my dismay.

Damn it! Was he not serious? "No, I—"

"Make sure you sleep early, you look tired," Liam interrupts, sounding genuinely worried. I stay stupefied, dumbstruck. "Goodnight." Smiling with triumph over my disappointment, he breezes through the door, leaving me all puzzled.

"What—" I watch after him with a baffled look. "What did he just say?" I burst into a ridiculous laughter, feeling my cheeks all hot and burning.

Is he playing with me? Testing my crazed feelings? Why is he doing this? I huff, completely defeated. Why is it exciting, though, despite the odds? I laugh again, stupidly.

However, when Dr. Snape's last words repeat in my head I quickly wipe off my laughter.

What is it that you're feeling for him, Kira?

"I don't know, and I don't care!" I blurt out, a sudden panic engulfing me. Why should I beat myself up over this, huh? No, I'd rather go in my room and sleep.

It's exactly what I do after finishing the coffee.

The annoying vibration manages to wake me up some time later. It's my damn phone. In comprehension that it's still dark, I grab it from the bedside table without a bother to move myself from the warm covers.

Calling at night should be illegal! I growl inside as I struggle to keep myself awake. My eyes squint at the light beaming on the screen. Ugh! I lazily pick up the call from whomever.

"Hello?" My face wrinkle at this act of utter disturbance.

"Good morning, little professor," a male voice utters merrily.

Wait! I know this voice. I sit up immediately.

"Um . . ." My eyes flash open as peek at the screen; it's a foreign number and I can bet a hundred bucks that it's Malik.

"Hey, Kira, are you there?" he asks, and confirm my guess.

"Malik? How did you—" I try to ask him but I'm too flabbergasted to even finish my question.

"Get your number?" Malik finishes for me. "Hey, Professor, have you forgotten that you personally gave it to me?" He is laughing.

Did I? I consult my memory box.

"When? I don't remember doing such a thing, Malik!" I shift into a more comfortable posture, my back onto the pair of pillows.

He's obviously playing tricks with my memory, which thus far has been serving me fairly well.

"At the wedding. You don't remember?" he asks, and I try my best to recall.
"Professor, maybe you should stop drinking for good now."

"No?" Honestly I don't remember, and it's quite rare for me to black out my memory, if never at all.

"Oh, Professor!" Malik laughs even more, and I nearly roll my eyes.

"Alright, let's say I did. Now what do you want, Malik? I guess you understand what time it is, and how important sleeping is, at least for a normal human." I rub my eyes, yawning.

"Well, yeah, and forgive me for this little disturbance," Malik says softly. "I can't reach Liam and I'd very much appreciate if you'd tell him to immediately check his emails, if possible," he urges and for a moment I grasp a hint of seriousness in the tone of his voice.

"Who, me?" I feel alarmed.

"Yes, Professor. You're the only one who can help."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now," he says. "Can you do it, please? It's very important. He usually leaves his phone on, but I wonder what happened today."

What's so important that can't wait till morning?

I sigh heavily and answer, "Okay, let me go and check him." Like seriously, why do I have to meet him in the middle of the night? I just sigh.

CHAPTER 14

It's almost three a.m. I slowly exit my room, coming across the silent hall with a dim light. Breathing softly, I head a few steps towards Liam's door that's just next to mine and opposite to Sam's, and here is my destination.

It's now that I notice the magnitude of this favor I've been asked. I must face Mr. Intense so late in the midnight, and in my pajamas. I'm not sure of how I look, and I don't understand why I'm even concerned of it.

Oh, really now? Apparently my subconscious seems amused by this, rolling her big brown eyes.

I reach for Liam's door, tentatively, as though afraid to make a slight sound. Sighing, my courage pulled in, I knock about four times and stay still, waiting. I keep my little patience intact, but my tummy is already in a thousand knots.

Just open the door, Mr. Darcy, and let's get it over with. I sigh again, unable to keep calm.

A moment goes by until I hear the doorknob screeching. My heart races at the tik-tok as the door swings ajar thereafter, and Liam pops out.

Startled, my eyes rest on a fit and shirtless body. Holy cow! Blue pajama pants hang by its sculptured waist, exposing the inviting lines of his body.

God, help me. I gulp.

"Ms. Jones?" Liam utters, looking surprised by this utterly unexpected visit. It's only natural. His just-woke-up face forms a furrow as he scrutinizes me in astonishment.

Holy Mother of God! Why is my heart racing rapidly? It's just Liam, right?

Still surprised of my presence, Liam's eyes glide from my head to toes, and I'm glad I'm wearing my most decent nighties.

"Um, I just—" I pause, clearing my throat. Where is my voice? I'm suddenly flustered.

"What?" Liam frowns, which shows that he doesn't understand a word I'm saying.

Good riddance my sanity!

I sigh heavily and get a grip. "I'm sorry for disturbing your sleep, Malik asked me to tell you that you should check your emails or something; he said he couldn't reach you," I finally tell him.

Was it so hard?

With great troubles, I make an eye contact with Liam and swallow a lump. I think it's much easier than staring at his naked chest. How could a man be this distracting really?

"Malik called you?" at last Liam responds, but his voice sounds odd.

And I can't believe that's the only thing he's caught from my long speech.

"Yeah, it's what I just told you," I retort.

"Okay," he says gently.

"Well then, have a goodnight." I decide to end it and quickly move my legs back to my room. I don't even dare to look back, yet I can feel Liam's gaze stalking my behind until I'm out of sight.

Once I'm back in my hideout, I lean against the door to catch my breath. My face is literary on fire that I could fry an egg. I exhale audibly while transforming my palms into a fan.

Is it really hot or just me and my burning hormones? I can't let go of Liam's image no matter how hard I shake my mind off. It's quite lewd of me to covet a man like this.

I seriously need a boyfriend.

I decide to kill some minutes in the balcony, browsing my phone. My Instagram has been inactive for a month now; maybe it's time to make some feeds. Unhurriedly, I start uploading a few pictures I've taken during my Montana excursions.

I smile at the memory when I come across the photo sent by Sam, the four of us at the wedding, standing by the red limousine. My fingers find Liam immediately and a little zoom takes place. I've lost it, I know.

Liam's sight makes me giggle out of the blue. I'm sure it took Liam a lot of energy making a smile. Oh, Mr. Intense.

Nevertheless, he looks awfully handsome that I end up biting my lip, allured. Cool air, coupled with a familiar voice that I know by heart, is what awakes me from my trance.

I turn to the neighbor balcony and find Liam on the phone. The weak light coming from his room enables me to see him well enough. Lucky me. He's at least wearing a T-shirt at present, and seems to have already noticed my presence.

This night keeps getting crazier.

Although I can't hear the conversation he is having, I'm positive he is talking to Malik . . . or anyone else about business. He's immersed into the call, but his eyes are fixed on me.

Right now I'd really love to know what he thinks of me whenever he gives me such looks, for it's hard to feel perfectly indifferent about it, and I know I shouldn't let it affect me.

With utmost discretion, I steal another glance to the side, but to my disgrace Liam is no longer to be seen. What a shame. He's even turned out the light to his room which makes it complete dark.

I'm strangely disappointed.

I just shut the window, ready to try getting some sleep. In need to turn off the light, I walk for its switch that's pretty close to the door. Surprising, the door swings open, and my heart is almost on the floor when Liam walks inside my room without any notice.

"I'm not sure if I should commend you for not locking your door or not, Ms. Jones," Liam tells me in hoarse voice. I'm too distraught to even think straight as I watch him locking the door behind him.

"You?" I croak. We're standing one or two steps apart and my legs are numb to make a slight move. What is he doing here? My head seems to have a number of questions.

Liam seems quite poised for someone who's just invaded a neighbor's bedroom, unannounced. He scans my room briefly, and returns his gaze back to me thitherto. Boy, it's like the storm in the sea.

Good Lord!

"I'm sorry, I couldn't knock since it was already open," he says.

Oh! "And you just had to barge in?" I hurry up to make sure the door is indeed locked.

"I felt the urge to be here, with you, and that's why I'm here," Liam replies.

"Huh?"

"I think I'm out of my mind, Ms. Jones," he mutters, moving closer to where I'm standing, and my mind goes ablaze.

Why is he such a temptation and I such an easy target? Damn!

"You shouldn't—" I'm suddenly pinned by the wall. "What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Something I've been dying to do." His confidence puts me in awe. I yield by the wall, panting, needy . . . just not in my normal composure.

He doesn't do a thing, however, he just stares at me while breathing soundly, beguiling me. My insides churn at the sight of him, undressing him with my eyes. My perverted mind.

I'm not sure how but I deftly grab Liam's neck and attack his soft lips ferociously just as his gestures suggest. I want him, all of him, and I'm I can't hold it.

Enthralled, Liam kisses me back and his hand travels underneath my top, caressing my skin with his trailing fingers from the waist to my neck, exploring the delicate contours of my body.

Holy Fuck! I'm so intoxicated into this man, and he knows I do. Damn! I feel breathless, heavenly, something out of this world.

We halt for a second, staring each other in the eyes with insatiable desire. Even without talking, we both understand of our mutual need. He wants me and I want him as much; he easily ignites the fire in me and I can tell I've got the same effect on him.

That devil subconscious of mine is currently wearing her red prada, ready to party.

Liam slowly reaches for the switch that's just an inch above me, and flicks it off, leaving us with just the bedside lamp. He trails his thumb on my lips, arousing me softly, and I rasp at the intensity of his ogling gaze.

"What're you waiting for?" I shoot, and his cynic smile urges me to go on with my endeavor.

Liam's hands reach the insides of my top, caressing my back while igniting the fire in my body. My fingers dig into his hair, and our lips keep mingling coherently. I arch my back to steady my stance, and he deepens his kiss.

Oh boy! This is bliss.

I'm slightly nervous about this, but my fear is far from surpassing my desire. I'm seriously craving for a piece of him. No, all of him, and it's an intense urge I've never felt before. Only Liam Darcy can do this to me, I easily conclude.

"Tell me, Ms. Jones, why are you always trying to provoke me?" he asks softly, seducing me with his warm breath against my skin.

"I'm not provoking you, Mr. Darcy," I hardly reply as I'm drenched with the mere sound of his sexy voice.

He's the beginning of my end.

Breathing out of order, I quickly tug Liam's T-shirt over his head and throw it away. My eyes rest on his bare upper body and that subconscious of mine goes on hiding. I'm in charge.

"You're looking for trouble," Liam utters, smiling devilishly, and my fingers trail the toned abs of his tight stomach. He flexes, but stays put any way, letting my suddenly incorrigible hand follow my craziness.

"I'm already in trouble. You're delicious." I smile back, which unleashes my beast that drags the beauty in me into the depth of insanity. I think I've already lost my mind and reasoning.

"And so are you," Liam breathes kissing my neck swiftly, the touch of his lips both soft and vehement.

Good Lord! Is that even a thing?

Lying down, filled with anticipation, Liam continues torturing me sweetly, and I release soft moans at each step he takes. It all goes well, until he suddenly pulls out, making me all startled.

I'm not sure what's going on, but the magic is over, and I'm as pissed as the void blanketing my demanding body. Liam sits on the bed, panting softly, his eyes directed towards me.

Does he find me unattractive? I ponder, and deep down I hear the voice saying 'Yes, Kira, you're just an amateur'.

"Why did you stop?" I demand, irritated. Liam holds his tongue, staring undecided at me, bemused somehow. "Never mind." I drop off the bed, ready to storm out.

In the kitchen, outside . . . Anywhere but here.

My face crunches and the devil in me stumble on her gladiator heels, utterly disappointed.

"Don't go." Liam hugs me from behind, and I close my eyes at this feeling of rejection. Is it? "I know what you're feeling, and trust me, I feel it twice as much," he says calmly, making me turn around to face him.

"Then why are you doing this?" I lament stupidly, his nose nuzzling of my hair. He doesn't leave my back. "Why?" I repeat.

"Because I don't want you to regret when you wake up later," Liam replies with no reluctance. "I'm sure that's exactly what will happen," he insists, and I swerve my body to look at him.

"What do you mean?" I breathe, confused at this allegation.

Liam's hands drop about my waist as he sighs. "You're not even sure of yourself, are you?" he questions, and I gulp.

He's right, I guess.

"So then—" I stammer, not knowing what to quip. *I mean, so it's the end of it?* I shift my gaze away from Liam, mindfully, but he pulls it back with the palms of his hands.

"I want to make love to you," he says tenderly, "when you're absolutely sure about it. I don't want this to be only physical." His eyes are the most sincere ones I've ever seen in a man.

My heart skips a beat, my emotions shooting randomly out of range, and grand felicity pools in my heart, even though my face refuses to fully cooperate.

"Is that the only reason or you're just not attracted to me?" I utter, provoking him somehow.

Smiling softly, Liam says, "I'd be gay if I'm not attracted to you, Ms. Jones. Would you like to prove it?"

Jeez! I chuckle lightly.

"How?" I ask, and the next thing I feel is my hand touching something of his that makes me giggle stupidly. "Will you be fine?" I press my lips into a thin line, amused, and he sighs heavily.

Liam joins in with laughter of his own. "But we can fix this if we come clean and tell everyone, especially your friend that according to you--"

"I can't do that," I say briskly. "I can't tell Sam that I'm involved with you as if it's something so simple." I panic, my worst nightmare back hunting me.

Why am I so scared of the outcome? Why do I feel like when that time comes I'll have to choose between the two? I seriously sink into dismay.

"Time to sleep," Liam snaps, interrupting my thoughts.

"Eh?"

"It's almost four in the morning, so back to bed, Ms. Jones, and right now," he orders, and I chuckle like a kid.

"Are you serious?" My disquietude dies quite easily, and in a whiff my smile reappears.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Liam prompts, and still I can't stop smiling. "Unless you want us to fly away from here." A salacious smile crosses his lips as he hauls me closer, more intimate.

"Right now?" My eyes widen like a fool, for I can't tell if he's serious or not.

"I can take you wherever, Ms. Jones." Liam's voice comes out exciting as he says this. My heart melts. "Do you want us to disappear right now?" His grip tightens around me, his breath erratic in my ear.

"Yes," I blurt my thoughts out. *What? Are you crazy?* My subconscious snarls, back from her hideout. "I mean, no! Are you crazy?" I quickly retract.

Liam bursts out laughing, entertained indecisiveness. "You're so cute," he mutters, pulling back so that he clearly sees me in the eyes.

No, I'm out of my mind.

"Okay, I'll go back to bed," I tell him with utter reluctance.

He nods. "Good."

"Crazy." I hop back in bed with my grand disappointment, but I lighten up fast when I see Liam doing the same.

Oh, we're sleeping together?

"Yes, Ms. Jones, I'm sleeping with you," Liam murmurs.

CHAPTER 15

Liam lies down by my side and covers us both with the duvet. I dare not question him, for I don't want him to alter his mind. I ultimately love this gesture, my subconscious nodding in agreement.

"Lights off, please." Liam points at the bedside lamp.

"Okay." I hurry to comply, stupidly indulged into this new bliss. Okay or not, just this once I'm refusing to think of anything else but this moment.

Liam holds me gently and I feel his warmth that makes me smile sheepishly. So this is what it feels like to have someone by your side, huh? What a feel!

"I said to sleep, Ms. Jones," Liam urges, dissolving me from my sweet reverie.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy," I reply with rolled-eyes.

How grumpy can he get?

I don't mind, however, I just can't help but wonder about his personality at times. We stay in silence, and I can't say I'm sleepy at all.

This is so new to me.

"Your body feels warm," I think out loud, some minutes later, hoping he's fast asleep.

But hell no.

"And so does yours," he answers, his voice hoarse and soothing. He plants a brisk kiss on top of my head. "You're perfect," he adds.

"Oh my." I bite my lip, my heart fluttered.

Silence stretches between us in a fleeting moment.

"It may sound very pathetic," Liam starts, making me frown attentively, "what I'm about to ask you." He glances down at me through the pair of his blue orbs piercing through the darkness.

"Um, why don't you go ahead and be pathetic a little?" I remark, and a little laugh from him draws my lips into a sweet smile. "I mean, it's human to be pathetic sometimes so go on and ask me."

Oh, my curiosity knows no bounds.

Liam chuckles lightly. "You're something else, Ms. Jones," he says with a sigh. My smile broadens. "Well, do you have a boyfriend?" he finally asks, and I nearly laugh aloud.

Seriously, Mr. Darcy?

"If I had one," I answer haltingly while rolling myself so that I face him, "I wouldn't be in your arms right now because I don't believe I'm that type of a woman."

Despite all my other flaws and sort of betrayals, I mutter inwardly. I can almost picture that rare smile on his face.

"Neither am I that type of a man," he gives me this little remark that takes my breath away.

"What type of a man are you, Mr. Darcy? Can you tell me?" I ask after a short pause, running my fingers smoothly on his perfect chest.

Man, he's the modern Zeus.

"I'm a little complicated of a man," he says in a low tone of voice, his one hand toying with my curls, gliding gently with his strong, manly fingers. "But very direct, and I always know what I want."

That's so evident, darling.

"Is that some kind of a message for me?" I ask casually, playful even.

"It is," he answers.

"So, you want me?"

"I need you."

"Oh." My heart back-flips. "How?"

"It just feels right."

"Oh . . . God."

"Are you gasping right now?" he asks in a giggle, and I bury my face on the chest of his, laughing.

"No, I'm enjoying the moment," I say frankly. Smiling, he tightens his embrace and it's ethereal.

Another silence follows, feeling each other's breath. Could anything else feel this good? Well . . . maybe. There is still a lot to discover.

"What are you thinking of?" Liam croaks his voice a bit groggy, sexy, unleashing unbidden desires from my cooled body. "Because you think a lot, Ms. Jones."

"Maybe something weird," I confess.

"Weird? How weird?"

"Utterly weird, but not really weird."

"Now you are weird." He laughs a bit, and I do the same, just momentarily.

"It's crazy how you meet someone new, someone you totally know nothing about, and yet you feel like you know everything about them. You feel connected to them as though you're a part of them," I say in a smooth whisper, feeling Liam's heart beating softly against his chest.

Am I even making sense? Well, it's how I feel anyway.

"What if you are the other half of them?" Liam asks, lifting his head to meet my face. He then smiles at my befuddled look. "They say nothing happens by chance, don't they?"

I know, but . . . well, I don't know.

"Listen," I breathe, trying to prove my point. "I'm talking about something serious, I'm not kidding."

"Oh? Wait, do you feel that way about someone?" He looks bemused, or amused, I can't tell. "Who is it?"

"You," I answer.

"Me?"

"Us. Being with you feels like déjà vu."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." I smile, for I'm afraid he may start thinking I'm crazy. "Can we kiss, Mr. Darcy." I change the topic, teasing him.

"Ms. Jones," Liam utters calmly after a blink. "If we go on that road I may lose my gentleman title."

"Your what?" I laugh hard, utterly entranced by his dry humor. He laughs along, looking at ease. "Just a goodnight kiss, please." My voice is imploring, and so is my sex goddess, who's currently feeling shortchanged.

Liam sighs heavily. I purse my lips. Does he find it that hard? Or playing hard to get?

"I can try to make an exception," he says with a big smile filled with mischief. Man!

"You're so full of yourself," I mutter.

"I guess I am. But believe me, I never intend it to be that way," Liam enunciates, and it kind of makes me feel bad from the way he lets it out. "It's quite easy for someone to misjudge the one they don't really know, so I've come to accept it as my flaw."

Oh no.

"I've never really thought you that way," I tell him truthfully.

He's complex, yes, but it never occurred to me that he's obnoxious or anything similar.

"Maybe I felt you'd understand me," Liam interrupts my thoughts, "from the very first time I saw you."

"Huh?"

"Let's have that goodnight kiss and sleep now, Ms. Jones." He now changes the music. "And I promise you are going to sleep well tonight."

"Oh, yeah?" I chuckle with much delight, wishing every night would be like this. What a dream. "What a confidence you have, huh?" I add, neglecting my wishful wish.

"I can feel it."

"Good, come here." I crash his peach lips like I've never tasted them before, kissing him like tomorrow may not come.

Sun rays pierce viciously through the window, making my eyes squint despite my lazy slumber. Is it morning already? I frown begrudgingly, coming to terms with the reality.

I can feel, from somewhere deep in my imagination, that someone is stretching the window curtains apart. Is it Liam? Wait, Liam? A sudden apprehension snaps me.

I slept with him, didn't I?

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead!" Sam's voice regards me. I turn fully awake in an instant, my head mindful of last night.

"Sam?" I utter, shocked to see her, my gaze scanning the room for something only God, Myself, and I know.

Yes, I indeed slept with Liam. I wonder when he left my room.

"What did you do last night, Kiki?" Sam asks me as she scurries over. My eyes widen at her detective look, suspicion painted all over her face.

Panic swallows my demeanor, my heart pounding heavily.

"What do you mean?" I utter, staring firmly at her. Does she know something? It suddenly jumps in my mind.

Casually, Sam sits down next to me. "I mean, how on Earth did you oversleep? Do you know it's almost twelve in the afternoon? I've never seen you sleep like this. Are you okay?" She touches my forehead.

A soft sigh of relief escapes my lungs at the sound of her words.

"Of course I'm okay." I remove her hand and quickly get myself away from the bed. "I just slept well, I guess, because I was kind of tired." I slip my feet breezily into slippers so I jog to the bathroom.

"Really? Well, that's good," Sam answers with a sigh. She makes herself more comfortable on the bed and I'm way more relieved that she decides to drop it.

"Is everything okay?" I ask her as I dart inside the bathroom.

"Yeah. I ate too much that I can't even breathe properly. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Not really, I'm not hungry," I reply from inside the bathroom, sucking in a deep breath.

What was I thinking? Is the only question in my head.

Staring myself in the mirror, my reflection kind of disgusts me. I'm suddenly feeling guilty from all the treacherous things I keep doing in the dark, behind closed door.

I'm such a traitor, backstabber, and I wonder how to stop.

"I've made up my mind, Kira," Sam shouts enough to give me a startle. "I'm going to tell Liam everything today." Her voice echoes just behind the bathroom door, and my heart jumps a rope.

Again with that? I feel more awful. She sounds pretty much excited, however, and what I see for myself in the mirror isn't what to call bliss.

"Really? That's good," I hardly utter the words.

Sam goes on telling me about her plans for the day, and it seems like she's so determined to finally ask Liam out. I'm positive she's more than capable of doing so.

"Do you think he'll reject me?" she asks casually. I swallow hard, not knowing what to say. What can I possibly say? Her laughter plucks me from the trance of horror. "Oh, I guess I shouldn't ask my little nerdy about this stuff, right?" she adds upon my silence.

A nervous smile stretches on my lips a bit. "You're right, what do I know?" I remark.

"Well, I'll see what happens," she says with another sigh, a sound one. "But honestly, do you think I have a chance with him?" Her hopeful gaze is heart-aching for me.

"Um—" I end up clearing my throat, unsure how to respond, yet again. This is a pure, undiluted torture. "Maybe you do, and maybe you don't."

Why can't you just tell her? My subconscious rumbles inside.

"What does that mean?" Sam huffs incredulously, pitching me a not-so-pleased look.

"I mean, you should be prepared for anything." I shrug, guising my true thoughts. "From what I've learned, Liam is kind of unpredictable; he's not like average guys who clearly show their likes and desires openly," I just blurt out whatever comes to mind.

"Meaning?" Sam sits more comfortably, her brows crunched.

"I mean, you shouldn't hope too much, in case things don't work out as you want them to. If he had same feelings, he'd made it clear to you, no?" I say.

Sam gives me an intense scrutiny. My breath hitches. "This is strange," she utters.

"What is?"

"You . . . Acting all pessimistic."

"Well, you wanted my honest opinion, right?" I query. She nods, looking undecided. "There, I think you should be ready for anything so that you won't be too disappointed in case things fall apart."

Sam sighs heavily, before saying, "I guess you're right."

I only hope this ends well. I'd love to tell her the truth but damn my guts! How do I even start?

Will she understand? This is the worst situation I've ever been as far as our friendship is concerned.

Between talking and laughing casually, Sam stays with me while I fix my bed, and offers to bring me breakfast once again, which I refuse. I don't feel like eating a

thing at the moment. At last she leaves me alone, and I take the most of this privacy to think things through.

The short moment I shared with Liam has become very special to me; I felt happy, and mostly very alive. It's something inexplicably sweet, and I've never felt it before. Moreover, it's amazing I slept peacefully by his side. It is something science has failed to accomplish so far. Sighing, I hug myself while sitting on the couch, facing outside through the window.

How do I solve this situation? And that . . . without hurting anyone. Can I face my best friend and tell her everything? I decide to put this matter pending and take a shower.

Perhaps I'll regain my sanity afterwards.

I feel lively after a shower. My idleness and disquietude urge me to take a short walk around the ranch as there's nothing else to do. Sam has been on a phone call for eternity with her buddies . . . and I can't stay still.

My feet wander aimlessly in the garden, feeling the soft summer breeze regaling my face. And Liam pops in my head, quite uncalled for. I didn't get to see him since last night and I gather it's best this way.

I lazily pace alongside the fence, which leads me to the barn where I find Julian tending the horses. Succeeding my stop, I dive under the fence and Julian regards me with a startled look.

"You're not talking to them?" I tease him.

"Ms. Kira?" Julian looks startled. I break into a chuckle at his instant frown at the sight of me. "Talking to the horses?" He glares at me.

"Yeah. I thought you're good at talking to them as well." I move closer.

"Are you angry because I told Sir Liam that you went to the woods by yourself?" He looks a bit remorseful, and I squint at the sight. What is he talking about? "Well, I've never seen a girl taking that path so easily; so I was—"

"Wait," I interrupt. "So Liam went to look for me because you told him I walked through the woods?" I ask in what sounds like a grand hunger for information.

What a lost cause! my subconscious murmurs with the I-knew-it tone of voice, shaking her head with a sigh. And do I even care? Not really.

"Yes, that's what I said," Julian snorts. "He was very mad at me, so don't add to it."

I smile indulgently, my heart appeased. "No, I'm not mad at you."

"Oh, thank heavens!" The young man sighs with relief, and my eyes narrow in wonder. *Did something good happen to him overnight?* "Are you his girlfriend?" he suddenly asks while pumping something with whatever he's holding, disrupting my trance.

"What?" My eyes widen.

"His girlfriend, are you?"

"Um, no."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," I respond with a smile. "Doesn't he have a girlfriend?"

"No," he answers.

"Oh." I can't stop myself from grinning ridiculously. What a fool, though! I know, Liam told me so last night, but confirming about it doesn't seem like a grave sin, does it?

"I know you and your friend with weird hair want to be his girlfriend," Julian utters with a smirk.

"Wh--what?" I gasp, feeling extremely taken aback.

This kid!

"Wait." He peeks inside the barn, and I notice two men coming our way.

Peter and Liam, to be very precise.

Why is it so hard to avoid this man?

"I see. Have a nice day, Julian," I whisper, ready to leave, but I think it's too late for me to do that.

"Why don't you help us, since you're already here, Ms. Jones?" Liam asks me aloud.

Huh? Somebody pinch me.

"Well—“ I stutter, and he raises an eyebrow at me, amused. Damn him! "How can I help?" I boldly ask.

"What else is to be done here, Peter?" with a smile, Liam asks Peter who looks a bit startled.

"Um, not much, boss. Julian and I can finish it all," Peter answers reverently.

"Good. You two can go ahead and do something else," Liam says, ignoring Peter's plea. "Ms. Jones and I will finish the painting," he adds while eyeing me intensively, mocking me.

CHAPTER 16

I'm flabbergasted by Liam's proposition. He could just pin me by the wall and do whatever he wants . . . but painting? Was I an enemy of the state in my previous life? I just scoff, staring at him stupefied.

"You really want me to paint?" Like a fool I try ascertaining.

"Can you not?" Liam prompt. I'm sure he's challenging me considering the sight of his mocking eyes. "Tell me, Ms. Jones, can you not?" He smiles with pure provocation.

Damn him!

"Of course I can. How hard can it be?" I retort proudly, so sure of myself. My subconscious scowls as it's quite apparent that I know next to nothing about painting. Well, there is first time in everything.

Liam smiles brightly, and looks utterly breathtaking in his blue plaid shirt and some black washed bout jeans. And I think I love his cowboy look; it has its charms.

Hesitantly, Peter hands me the painting brush he's been holding. "Are you sure about this, Ms. Kira?" he asks me kindly . . . almost sorry.

"Don't worry, Peter, I've got this." My gaze refuses leaving Liam's blue eyes that shine bright like the sky above us.

"You can leave us now. Just do not forget to pick the things I asked you for," Liam tells Peter instructively.

"Yes, sir," Peter replies with a nod. In a few minutes he and Julian disappear, leaving Liam and I alone.

"Are you ready, Ms. Jones?" He now looks aesthetically pleased having me under his leash. There's no escape now, is there?

"I was born ready, Mr. Darcy!" I snort with confidence, ready to face his challenge. "Let's do it." I lead the way towards the barn.

"With pleasure," Liam murmurs, and his steps follow me suit.

The barn looks bigger on the inside. The only thing inside are the haystacks in the middle, just a few, the cans of painting color, and the ladder. The smell of fresh paint wafts my nose as we walk in. Half of the barn is done already, leaving only a small part. Thank God.

"It's done like this." Liam gives me a very close demonstration after a short while, standing right next to me.

"Like this?" I follow his move, grazing the drenched brush on the surface of the rough wood.

Liam nods his smooth assent, but holds my hand and leads my moves. Oh boy!

How do I concentrate like this? His chest behind my back, body to body . . . the feel is so alluring for my poor heart. I clear my throat, trying hard to find my focus.

"Now you can do it, right?" Liam asks, and his deep voice is nothing but a torture.

"Mhh," I hum gently, and he moves slowly out of my back. A deep sigh finds its way out of my lungs. "Why do you paint the inside?" I start painting on my own, Liam doing the same.

"Just to seal the wood, and avoid the fungi when it gets humid," he answers.

"I see," I utter.

I'm starting to regret. I mean, maybe I underestimated this a little; it's certainly not as easy as it seems when someone else does it. Bead of sweat form on my forehead and it's been less than thirty minutes. Liam seems very experienced that I'm so amazed, yet I can't feel my arms.

Also, I wonder why he is doing this anyway. Evidently it's so easy for someone like him to leave the job to his workers, yet he's been personally fixing and painting the barn with Peter since morning.

I halt a bit, to wipe my forehead with the back of my hand, while staring at Liam with no discretion. He's fast, yet calm . . . and even stoic as he makes his moves. I'm drooling over him, and he quickly notices.

He huffs a small laugh at my expense, and I'm sure he's making fun of my flawed-skills. Either way, I refuse to back off, so I take a deep breath, and keep the task going.

"Giving up already?" He beams, making a short pause to snatch something from the jeans of his pocket.

"Me? Never!" I retort.

Smiling, Liam says, "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot that I used it." He's referring at the handkerchief he's holding. "You can step out and get some fresh air," he suggests.

"No, it's okay. I just can't reach farther than this," I reply with my best excuse of my height.

Without saying more, Liam pulls me the adjustable ladder.

"You can use this." He sweetly, but sardonically, offers me.

"Thank you very much," I utter between my gritted teeth.

Can't he just understand the lady's language? No can mean a yes, and vice versa is true. He smiles wittingly, and I know he understands my scheme.

He just enjoys the sight of my pretense.

"Do you realize physical activities can cure insomnia?" he says, making my eyes roll.

"Really?" I grab that very same handkerchief from the back pocket of his jeans and wipe my face off. Hmm, the smell of his skin, cologne, mixed with . . . sweat? I don't even care, for it's probably my favorite by now.

"Yes, they say it's only a condition for the rich," Liam says, ignoring my gesture after a fleeting surprise in his eyes.

Maybe he's right, but I wonder how much my bank account reads to place myself into the rich people category. But well, he's not far from the truth. I kind of sleep soundly whenever I overwork myself with the physical activities than the mental one.

"Then I hope I'll sleep very well tonight." My tone is full of sarcasm as I say this.

"I'm sure you will." Liam chuckles.

Mr. Intense chuckling? Such a rare scene. Speaking of sleeping, I begin to wonder when he left my room this morning.

"Did you sleep well last night?" I try to pry.

He takes his time responding, eyes on the painting he's doing. "Not as much as you did, but it was memorable," he says, and I blush. The guy has a way with words.

"Although it was a bit had not being able to—" He clears his throat, glancing at me with a blush.

"Do what?" I encourage him to go on.

"I was about to use some vulgar language," he says with a sigh, and I almost burst into a laughter. What a classic dude! "But I've realized it's improper to say such a thing to you."

My God! Did he time-travel from Victorian era or something? I laugh at last.

"I don't think I'm such a fine lady that I'd mind hearing you speaking vulgarly," I utter with a feigned innocence, my wildest side unraveling itself.

Liam laughs aloud, seemingly amused by the minutes. "Your ways of digging for information surely fascinates me, Ms. Jones." He glances down at me with a smiley face.

"I still want to hear it, and I quite appreciate the remark." I try to weaver my gaze from his by clutching the brush properly.

"Very well," Liam says, sighing as though he's about to disclose his most embarrassing secret. I stay attentive, my focus back on him. "I had a very hard time last night."

Oh. "Why?" I urge.

He releases a soft smile. "Because all I could think of was how alluring your body looked," he says gently.

"Um—" I almost choke on my saliva or whatever. I think I've turned into a beetroot thinking of this little information.

"I wanted to fu—" Liam pauses as I suddenly trip and almost fall from the ladder. What the heck! Thanks to Liam's quick reflexes I'm caught right on time.

The thud in my heart multiplies, unsure if it's from the accident I almost had or from the pair of stormy eyes gliding between my lips and eyes. I gulp.

"Ms. Jones, are you always this clumsy?" he asks me in a low, hypnotizing voice, his smile mocking.

"I think only when Mr. Darcy is around," I whisper. My mind seems inactive, baffled into the sphere of his sexy, inviting lips.

Good Lord! Do I want to kiss him?

"You're always questing for trouble, aren't you?" he breathes. His eyes are currently gleaming lasciviously, same effect he has on me is pertained in him.

How lovely! The devil in me is enthralled.

"I guess trouble seems to love me more than I desire," I remark coolly, devouring his tight brace with our faces only an inch apart.

Liam smirks, and damn it's more of a provocation. My breath turns ragged, disturbing the perilous hormones. I wet my lips, and his start moving toward mine.

Oh boy!

He knows I want him, and I'm sure he feels the same. He's just too gentle to make a haste move. Without knowledge, I drop the painting brush on the floor which ends up breaking the spell.

What the fuck! I glare begrudgingly at the floor and the magic is over.

Totally over.

"You should take a rest, I'll finish this quick." Liam drops me to my feet instantly, a smile lingering in his face.

Is he making fun of me? I glower inside as he gets back to painting. I'm not taking this! I opt to ignore his protest, follow my instinct. I lunge towards him like a buffalo and take him with great surprise. He

"Or maybe we both could use a break." I spin him and my arms enwrap his neck. He tenses but does nothing to object. My lips crash hard onto his, my manners thrown down the drain.

Who are you? My subconscious gapes at me and I don't know the answer.

Fortunately Liam accepts me wholeheartedly, gripping the small of my back and tugs me onto him. He pants heavily, stirred, his body flexing to hold me perfectly. Boy, it feels unearthly.

Our tongues intertwine to the point that I start losing myself. I feel a foreign flutter in my flesh and body, some smoldering fire in similar color with sexual desires. If it's love or lust, I can't tell. I simply want more.

Still kissing me, his lips relentless, Liam leads me towards the hays, dry grasses crunch as we step on them. I couldn't care less, I'm already drowning.

I'm pinned against the barn wall, unpainted part, the hard wood against my back. It should hurt but it doesn't. I should feel scared, worried, or a bit hesitant to make out in such a place but strangely I don't.

Liam pins my hands above the head, his frame towering my height. I tip my neck aside, letting him kiss me more fiercely, demandingly. Oh, I love it.

His lips slide from my neck to my cleavages, swiftly, forcing a moan out of me. God! I rasp, the pleasure quite incessant, driving me insane. I writhe in his command, but he holds me still with his weight.

Fuck, I love this game!

"You drive me crazy, Ms. Jones," he breathes hoarsely, gracing me a glance. He looks intoxicated and I feel victorious.

"I didn't know," I tease panting wildly as his fingers caress my back, nakedly touching my skin underneath the fabric of my shirt.

"I really wanted to resist," he says under his breath while reclaiming my lips. I didn't ask you to, did I? "I tried my best."

"And who told you to resist, huh?" I utter coquettishly as I watch his emotionally wrecked face, full of desires; desires over me.

"So full of yourself, aren't you, Kira?" He laughs cynically, and I subtly gape.

Did he just call me by my first name? Kira? Not Ms. Jones?

"As much as I desire to be with you right now, I still won't touch you, Kira. Not in this place," he mutters while playing with my hair, staring deeply into my eyes.

I'm stuck between my needs and his statement. Of course he's not going to fuck me in the barn! Yeah, I saw it coming but why is my shameless self a bit disappointed?

Because you're officially a hoe? My subconscious mumbles.

"I know. But I still want to kiss you," I blurt out, nuzzling his stubble while clinging onto his neck. I look up at him, and his smile melts my heart.

Jeez, am I falling in love or what? It feels like a million stars by just being with him.

"And I want to kiss you more," he adds softly, taking my face in his palms. He suddenly takes a deep breath, a feel of overwhelm engulfing his face.

"What's wrong?" I whisper.

"How I want to take you far from here, right now," he articulates in a serious manner. I beam at him. "Would you—"

We suddenly hear a startling sound, cutting the moment. I think someone is approaching.

"Liam?" It's Sam's voice coming from right outside. "Liam, are you there?" she repeats again, louder this time.

Oh my God! I gasp inwardly.

My blood pressure drops when I hear Sam's voice getting closer and closer. A cold sweat flows down my temple. Liam is still holding me without making any move. He looks unperturbed, unlike me.

It's totally impossible to know when exactly he freaks out.

"It's Sam," I whisper in a very low voice. "What do we do?" I'm frantically trembling in his arms.

"We should just tell her. I told you so already, didn't I?" He smiles nonchalantly.

What the heck!

"Are you serious?" I query, half-annoyed. I'm looking at him\$ yet I can't believe he has the audacity to say such a thing.

He finally sighs out disappointedly. "I did not expect doing this at my age," he says, and I quirk a questioning eyebrow. "You're making me do the shittiest things, Kira."

"What?" I swear I could laugh aloud if it weren't for the moment. "You know . . . just go!" I push him forward, and he laughs soundlessly.

"I'll go talk to her. You'll probably need to take care of that first." He points at my chest in a playful manner, my two buttons undone.

"Hooligan," I murmur, smiling shyly.

What am I doing?

CHAPTER 17

"Oh, there you are," Sam's voice is laced with relief as she sees Liam emerging from the barn, I suppose. "What are you doing in there?" she asks.

I hold my breath while listening attentively to their exchange.

"I'm working," Liam replies as smoothly as the water sliding its fall. He's something else! "Is there any problem, Samantha?" I can easily imagine the small furrow on his face.

"Um, nothing," Sam answers coolly. "I was surprised that neither you, nor Kira, were at home. I even tried to call you but you weren't picking."

Oh boy! My heart pounds quickly at the mention of my name. I bend down and pick the brush that's no longer useful. It's smeared with dust and dry leaves.

"That's because I don't have my phone with me right now," Liam replies.

"Oh," Sam utters.

Should I step out? I flounder on how the image of me and Liam, alone, inside this secluded place would be expounded by Sam.

"Do you need anything?" Liam asks her, disrupting my unavailing thoughts.

"Well, I'd like to talk to you about something important," Sam tells him. I get a sudden dryness at the throat upon hearing this.

Is she going to ask him out? Confessing her feelings at last?

A small pause of silence takes a hold of the moment, making me gulp. Why isn't he saying anything? I bark inwardly, afraid somehow.

But afraid of what? I can't even tell.

"Of course. But can we do it later? I'm not done with the work yet," Liam prompts casually.

"It's okay, I just—" Sam stammers. My brows crunch, marveling the sight of her face and body gestures. "Never mind. I'll wait until you're done," she adds, nervous.

"Actually, Ms. Jones is also here," Liam utters after three seconds or so. "She's on the ladder, painting with a grumpy face."

What the heck! I quickly shift from where I've been standing so reverently as though making a single step is a mortal sin.

"Kira?" Sam gasps.

"Yes, I asked her to give us a hand when she was walking aimlessly." Liam details the situation and I feel exposed, hoping for a fine response from Sam.

But she's silent; maybe too silent for my taste.

Hence I decide to take my chances and step out of the barn.

"God, I'm tired," I announce with an exhausted yawn, stretching my arms with a brush full of paints to back my allegation. Even my shirt is a bit stained.

What a corn artist! My subconscious looks at her head pitifully.

"Kira? You were inside the whole time?" Sam's voice is rather disturbing, accusing even.

I need divine intervention.

"Um, yeah. On top of the ladder? Painting?" I reply as though I was doing the hardest task of my entire existence.

Liam chuckles.

Sam throws a quick glance at him. "You . . . made her paint?"

"Yes. She insisted painting isn't as hard as people make it sound." Liam's answer makes me baffled. He's seriously making jokes under this circumstance. "Didn't you, Ms. Jones?" He gives me a solid look, no longer playful.

How does he do it?

"Yeah." I glare begrudgingly at him.

Bravo, Kira Jones! You'll surely get an Oscar at this rate.

My friend seems confused a little as she asks, "But why?" She faces Liam, who looks as stoic as always.

Maybe only I can detect the fluctuations in his emotions as I'm slowly getting a hang of this man's special ability.

"I think I need to eat. I did my part and . . . I guess I should leave you two alone," I state, trying to dissolve any tension that's about to crop up between the three of us.

I surely hope Sam is far from suspicion.

"You tried," Liam remarks. His smile is so vivid that Sam is probably more confused with the whole thing.

Without wasting time with him, I turn to Sam. "I'm going to eat . . . and maybe take a bath. Would you like to try it?" I hand her the brush.

"Huh?" Sam takes a brush like a thunderstruck bunny, completely astounded.

"Good day, Ms. Jones." Liam looks at me shortly as I dive under the fence.

"Good day," I return with a tight smile and walk away.

I only halt to stare back a bit, feeling bereft somehow. I see Sam following Liam inside the barn, and a sudden wave of sadness overwhelms me. It's like a feeling of letting go of something very precious just when you need it the most.

I breathe out deeply and tell myself that it's all okay. It has to be.

The day goes on uneventfully, and I decide to spend the rest of it locking myself inside the bedroom, reading *Malice*. It's a big hassle trying to calm my nerves when I think of Sam. I keep on wondering whether she's told Liam or not.

I'd rather she has not when I think too much of it.

Or maybe not. I'm just so indecisive lately.

Tired of all of the stresses and work, I take a quick shower to feel myself again. The water fills my body with ease. Quite unbidden my head returns to the several minutes I was with Liam in the barn.

"Oh, Kira, stop it," I breathe, tipping my head back as I rub my neck smoothly at the feel of his kisses all over my skin.

No, I shouldn't entertain this. I speed up the shower and exit the bathroom with a wrap of the towel around my body. At the same moment my phone vibrates. I reach for it unhurriedly, catching a deep breath.

"Malik." My smile return at the caller's ID. I swipe the receiver while sitting down on the bed. "What?" I snap with a hidden chuckle.

"Easy there, Professor," Malik responds in that famous mischief of his. "I know you're missing me terribly, but you don't have to be mad, okay?"

Jeez! I laugh at last. Frankly, he never quits leaving me amazed.

"Fine, I'll pretend I do," I answer resignedly. "What's up?"

"Cool. I just wanted to say thanks about the favor earlier."

"Oh?" I blink twice.

"Yes, Professor." He gets a bit serious. I cross my legs, my eyes at the soothing sun rays piercing through the window. "Thanks to you everything is on track right now and I'm almost done with my mission here."

"My pleasure, I guess?" I answer vaguely, already drifted to other stuff in my head.

Samantha. Liam. My rotten luck.

"Yeah," Malik utters in a low voice, and then sighs deeply.

What's wrong with him? I'm not used to hear him speaking monosyllable. "Are you okay?" I end up asking, my full attention back towards him.

"Oh yes," he answers fast. "I'm just a bit tired, and maybe bored."

"You are bored? That's a lot to take in," I tease, and I'm glad to hear his grand laughter. "I don't believe that." I stand up, taking a pace towards the balcony while holding my towel tightly.

"Professor, I hope you're not taking me for some kind of Tom who always chases after Jerry," Malik remarks, and my big laughter is guaranteed.

"You're crazy, Malik."

"I'm serious, though. I mean, I also get bored and in need of some solitude at the same time."

"Well, I believe we all need that moment at some point. So, when are you coming back?" I ask, and I can feel Malik's enthusiasm back into full track.

"I was right! You do miss me, huh?" he teases. "I'll be there sooner than you expect, professor."

"Okay. And since I saved you millions from my midnight-messenger job, you should at least bring me a souvenir from New York."

"You want a souvenir?"

"Yes, and I'm damn serious," I insist.

"Anything in mind?"

"No, surprise me."

"Okay, your wish is my command." He quickly gives in, warming my slightly frozen heart. "Very well, Professor. It's always a pleasure having a chat with you." He yawns audibly.

"Mine as well." I smile gently, breathing out.

"I got to go now, I'm very sleepy," he says with another yawn.

Did he work all night?

"Sure, be good," I tell him, and we hang up.

Now I believe that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. I never thought Malik would befriend someone like me, and here we are, speaking like old friends. Life is surely like a Pandora's box; you never know what to expect, and behind every sorrow there's hope.

Perhaps I won't be as happy in the end, but at least I've experienced some.

Fed up of the boredom, I attempt to make myself useful somewhere else around the house. I stop by the kitchen, where I find Betty chopping vegetables. She's so absentminded to even notice my arrival.

I'm surprised to imagine how she manages spending a day solemnly, without talking to anyone.

It's such a bummer, but since she's a mute, perhaps she's already used to the situation. I dramatically clear my throat and she stares at me, startled in the beginning, but smiles shyly in the end. I greet her, she answers with a short bow.

Unsure of what to say or do around her, I find myself looking at the ingredients scattered on the wooden table. I smile at the sight.

I spot some fresh salmon dipped in spices, and rice. I can almost predict what she's cooking, but I confirm with her anyway. The fish seems marinated enough, and I've learned that she has troubles with the timing when I last had a chance to watch Eleanor cooking with her.

Betty kindly refuses my help, afraid to impose, but as stubborn as I can be, I ignore her disapproving look and reach for the grill. I don't see an issue helping her; after all there's nothing else I can do around here and it drives me crazy staying idle the entire day.

At last Betty relents, and I finally feel at home as I take charge of making the fried rice, green beans, and sauce enriched with coconut milk. Okay, I never meant to take over the kitchen but I just can't help. I love cooking.

But is that the only reason? That nosy woman in my head whispers with a sly grin, and I roll my eyes mentally.

Frankly one part of me wants to help Betty, and another wants to impress someone; needless to say the name. It's such a hassle communicating with Betty, though; I have to only tell or ask the things that require a yes, or no, for an answer.

But in the end she and I make a great team together. We joke, we laugh, even if it is not an easy task catching up with what she says at times. She's pretty nice, and kind of innocent about the world.

She's lived her whole life in Yellowstone, and her dream is to see the outside world. It appears that Eleanor has promised to take her to London during Christmas, and she's overly excited for December to arrive.

It's 7:30 p.m. Sam and Liam haven't returned yet since the last time we parted. I'm positive it's not from the barn-painting, so then where are they? I give Sam a call, and to my surprise she informs me that they are out in town.

She doesn't give me many details but reassures me that everything's fine so I shouldn't worry a thing. But how do I do that if I've turned into this weird, hysterical woman I don't even recognize? I can't stay indifferent.

"And when are you coming back?" I ask, biting my thumbnail like a kid.

"Well, maybe a little later?" Sam says in a whisper, and I can't help myself from frowning.

"Later?"

"I'm not going to vanish, Kira, so stop worrying already."

No, I'm not worrying about that. My subconscious wrenches a single eyebrow with a sharp look.

"Okay," I say with a sigh. "I guess . . . you two are having fun? And maybe you've told him already, no?"

God, what am I doing?

"Maybe soon, but not yet. Look, Liam is coming, see you later, I gotta go." She sounds in a rush.

"Sure, later," I reply, and the call ends. "You're losing it, Kira Jones. You're totally losing your mind," I tell myself, feeling like my heart is lurching away.

I sit on the couch inside the silent living room, wondering what sort of a person I'm becoming. I feel hurt, I feel angry, and I don't know whom to blame. It can't be Sam, and it definitely can't be Liam.

I'm the only one to blame.

No, this is enough for a day! I sniff the pricking tears that make me feel more miserable.

I need to fall asleep right now before I lose my mind, I decide, while heading back to my room. I grab the last pack of my sleeping pills, thoughtful.

"If you rely too much on them, you'll become dependent! And it's not good for your health, Kira." Dr. Snape's words haunt me out of nowhere.

"But I can't stand this feeling." I drop dejectedly on the bed, my eyes watery. "What am I going to do?" I lie back, facing the sullen ceiling above me. "I just want to sleep," I murmur, pain and fear holding my heart tight.

CHAPTER 18

Jeez, can't I sleep like a queen at least once? My frustration shoots higher as I fight the urge of drifting from oblivion when I need it the most. I'm unsure whether I'm dreaming or not when I feel someone shaking me gently. Oh, damn . . . I want to scream but I'm too lazy to even dare. For once I wish it's a dream and not reality.

If I'm not dreaming then it can only be one person.

"Sam, please, let me sleep just one more minute." I snuggle as she continues shaking me slightly. "Ugh, I feel drowsy; can't I just sleep the whole day?"

A soft and sweet chuckle fills my ears. "I know that's why I made this little serum for you," a soothing voice replies, and I wince in ascertaining manner.

"Um . . ." I bolt up immediately, clearing my eyes and catch the blurred features of Mrs. Eleanor's sweet smile. Oh God! "You're back!" I exclaim gleefully.

"Surprise!" Eleanor utters cheerfully.

"Mrs. Eleanor!" I shout like a little girl would when regarding her loving parent from a long trip. I'd love to hug her right now, but I'm afraid I'll be like a crazy fan girl.

Aren't you? My subconscious stares mouth hanging.

"What are you waiting for?" She stretches her arms, and I gape stunningly. "Oh, I missed you, dear," she says warmly, and I go jelly.

"Me, too," I reply with a big, satiable smile. "How was your trip? And when did you get back?" I practically urge, pulling back so I watch her properly.

As usual, she's gorgeous.

"Last night, and you were soundly asleep," Eleanor remarks. "And my trip was splendid . . . I even climbed up to Paris for a day, and I brought you a little something." I follow her gaze, and find a pair of brown ankle boots, awfully beautiful ones.

"Wow." My mouth stretches wide-open, unable to hide my enthusiasm. "Are these for me?" I ask urgently.

Eleanor nods. "Yes. Since I realized how much you like the ranch life," she says jovially, "I figured you would like this gift."

"I love it," I say it laughingly and get up to appreciate them.

"I'm glad you do." She smiles.

Aw, I love her.

"Thank you, Eleanor. Thank you so much." My eyes beam with delight.

"It's my pleasure, dear," she returns, an amorous gleam in her eyes. But there's a profound sadness behind her sass, and something tells me that she gets a certain type of console whenever she treats me, or us, the way she does.

Is there a story about her life's diary? I can't help but wonder.

"Drink that Chinese tea, it's great for the fatigue," she instructs, eyes on the bedside table where a small cup and its dish is placed.

"I will," I tell her quickly. I feel like I could even drink a broccoli smoothie right now.

Yuck!

"Well, I let you refresh yourself. I'll see you downstairs for breakfast," says Eleanor while getting up, her smile so healing. "Pardon me for cutting your sleep. I couldn't wait!"

"It's okay." She's just so sweet! My subconscious utters dreamily, palming her face as I do while watching Eleanor nearing the door.

How can someone be this nice to a complete stranger without expecting anything in return? She is a marvel.

"By the way," Eleanor says as though she's forgotten something important whilst at the door. "Thanks for the dinner last night, it was delicious."

Huh? I gape, and she raises a playful eyebrow. "Oh, that one; it was nothing," I reply casually.

"Don't be modest now, Kira. Betty told me everything. And guess what, Liam loved it! He likes rice and casserole dishes," she tells me this with such enthusiasm, as if sending some kind of message.

Or am I imagining things?

"Oh, okay." I only nod and off she goes.

About forty minutes later, before landing downstairs, I pass by Sam's room. Apparently she's also slept in and seems to have just woken up a few minutes ago.

I'm not sure what she did last night after disappearing without a trace. In a split second I wonder whether I want to know or not. I guess I do, as ugly as it may be.

"Hi, Kiki," Sam greets me lazily, still in her pajamas rubbing her eyes.

"Hi," I reply softly, shutting the door behind me. "You've slept quite long."

"Hey, with all the labor work I did yesterday, it's only fair I sleep until afternoon."

I bet. Painting is no joke.

"I see." I sit cross-legged at the corner of her bed, watching her pacing hence and forth, figuring out the outfit of the day.

"And to think I didn't get anything out of it," she grunts and looks pretty upset, her brows knitted together in a patent fury.

"What do you mean?" I ask quickly.

Maybe quicker than intended.

Sam sits beside me in an instant, takes a deep sigh and says, "Remember I said I'd ask him out?"

"Yes?" I retort wryly. How could I possibly forget this? It's the reason why I buried myself yesternight.

"Well, I didn't," she snaps, then stands up as quickly as she's sat down. Oh boy! "I don't know how to do it, Kira." She glances at me.

"Um, what do you mean? Isn't that why you went with him?"

"I mean, it's like I'm scared of him," Sam proceeds, sighing soundly, and bites her lower lip savagely.

"Oh." Admittedly I'm somewhat relieved, but I also wish she'd told him already and get it over with.

"He's indifferent. I mean, yes, he does treat me well," Sam says, leaning against the wall with arms crossed on the chest. I swallow hard, waiting for more. "He talks less, but he listens more; well, even though I talk like a machine sometimes, he still does listen."

"Oh," I breathe, licking my lip nervously. "So, what's the problem?" I breathe.

"The problem is . . . it's like he's trying to put a visible boundary between us whenever we're together and it scares me. He's there, so close, but then he's not." Sam's voice is truly laced with disappointment.

"What if he doesn't feel the same way?" I think out loud, and I could almost feel the slap from my subconscious screaming 'did you have to tell her that!'

Sam looks completely taken aback, despondent even. But I keep my eyes insistent. "Why? Has he said something?" she snorts, a mild anger filled in her eyes . . . the same reaction she gives whenever you tell her what she doesn't want to hear.

"No. I'm just saying that maybe he doesn't feel the same way. If not, then why would he keep the indifference? To play around with you? I don't think he's that

kind of a person," I say, clearing my throat. Sam frowns, but just momentarily. "What did he tell you when he invited you here?" I ask, and Sam blanches.

What's wrong with her? I squint my eyes at her quivering lips.

"Kira, I have something to confess," Sam mutters, and I look up at her. She's slightly fidgeting. "The truth is, between Liam and I, nothing extraordinary happened," she says, and I shoot a quizzical eyebrow. "We didn't even kiss like I told you before. We had nothing intimate."

"What?" I widen my eyes, astonished.

"Yes, I lied, just so that you'd agree to come with me," Sam says.

"You . . . I mean, you wanted me to be here so you lied?" I'm totally flabbergasted, even though Liam has already told me so. Perhaps I thought he wasn't telling the truth.

"I've been always popular with guys, right?" Sam says painfully while sitting on the couch near the window. "But I've been constantly aware that all they ever wanted is my body and nothing else."

Oh no! I can't believe she's at it again. How does she not notice what a precious woman she is, or can be . . . if she let her true value shows?

"Sam," I utter, "you're better than that. You're beautiful, the most gorgeous woman I know, and I always tell you this over and over again; do not let anyone make you doubt yourself."

Sam looks troubled. "I know, but still I don't think—"

"But you need to have self-restrain," I tell her truthfully as I believe she needs to hear this for once in her life since I never dared to say it before.

"Really?" She gets up once again, and does her usual pacing.

"Yes. No one will take you serious unless you show them you are. You can't continue letting them think you're this gorgeous bombshell with a great body, but only for momentary pleasure. No! You deserve the best; the man who will love and accept you fully."

Damn, am I making sense? I sigh, and my subconscious is currently on a silent mode, totally unhelpful.

Sam's eyes narrow with displeasure, but I believe she gets my point. "But Kira—"

"And I don't think that man is Liam," I interrupt, my heart racing vehemently against my chest. But it's the truth, right? Oh, I don't know! "I believe if he were, he'd have shown you already," I add, finger crossed this gets to her.

"You think?" Sam asks, eyeing me doubtfully with squinted eyes, her bangs ruffled.

"I don't think what I think matters, Sam. I just don't want you to continue suffering in silence over a guy who doesn't deserve you," I blurt, feeling angry at Liam for some unknown reason.

"Maybe; but Liam is different," Sam says sternly. "He treated me like a lady. He is the first guy to touch my heart, I guess. Yeah, something like that. So tell me, how can I let go of such a person? How do I forget about him when my heart's already yearning for him? I love him, Kira! I swear I love him."

"You do?" A heavy, cruel pang hits my chest.

"Hmm." She nods. "You have no idea how I kept staring at him yesterday when we went to pick Eleanor from the airport. He's just too mysterious or something. He's someone who makes you want to dig him up, or peel off his layers like a cabbage."

Yes, he is a beautiful mystery.

"Are you absolutely sure it's love?" I ask, for I don't really want to believe it is.

Oh, look who's talking! My subconscious snarls, challenging my feelings. Yeah, perhaps we're both infatuated by him, I retort.

"Yes, Kira; I'm sure of it. You'd understand me if you were in love yourself."
Sam's answer finishes my speech.

Oh! I blink twice, gulping.

"It's a strange feeling, you know. I've never felt like this . . . so needy over a guy, so attracted. It's unbearable! It makes me want to scream at times, let it all out!" She sits next to me, looking excited.

My heart shrinks. "And . . . if it's not like that on his part, what will you do?" I ask hesitantly, my voice low.

"Why wouldn't it be?" she asks, that hint of an overconfident girl overshadowing her face. "I can make him fall in love with me, Kira. Mark my words. I'm Sam, I always get what I want, have you forgotten?"

"Oh! Right," I breathe and I have nothing more to say. I feel . . . defeated and numb inside.

"You're probably thinking that I'm going crazy, huh?" She laughs.

"A little," I mutter.

Finally, I leave Sam's room and head straight downstairs, hoping to never bump into anyone, which is not the case. I meet Eleanor at the staircase bottom and she seems in a hurry.

"Oh, there you are," she regards me hastily while sneaking a hand inside her black, designer purse. "I'm going to work; the new arrivals need to be displayed today. But I'll be home early, and I guess I don't need to remind you that this is your home too, do I?"

"You don't have to." I smile faintly.

Eleanor smiles back. "Great, I'll see you later then." She turns around, and quickly spins back. "Oh, if you see Liam, please tell him I had to leave early," she adds.

"I will," I say before she walks out, leaving nothing but the cracking sound of her corn heels and the fresh fragrance of her perfume.

I feel lost and dejected that I end up sitting on one of the stairs. For over five minutes I stay completely still, absentminded, my head incapable of thinking or processing anything, my focus on the large window facing the garden as the trees dance viciously.

A cold air against my skin is what impels me to find something warm to drink in the kitchen. I shudder, hugging my long cardigan while thinking of the coffee with plenty of cream. Maybe after a cup I'll be able to gain my senses, I decide.

"Good morning." A voice startles my reverie as I get up from the stairs.

Liam! My subconscious gnarl and I throw a glance over my shoulder, only to confirm that it's really him.

CHAPTER 19

"Morning," I answer crisply, watching Liam descending the stairs gaily. He's wearing a black fitted sweatshirt, his hands inside the pockets of his grey joggers.

And my heart flips, as always. Such a foolish I am.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and I cynically huff a small laugh. He squints hard at the sound of it, probably wondering why I'm grumpy so early in the morning.

"I'm good," I reply and move my feet to wherever I was going, my rotten mood unchanged.

"Wait." Liam grabs my wrist deftly. His touch takes my breath away. "Are you angry at me?" he asks, a frown on his face.

I slowly turn around to face him. His eyes are earnest. "Do I have any right to be?" I question while pulling my hand out of his.

His lips harden in bemusement. "What is the matter wit—"

"Oh, I nearly forgot; your mother said she had to leave early," I tell him while rubbing the bridge between my eyes, cutting him off.

He scowls my foul mood the sole reason. "About yesterday," he starts, ignoring Eleanor's message. "I just had to go with Samantha because I got the call when we—"

"You're not obligated to explain a thing to me, Mr. Darcy!" I utter strenuously, anger laced in my voice as I resume my journey to the kitchen.

"But I want to," Liam barks softly, just enough for me to hear. He's tailing me, and I just keep walking. "Listen, we can avoid this nonsense if—"

"If we tell her everything?" I finish it for him sharply, standing by the kitchen door. "Do you think it's that easy for me?" I can already feel the threatening tears brimming in my eyes.

No crying, bitch! My subconscious insists sternly. I take deep breath.

"Listen." Liam seizes my face with his palms, and sounds very desperate that I stay put. "I feel like I've known you forever, Ms. Jones. Near, far, you and I are meant to be," he whispers in my ear, and I swallow hard. "It's crazy but I can feel it."

Yes, I know the feeling. And it's a very stupid feeling considering that we've known each other for just . . . a week maybe?

This is bullshit!

"But this is wrong! I can't just go on with this, and disregard her. We shouldn't have started this. I'm calling it off!" I turn around to enter the kitchen, only to bump into Julian holding a big-fat sandwich.

I sigh heavily at the sight of his astounded eyebrows. "Hi," he utters mouthful. "Sir . . . Liam?" he now greets his boss.

"Just go ahead with your agenda, Julian," Liam tells him dismissively.

Watching the crazy boy, I really feel like laughing. "Hi, Julian, have a nice day," I say when he walks past me.

"Okay." He nods.

"And you, too, Mr. Darcy. Just go on with your agenda and—" I don't finish my sentence as I hear the kitchen door slamming shut, and in a few seconds I'm into Liam's arms right behind it. "What the—"

"Stop thinking of negativity, Kira," Liam snaps again, making me breathe softly in a flustered manner. I can't get used to my name from his mouth; it's very arresting. "I won't give up on us so easily, and don't ask me to go away."

"But—"

"I was only thinking of you," Liam cuts me short, playing with the strands of my curls. "No matter how much your friend kept talking and talking; only you

occupied my mind because I could not think straight imagining what you'd be thinking. I'm sorry." He sighs, fear clouding his face.

Jesus! Why is he doing this?

"Listen, somebody may come here, so let's—" I don't get to finish. Liam shuts me up by kissing these very same lips that were about to speak a second ago.

Oh God! Why can't I resist him? Damn it, why am I such an easy prey of his? I hold my breath, feeling his lips coaxing mine possessively, demandingly, igniting the smoldering fire in me.

He's my weakness. We kiss so hard, my arms around his neck, and his about my waist, holding me tight. His kiss is rough, yet soft, simply beguiling.

You're in the kitchen, woman! My subconscious yells warningly, and the devil in me is busy amplifying my sex goddess.

Just great!

And since when did my life become a soap opera? Kissing the male lead in secrecy? I'm sure anyone can appear at any time and it'll be a disaster. I pull back abruptly, panting heavily.

"My God, you're driving me crazy, and I don't know how to deal with your impertinence," Liam says once we go an inch or two apart. "I want you near me all the time, so what do I do?" he huskily asks.

"I don't know," I breathe. "Sam will be here soon, let me go." I pull out of his brace.

"Okay," he relents, and I'm slowly out of his hands, heading straight outside where the cold air slaps my face.

I have to go back to Los Angeles and forget everything. The dream is over, Kira, we need to get back to reality; I can now hear my subconscious perfectly clear. I snuff the unbidden tears away, catching a long breath. She is right.

"I need to leave," I murmur while pacing hence and forth in the porch, nibbling my fingers in a fright. My body is hot and cold, the feeling unfathomable.

That kiss . . . damn that kiss!

Liam stirs me up. He destroys any resolution I make as long as it doesn't include him. He's someone I need to run away from yet the magnetism between us is exceedingly powerful. Fuck! I ruffle my hair messily, shutting my eyes as I lean on the railing.

Out of the blue, a familiar voice of the roaring engine swaps my subconscious into reality and my eyes open immediately. Malik is back. I can't help but smile at the sight of his infamous Chopper 64 as it majestically lands at its usual place.

I straighten up when the prince himself drops off the ground with a small duffel bag in hand. Today he's exclusively dressed in white cropped pants and a blue jacket that matches his shoes. He looks handsome and majestic, nearing the porch.

"Told you I'd be back sooner than you can imagine, didn't I, Professor?" He beams, standing before me.

"You surely did," I reply weakly, accepting his friendly hug. "How was your trip?" We exchange a short greeting. It looks like all is well, and welcome mischief.

"Are they in?" Malik asks about the others.

"Well, Eleanor has left a while ago, Sam is inside, and Liam—"

"He's here," Sam's sassy voice shoots, and when I turn back, I see the two of them together.

"Here they are." A sharp breath escapes my lungs when Liam's blue eyes pierce on mine, his look impassive.

"Hi, Malik. Are you good?" Sam smiles radiantly.

"Very good, and I see everyone is doing great," Malik replies. "What's up, brother?" He moves towards Liam, and they share a quick manly hug.

They decide to return inside for breakfast. Alone as I've been earlier, I stay at the porch, busying my mind with countless thoughts. I feel like bursting, like

practically burst and fall into pieces. I need to leave; it's my only salvation from this temptation.

Despite my dismay, I let out a faint smile when Malik joins me with his latest golden iPhone in his hand. He stands in the same posture as mine, facing the front yard with elbows on the railing. I need to go; maybe he can help me escape, at least for a while.

"Malik," I utter recklessly.

"Professor." He faces me, a little startled.

"Can I use your helicopter?" I ask without flinching.

"The chopper?" he queries, surprised, and I nod my head.

"Actually I'd like to see Big Sky. I've heard marvelous stuff about the place," I say dreamingly, my thoughts on the splendid things I've heard about the place. "Can we go together?" I give him a hopeful look as it's my last card for escape.

Without a word, Malik quickly taps on his phone and connected into a call right away.

"Cyrus, fifteen minutes to finish that thing. We're flying to Big Sky." I hear him saying in a menacing voice that I never knew existed within him. I bite my lip in a stun. "Done, anything else?" He grins.

Wow! My subconscious jumps gleefully.

"No, I'll go change." I smile in awe.

I quickly change into a white max dress that's perfect for a lovely summer date. Except that I'm not going on a date. With my curls tied up, and brown sunglasses, I'm so good to go.

My self-confidence is all that I need right now to beat my demons before they make me feel undeserving of good things in life.

"Long dresses are also beautiful on you, huh?" Malik comments when I step outside, his mien playful as always.

What a tease.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment, Malik?" I laugh with a clear joy, and so does he with a slight shrug. "If it is, then thank you. I'm ready."

Malik gives Liam a call to inform him about our little escape, and I choose to stay oblivious of their conversation as we near the helicopter. Cyrus, the pilot, regards me with a simple hello, and I answer as given.

"Ready?" Malik asks him after ending the call.

"Yes, sir," Cyrus replies.

Malik gives me a hand climbing in, and I grab it so naturally. I sit at the back, by myself, and he sits at the front. The seats are comfortable and it's spacious enough for me to see outside without troubles.

Minutes pass by as Cyrus sets his mechanics. He puts on the enormous headset . . . we all do. He sets other things I don't even know and I start hearing the whirring sound that sets my being alive.

It's my first time riding this thing but I like it already.

The air blown around is so exhilarating; makes me feel problem free.

I exchange smiles with Malik, and he raises his eyebrow pointedly to my excitement. Slowly we hit the sapphire blue sky, leaving the Darcy's vicinity. I can't explain the rush of adrenaline as we fly high.

Something like a park with animals running around streams into view, widening my grin.

"Is this the Yellowstone National Park?" I shout out to be heard by Malik.

"Yeah, Professor," he answers loudly. "Should I push you off?" he adds, together with his diabolic laugh.

"Not funny, Malik! Not funny at all!" I retort, and it makes him laugh even louder, together with Cyrus.

Apparently this is the first national park in America; so I'm kind of elated to finally see it even from above. I see a group of American Bison running around. The chopper heads south, and we meander down the Gelatin Canyon; it immediately puts my camera into a better use.

After flying by for a while, we finally approach the famous Big Sky County. It is way beautiful than I imagined. It's like something from an old book, its architecture old and vintage. The snow covers most of its landscapes, giving me a little taste of winter amid the summer.

I simply love nature.

"And here is the Big Sky, baby!" Malik shouts like a maniac. We all laugh in unison. It seems I'm not the crazy one about this amazing county.

"Yeah, it's exquisite!" I shout as Cyrus lowers the chopper slowly.

"Now wait until I show you what's best about this place," Malik brags.

"I can't wait, Malik," I reply.

We spend some time at the resort for a local luncheon, after a little walk around all of Malik's favorite places. I can't say that they haven't turned into mine as well. I mean, almost everything about this place is enchanting.

I still don't understand why Americans disregard the Montana State. I think it's a little heaven on Earth.

Seated comfortably, eating and drinking, Malik starts his unexpected inquiries. "Will you tell me what's wrong with you now?" He narrows his eyes at me, and my smile fades instantly.

I feel alarmed at his look of apprehension.

"There's nothing wrong. Why? Do I look in trouble?" I try to cheer up, but my companion is far from being stupid.

He knows!

"Aren't you running away right now?" Malik asks, and he's damn right. "Come on, Kira, I know you like Liam, so then what's stopping you both from--"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I immediately cut him short and glance away.

Damn, are we that indiscreet? How did he find out? From Liam?

"Don't worry a thing, Professor, your secret is safe with me," Malik utters after a short while tells me, impelling me to look back at him.

"You're crazy." I smile evasively.

Malik reclines back in his chair, his lips stretched into a soft smile. "It's the first time I'm seeing Liam so engrossed into romance," he proceeds, sounding sincere.

"I'm very positive that's not true," I remark while drinking my sangria.

Like seriously? First time? I don't buy it.

"Well, Liam is one of the people who don't know how to beat around the bushes." Malik's gaze is too earnest that I feel condescended, talking to an uncle. "If he shows even a slight interest on something then it means he's indeed serious about it."

Why is he telling me this?

"So, you mean he's never been serious with a woman before?"

Malik seems amused, chuckling. "I didn't say that, goodness!" he comments. I arch my brows inquisitively. He clears his throat and adds, "Let's say . . . he's indeed serious with you. Maybe more than I've ever seen him before."

I'd be lying if I deny the fireworks in my heart right now.

"Why? Did he go through some rough patch as far as romance is concerned?" I ask.

"Professor—" Malik leans over the table, as he's seated across from me, "—if you're that curious about his story then it means you are interested in him," he says coolly.

"Huh?" I gasp, somewhat busted.

"See?" Malik shoots me a scandalized index, back to the typical playboy. Jeez! "I was so damn right! When did you fall for him? How? And why?"

"Malik!" I groan, and he laughs even harder. "You've got it all wrong." My eyes betray my words.

"Okay, I'll pretend I believe you." He sips his own drink, and I tuck my lip between my teeth. "In my opinion, you like him, and he likes you."

"Just drink your Sangria." I pour him another one.

"Sure." He rolls his big eyes.

"But we can't always get what we want," I think out loud, sighing. "That would be too selfish, right?"

"I don't know," Malik replies coolly, sipping his drink. "But everyone deserves to be happy."

I know that.

"And what if it comes with a high price? What if someone has to be hurt for another to be happy?" I fix my eyes on the glass I'm holding, tilting it to the sides, Malik's intense gaze on me.

"Would you rather sacrifice your own happiness so that another won't get hurt?" he asks casually, and my heart tightens. "Is that what's happening to you?" He now sounds serious.

Maybe? Well, it doesn't matter.

"No." I face him with a smile. "But if it happens, perhaps I'll sacrifice mine. Stupid, isn't it?"

"Depends on your reasons; it can be stupid, but it can also be noble," Malik answers. "Oh, but I'm not a great believer of nobility," he adds, and we both laugh.

Going back to what he'd just said, about Liam and romance, I think I kind of understand Malik's point. I don't know what Liam's predicament is, but mine is just my unsettling past events.

The fear of not being good enough is what created my little bubble.

Or maybe the right person hasn't shown up yet. Deep inside I always knew that there'd be someone who can see through me and accept whatever the wreck I am, and maybe then I'll be able to open up.

CHAPTER 20

"I miss the ocean," I utter my inner thoughts, lost in my own trance as the afternoon stretches its wings under the blue sky.

I miss home.

"It can't be a perfect summer without some salty water, right?" Malik slides his mobile on the table and graces me his full attention.

"Exactly." Smiling, I glance up at him. "I mean, Montana is really nice, but I still miss L.A. I want to get tanned at the beach, hearing the sound of the waves, the swimming . . . I miss that." Nostalgia blankets me.

A long silence takes a reign, Malik's now-calm eyes pitching me some kind of avuncular concern. Did I say something unfitting? I feel like an incorrigible kid on the wait for the parental judgment. I hold my cooled drink once again.

And suddenly Malik's face lights up and forms his infamous grin that never leaves anyone indifferent. He seems decided. What is he up to, though? My subconscious raises awake.

"How about we go to Miami?" he asks lively, his gaze expectant.

"Miami?" I almost choke on the sangria, stunned.

"Yes . . . Miami." He playfully wriggles his dark eyebrows, sounding serious nonetheless. I blink twice in daze. "Don't you want the perfect summer with the beach?" he insists, and I just stare at him wide-eyed.

It's so hard to fathom when he's serious and when he isn't. Does he mean it or he's just pulling my leg? I pout at the thought.

"You're kidding, right?" My voice is grouchy.

"Come on, just say yes already," Malik exhorts. *God, he's not kidding!* "I'm being serious, Professor. Do you want to go to Miami?" he repeats, looking hopeful.

"Okay." I shrug after a thought, and it seems like a plan. Oh boy! "So, why aren't you staying in the palace? Aren't princes supposed to be in the kingdom?" I alter the course of our conversation.

Malik scowls. He takes out a cigarette from his jacket and slowly lights it up with the golden lighter that could've paid for my monthly bills.

Did I touch the sore spot? And . . . he smokes? I'm a bit surprised.

He takes a puff of cigarette, his gaze indescribable, and then says, "Because I like being free, just as I am." He halts to blow some smoke to the side. I remain attentive as he adds, "My brother is the crown prince, and so only he is obligated to stay in the palace."

I clasp my lips together like a toddler in front of a story book. "And when did you leave the palace?"

He frowns a bit in recollection, his look subdued for the reasons only he knows. "When I was fifteen, I guess." He glances at me softly.

"Wow, that long? But why? I think you were too young. I mean, if you're willing to talk, that is." I don't want to pressure him.

Malik leans back in his seat and blows the smoke again. I try to chill despite my feud with cigar and the horrible smoke. "I had an accident by the time," he replies coolly, full of hidden emotions of similar scent with pain.

My heart tightens. Does he have a painful story? I wonder. Well, in reality who doesn't? That horrendous voice answers inside me. What a know it all? I scowl mentally.

"I had to move to Houston for the rehab," Malik proceeds calmly, revisiting his memories, it seems.

"I'm very sorry." I suddenly regret asking of his private afflict. More than anyone else, I understand how tough it can get when talking of some deadly memories that you'd rather forget.

"I used to do illegal motorbike racing back then. Of course behind my father's back," Malik goes on, which makes my eyes glow in more stun.

But I'm not surprised at all that he was once a troublemaker.

"So, one day I pulled a dangerous stunt, and ended up with a few broken ribs and a crippled leg." He starts laughing while I'm grimacing.

"That's terrible!" I say in a horror, imagining the scene.

"It was." He smiles as though it's water under bridge.

Maybe it is.

"So, did you get banished or something? I mean, after getting better of course," I ask curiously.

Malik bursts out laughing, and I join him this time. *What the heck, Kira Jones! Banished? You should really stop watching those Korean historical dramas.* I quietly ignore my subconscious.

"Oh, Professor! What a humor! No, I wasn't banished." Malik looks amused, relaxed even.

"Really?" I utter.

"Well, in a way I was, because they wanted me to stay away for a while since I've been nothing but a disgrace to the royal family." He makes the heedless face that

forces a laugh out of my mouth. "Using my rehabilitation as an excuse, I decided to spare them the headache. Trust me, it was the best thing that could ever happen to me; I love to be free."

Malik continues telling me about his arrival to Houston, Texas, where he stayed for a year in the rehabilitation clinic, before moving to Edinburgh, UK, for his studies, and later to London, where he met Liam.

He talks of their endeavors together, and that they didn't like one another at first. Wow! They were like cat and mouse, according to Malik himself, and I muse at the image it brings. Damn, I can't even imagine.

Now I understand why the Darcys have become like his real family, and how much he cares for Liam. Perhaps their friendship means a lot more to him than he lets on. Just as my friendship to Sam.

Malik dismisses Cyrus, later on through a phone call; hence we use a rental car to drive back in the ranch. I had so much fun, and my mood is so lifted in comparison to how gloomy I was this morning.

When we arrive home, I'm deadly exhausted; my head on Malik's shoulder which startles me like hell.

"Sorry, I don't always fall asleep recklessly," I utter apologetically while pulling my head away.

What a clumsy!

"I'm not complaining, Professor, am I?" Malik reassures tenderly with a friendly smile. I blush from embarrassment. "Did you have fun, though?" His worries replace the playfulness.

"Yes, so much fun," I reply while stretching my tired body, a long yawn coming along. "Thank you." My smile is grateful.

"It was nothing," he returns gently as we start getting off. "I think I also needed to recharge after all."

It's around eight in the evening as we enter the house. It's good to be back, and all I can think of is the shower and bed. However, heavens seem to have other plans for me. The first person we encounter once we walk in is none other than Liam Darcy.

Just great!

He looks exceptionally mad that even Malik seems wary. What's his problem now? Has he been waiting for us? Because that's exactly how it seems. Malik's questions shoot back at the back of my head. How? When? I can't help but ask myself the same inquiries.

From the dream? And why the hell do I dream of him?

"Relax, brother." Malik grins, neglectful of Liam's uncalled for outburst. "I promised to return her early, and here we are."

"You promised?" I snap, suddenly enraged at their grand arrangement.

Malik's face drops remorsefully. "Professor, the thing is—"

"You call this early? You weren't even picking your call." Liam eyes his shiny watch and I can't help but wonder about this sudden attitude of his.

He's so confusing.

"Well, with a good company who cares about the phone, bro? I probably left it on a silent mode!" Malik replies, and I'm in awe at his unweaving composure.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," I intrude, feeling tired to even stand straight. "I don't know what kind of arrangement you two had, but if I may, let me remind you that I'm not a child. I can take care of myself, and I definitely don't need a curfew like a timid little teen," I snap pointedly at Liam. He glowers at me and I couldn't care less. "Besides, I was in very safe hands, so I don't see where this fuss is coming from." I turn to Malik for reference.

"Of course, Professor," Malik agrees, and I swear I could laugh at the face he pulls.

In all honesty, it's true; I had a great time and a very pleasant day for a change. Coming back here, I expected nothing less, as long as Liam wouldn't have showed up. But no, the cowboy is everywhere.

"Very well, in that case I'd like to retire to my room and get some rest," I tell Liam, who wants to open his mouth but decides not to.

He has no idea how striving I am to avoid any problem as far as our secret involvement is concerned. I take a deep breath, my feet heading for the stairs.

But Liam doesn't let me go that easily. "What about dinner?"

I halt by the staircase, gripping the handrails. "I had dinner already," I answer gruffly, whirling my gaze back at him.

"You did?" His voice is curt, displeased.

"Yeah. Would you like a receipt?" I sarcastically remark, making Malik block his mouth from laughing aloud.

Liam's jaw constricts. Jeez! Well, he called for it. I stay firm.

"Actually, I wouldn't call that dinner, Professor," Malik says cautiously, eyes on me. "It was just a snack and—"

"And I had enough for three," I interject.

"Well, if you put it that way, Professor." Malik laughs delightedly, successfully reading the signs. "I like your appetite, by the way."

"Oh, shut up," I hiss, and he laughs even more.

Jeez, there's no stopping him! I roll my eyes.

"You're going to sleep?" Liam asks gloomily, his voice deep and unfriendly.

My heart fringes at the undeserving treatment I give him. I'm not proud of myself.

"Yes, do you need me for anything?" I return, and he moves closer, making Malik's big eyes go bigger.

I gulp at the look of menace he saunters with, his jaw tight as though I've offended him gravely. "This can't go on," he whispers, looking as serious as hell.

Despite my internal tempest, I manage to put on a gold facade. "Goodnight," I say to them both before walking away.

Damn him! I won't break! No I won't!

I'm almost upstairs when I hear them talking, "Did you do anything to upset her? Because she's like a volcano and I'm only used to see that in you. I had no idea you had a twin," Malik enthuses.

"What?" Liam utters, followed by Malik's laughter.

"Seriously, have you offended her?" Malik repeats, seriously this time.

"I don't know," Liam answers cheerlessly and I lose auditory of their husky voices as I finally disappear.

Frankly I don't enjoy lashing at Liam. I'm only trying to distance myself from him, even if it means acting all cold and immature. It's the only thing I can think of, and I hope it works. I've already crossed the line, and perhaps it's a little too late, but I can still give it a try.

And why is he so possessive, dammit! I grunt, and my subconscious huffs amusedly at this. As if you don't like it, she mutters with rolled eyes.

The mattress feels cold as I roll to the side of the bed, exhausted. It's been quite a fair day, I must confess, but I'm suddenly feeling all sad and empty. I'm almost on the verge to cry, but I don't want to think I'm already that miserable.

I've never felt this kind of emotion before. Is it love? I shudder with fear; not the fear of finally being in love, but rather of the person I'm supposedly falling hard for. It's like a forbidden kind of love, and it kills me softly just thinking of what to expect along the way.

It's been thirty minutes or so, and I'm still lying down thoughtfully. Nothing else comes to mind except Mr. Intense. He has apparently succeeded to dominate my head enormously, and I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about it. Love or not, I've already lost this round.

Unable to sleep, as usual, I decide to get up and dig in my suitcase for the diary. Writing has somehow proved to be a better therapy than brooding around, in my case. I sit comfortably in my bed and begin a new entry with a sniff. I believe I'm capable of filling this diary if I pour out all of my emotions lately.

"Anyways, Kira, let's write what's really the matter," I mutter with a sigh, and let the pen slide.

Dear God,

I'm not sure which one I am; a bad person or a horrible friend. But there's one thing I know for sure, that I never intend to hurt anyone. Lately I've been feeling like I'm losing my mind. Around Liam I see nothing, I hear nothing, it's as if the world comes to a halt. I know it's crazy of me to think this way, but I think I'm falling in love with him! I can't stop thinking of him; his kisses, caresses, the way he challenges me both physically and emotionally, he unleashes the part of me I didn't know existed, and I dare say that he does make me feel alive. However, I can't ignore Sam's feelings . . .

By the time I'm done with this I feel tears rolling down my cheeks and my throat feels heavy. I sniff while drying up with the tips of my fingers. I got to be strong; I can't let Liam get to me as though my existence depends on him.

But my tears are persistent just like my foolish heart, so I let them fall freely. I think I get it why people say you should cry when you feel like it; apparently I do feel better as time goes by. I even get the strengths to bathe and change into my pajamas.

A little bit later the door swings open, and my heart freaks. I watch it tentatively.

Sam pops in without a simple knock. Maybe I should learn to lock it for starters, I sigh heavily. For a moment I thought it was Liam, how stupid! My friend walks over holding something like a parcel, all smiling.

"Delivery for Ms. Kira Jones," Sam says with a dramatic exaggeration, her fair skin radiant from the good mood she's in.

"Delivery?" I ask, my brows clinched together.

"Yes, ma'am, here." She hands me a little shopping bag and I stare at it suspiciously. "Come on, Kiki, it's not a bomb!"

"What is it?" I delicately hold it.

Sam sighs heavily. "Alright, it's from Malik. Now open it," she tells me while slumping on the bed as she always does.

I scowl while opening it gingerly.

I find a cutely wrapped box: pink paper, white ribbon. Smiling, I quickly peel it off, and what's inside is a beautiful snow globe. Wow! My grin widens. It immediately reminds me of another one I used to have with a shiny Eiffel tower.

What a sweet memory! I blush.

"It's beautiful," I mumble.

"What? What did he give you?" Sam practically snatches it from my hands.

"Sam," I shout, and we start wrestling in a childish manner. "Be careful, Sam!"

"Okay, you don't have to bite me," she retorts. "What are you guys? Seven-years-old kids?"

I know she finds it immature but unfortunately I couldn't care less.

"I love it." I smile.

"Whatever." She gives it back while laying herself in bed. "You should really date him, because you're so much alike."

No, sweetie, I'm crazy for the forbidden.

"I'll think about it," I say absentmindedly, my eyes on the gift. "Well, I love it, and it's all that matters. Plus, I know you're jealous." I take a close look of its sparkling water with the little statue of liberty in the middle.

"Me . . . jealous of your snow globe?" Sam makes an accused face, and she's damn cute.

"Yes, ma'am, should I give it to you?" I tease.

"Give it," she utters quickly.

"Dream on." We both laugh, and I notice a small handwritten note that reads;

Could've bought you anything with a diamond, but I heard a souvenir has to carry the spirit of the place, so I hope you like it!

Malik.

I smile delightfully when I finish reading it. So typical of him; I'm not even surprised by this. Only Malik could mention diamonds on the note.

"Ah, you're so infatuated," Sam mutters, eyeing me like I'm a lost cause.

She has no idea what she's saying, so I don't bother with anything. If only she knew who infatuates me, she'd probably throw this snow globe on the wall.

If not on your face! My subconscious remarks with a very deep sigh, pitiful eyes thrown my way.

CHAPTER 21

Sam doesn't want to forgo about Malik and I have no intention in changing her decided mind. "So, where did you go with him? Did you get to kiss him?" She sits straight in my bed, ready to hear the nonexistent scoop.

Jeez!

"Why would I kiss him?" I chuckle, for it's pretty insane. Well, at least for my case with Malik as I'm already preoccupied and becharmed by the cowboy.

"You didn't?" Her tone is accusing.

"No! Stop being silly, Samantha Ford!" I scold as it's a bit annoying.

"Gosh, you need to stop being a nun. I can get you a form to join the convent if you want." She laughs, arching my eyebrows in wonder. *Does being single makes one a nun?* I mentally pout. "I mean, when will you get laid already? Until you get married?"

"I don't know; maybe never?" I say recklessly, feeling somewhat hurt from the harsh truth, even though it's not a foreign speech coming from her.

I've heard it too many times.

"Ugh, you're being boring now!" Sam grunts. "I'm always the one who talks about men, and you say nothing. Do you have a problem, maybe? Are you a les—"

"Sam, stop!" I end up yelling, and she winces back, a single eyebrow raised. I take a deep breath, fixing my composure. "I don't want to talk about sex or men. And I'm pretty certain of my sexuality, so just . . . let's not talk of that, okay?"

Rattled, Sam raises her hands in surrender. "As you wish, ma'am."

"I'm sorry for yelling . . . you're just too stubborn." I try pacifying the tension.

"No, I'm not. But I'll soon find you a boyfriend, and your sexual frustration will be over," she says with a confident grin.

"Just great," I mutter under my breath, thinking of the 'sexual frustration' she's stubbornly referring to.

Perhaps I am frustrated. How come I'm constantly marveling *him* in possession of my body? Quite lewd of a thought but I fail miserably to restrain myself.

"And what are these?" Sam finally sees what I brought from Big Sky. She succeeds to mercilessly pull me out of my fantasy.

"Nothing big, just some items I bought."

"Let's see." She rummages through the bags and throws everything on the bed. Her face lights up into an infantry smile afterwards. "Yes! Now we're talking."

She gets busy with her favorite chips and a few stuff . . . like the local bracelets and sandals I brought. I like handmade things and it's impossible to resist buying any when I come across.

Leaving Sam to her endeavor, I quickly send Malik a thankful text, but he doesn't reply. Maybe he's busy. In truth, he's made my day; I do love gifts, no matter how small and insignificant they may seem to others.

"That's for Mrs. Eleanor; do you think she'll like it?" I ask Sam when she inspects the silver bracelet I found from this famous local artisan.

"Thank you, mom?" Sam reads the artistic letters engraved on it. "Kira, don't you think you're getting too attached? Will you be okay when we leave?"

Well . . . I don't know.

"I don't think I'll be totally okay, but I'll be very sorry if I don't use this little chance heaven's given us. I only did what I would've done if my mother was alive. Don't you feel it too?" I smile fondly at the thought.

"Of course, who wouldn't wish for a mother like her? I'm sure Eleanor will love this," Sam replies and I'm glad we're on the same page.

"Hopefully," I quip, my lips tight.

"By the way, Eleanor brought me this sexy Giuseppe handbag! Can you believe how much it costs?" Sam jumps in glee, and I'm lost.

"What is that? Some new pizza shop in Italy?" I stare at her blankly, because I don't know what Giuseppe means.

"Oh, don't tell me you don't know who Giuseppe is?" she nags, laughing.

"No?" I gape.

"He's a very famous designer in Rome and—"

"Sam . . . please don't insult my intelligence for God's sake! Why would I know a designer from Rome? What for?" I rise from the bed to grab my charger.

"Yeah, I totally forgot. What a cavewoman you are." She shakes her head, sighing as though I'm the most indocile being.

"Yeah, a cavewoman indeed." I blow out some air, feeling exhausted, yawning. I plug in the charger and lay my phone on the nightstand.

Completely tired of my fashion oblivion, Sam checks on whatever that fits her among the stuff I bought.

"I love these." She gets up, showing off the flat gladiators in chocolate brown.
"They are mine, right?" She glances expectantly at me.

"Oh, what a ripper! If I say they're not, will you let them go?"

"Never?"

"So why bother asking?"

"Good question," she returns, and we end up laughing.

She starts questioning me about my little getaway with Mr. Loaded, and I still don't understand why she is so convinced that Malik has a thing for me. The poor guy has never shown me any sign of the sort, and yet I can't stop hearing Sam's nonsense since day one.

Anyways, I deeply hope she's imagining things because I'm not up for another drama. This one soap opera of a love triangle is already a headache, and certainly enough for a lifetime.

"Well, we just talked, walked around, and it was fun." I shut the windows so I can occupy my bed peacefully.

"So, you don't like him even a tad?" Sam asks, a hint of doubt crowding her face.

"I do," I reply casually. "I do like him, Sam . . . but as a friend." My gaze is earnest as I say this.

"Ugh, that famous speech." Sam sighs, foiled, and I just smile.

"And you? How was your day?" I ask while folding my dress.

"Well," she begins with laughter. I crease my eyebrow skyward, curious. "Liam and I made a horrible lunch today." She's blushing.

"Lunch?" My heart booms at the mention of his name alone, dragging me deeply into the pit of even more curiosity.

"Yes. Betty wasn't here; it was just Liam and me in the afternoon. We decided to test out cooking abilities after debating whether to go out or not. I suck in the kitchen, as you already know, and Liam is horrible," she explains fondly, the memory seemingly awesome. "It was half burnt, half undercooked."

"Huh?" I gulp, feeling surprised and another feeling that I don't want to admit.

They were together the whole day, a brutal mental reminder.

"It was so much fun!" Sam looks happy, and it's what I truly like seeing in her. "In the end Liam made amazing sandwiches, and it's what he knows how to make best.

We chilled with a movie afterwards, so my afternoon was great," she says with a satisfied smile.

"That's good." I smile back, tightly, a part of me in a slight displeasure.

"Oh, we also went for a walk around the stables, and I nearly got kicked by a horse if I didn't fall heavily on my butt. I'm really not into this country stuff, I swear. But I had to play along since I'm interested with the owner." Now she sighs heavily, laying herself back against the pillow.

"I'm glad you had fun together," I say truthfully, even though my heart hurt for one reason.

It can't be me.

"Yeah, I did. He can be funny sometimes," she adds, and I just swallow whatever I'm feeling.

It's better this way.

We continue chatting the night out, catching up with a few cheesy gossips about some people we know in common until late. Between talking and laughing, we somehow end up sleeping in my bed.

The only thing that wakes me up in the midnight is the same usual thing. I seriously hate it. Will it be over when I finally remember everything? I want to sleep peacefully like I used to when I was a child. Why is it so hard?

The following morning during breakfast, Malik drops a bomb that leaves everyone astounded. He announces blatantly that we're flying to Miami this evening, and he has already made the travel arrangement.

I can't believe the knowing look on his face when he throws a provoking glance at me. He was really serious about Miami when he told me yesterday; I'm so dumbstruck.

"That's great, Malik. As always, only you know how to have fun," Eleanor says.

I can't believe she seconds the idea, which makes me shift my eyes towards Sam. As expected, my best friend is wiggling in her chair gleefully. But it's understandable, I guess. I'd love to see Miami.

"And you think you can just plan your trip without consulting us first?" Liam snaps.

God, he is so barbaric. What tree has he fallen from?

Eleanor rolls her eyes, which makes me laugh for real, and Malik only shrugs. I love the way he never gets offended by Liam's disturbing remarks. Such a lovely friendship they share.

"Who wants to go swimming in Miami?" Malik makes a dramatic inquiry.

"I do." Sam raises her hand immediately.

And I . . . well, I follow suit.

Malik smiles triumphantly. "See, brother? Winner takes all," he rubs it in, and Liam frowns.

"You should loosen up a bit, honey. What's the point of taking a leave if you're only going to confine yourself in this country house?" Eleanor says in a motherly way, but someone doesn't flinch a muscle.

"Don't worry, Aunt," Malik says. "I'll just cancel his ticket."

I don't know why, but I always find them like two little boys who love bickering to one another.

And it's kind of cute.

Watching Mr. Intense sulking is as if I'm seeing the younger version of himself that I wish I knew. I smile to myself.

"Fine. But this better be the last time you do this," Liam says coolly, and everyone look relieved.

What a hassle! He could've just accepted without a fuss.

After breakfast I present my little gift to Mrs. Eleanor, in private, and she seems quite taken aback when she see it. "Is this for me?" She sounds exhilarated.

"Yes?" I nod approvingly.

"Thank you . . . mom?" she reads aloud, and it's a bit embarrassing. "It's beautiful, and I love it."

"I know it's nothing much," I try to justify but she cuts me short.

"It's wonderful, Kira. I like it very much." She's sincerely grateful, I can feel it, and it makes me so happy.

"I'm glad you like it." I grin.

"You know," Eleanor starts, her voice softer and tender as she holds my hands. "I like you a lot, Kira, and . . . I know my son does, too!"

His son? My subconscious pops in unannounced, panting heavily after the race she's just pulled from wherever she's been hiding.

"I—" I'm caught off guard by Eleanor's remark.

She chuckles. "You don't need to be wary, Kira. Mothers' hearts never lie. You like him, too, don't you?" she asks with a warm, witting smile.

I swallow nervously, for I don't think I have the right to answer this question. Not under these circumstances that I met her son. Lucky for me Mr. Intense appears, and I feel eternally saved.

"I need a moment, Mother," Liam intrudes. "Ms. Jones, do you mind?" He looks serious, and I oblige his request.

"Not at all. Excuse me." I use the chance to slip away.

My head is on the clouds as I climb the stairs back to my room. I want some alone time to process everything; I'm feeling terrible right now. However, to make matters worse, I bump into Sam heading to my room as well.

Things can't go any worse, can they?

Sam seems so thrilled and I imagine it's from the Miami trip. Maybe if I were in a different dimension, I would also share the same enthusiasm, but apparently I'm not. My wish is to disappear and go back in time; to refuse Sam's invitation.

"Have you packed?" she queries.

"Not yet," I breathe.

"Everything okay?" Sam asks worriedly, which destroys me even further.

"Yes, I'm good. I'll just start packing now."

We parade inside, and I do as I said. I'm originally so well organized; hence I don't do much to put all my things in place.

Maybe it's about time everything go back to where they belong, I decide.

"Kiki, we're not leaving for good, you know? You heard Malik that we're only staying in Miami for a few days."

"What do you mean? Do you plan to come back here?" I ask, because if that's her plan then good for her.

As for me, this is a one-way ticket.

"I know it's crazy that we return back to Montana, but who cares? Money talks, right?" Sam laughs.

I do care, very much.

"I know, right?" I try showing that I'm following.

I finish by putting my camera inside my shoulder bag . . . followed by the gift Malik gave me deep into the suitcase. I'm just counting hours so that I can finally leave this place. What will happen in Florida? I can't help but wonder.

Alone at last, and idle, I end up strolling around the ranch before our departure time. I can't believe it's been a week already, and I'm really leaving this wonderful place and its enchanting nature.

Well, I guess there's an end to every beginning, and it's time I face mine.

Sighing, I keep walking aimlessly, only to end up at the usual place.

Charlie is eating gracefully. I smile stupidly at the memory of being busted in the river by Mr. Intense himself, and the horseback ride afterwards.

It's been one eventful week, I tell myself, and I'll never ever forget.

I move towards Charlie and run a hand on his back with several sighs escaping my lungs. He flexes a bit, but stills afterwards as though enjoying the touch of my hand. Throwing glances around the ranch, I try to copy every part of it into my memory box with a smile.

"Are you okay, Ms. Kira?" Julian snaps me from the clouds, and I quickly sniff away the discomfort.

"Yap, kiddo. I was just leaving, by the way," I tell him, and he glares at me as though he doesn't buy my words at all. "Would you like to have this?" I take off my watch that I bought recently.

I noticed him wearing this haggard one that looks at least ten years older than himself.

Julian stares at me wryly. "Why are you giving that to me?" he asks, and I almost roll my eyes.

Of course he is as proud as his boss. But two can play this game.

"Forget it, if you don't want." I start fastening back the straps, and he quickly grabs it.

"I'll take it, thank you," he says dryly.

I smile triumphantly. "Okay, stay well." I pat his head, but he dodges fast, which makes us both laugh. "Good bye, big guy," I whisper to Charlie, and with that I leave them behind.

"Kira," Julian calls after me, just before I get away.

"Yes?" I turn around, smiling.

"He likes you," he says, and I frown a bit. "No, I think he loves you."

"What—"

"Forget it! Just go!" he now lashes at me.

"Huh?"

"I knew you were dumb." He pouts, and dives inside the fence.

Laughing, I leave with my head bigger. Yes, I know he likes me.

CHAPTER 22

When it's time to leave Eleanor escorts us outside. She hugs each one of us in turn, insisting we have much fun in Miami. I hug her a little too longer when it's my turn, savoring the last feel of her warm embrace.

God knows the emptiness I'm starting to feel from this point onwards.

"Take care, honey," she murmurs softly, her smile maternal.

"I will. Thanks for everything," I utter sadly.

We all slide inside the van, and Peter hits the engine. Having one last opportunity to enjoy the beautiful Yellowstone and its landscape, it's precisely what I do throughout the ride.

Sam and Malik engage into a conversation, and the rest of us remain silent to our thoughts. I can't describe what I'm feeling right now, but it's surely not something I could term as bliss.

About an hour later we arrive at the same airport that landed us a week ago. I remember Peter picking us up like some clumsy tourists, and I smile weakly when he looks at me with his discrete glance while talking to Liam.

Looks like the boss is giving some orders.

Before leaving, however, Peter approaches me and says, "Nice trip, Ms—" He pauses, running a hand through his raven hair. "I mean, Kira."

How cute! I can't help but smile from the way he's just addressed me casually as if it was the hardest thing to do.

Do they get gentleman trainings in the ranch?

Well, I highly doubt, if I consider some boy named Julian.

"Thank you, Peter." I hug his sturdy body, and it completely takes him off guard. He stiffens and it makes me smile heartily.

"Don't mention," he whispers, smiling back.

Liam witnesses this but doesn't say a thing. He's expressionless, his eyes bored deeply into mine. Malik is on the phone, and Sam is following him with her eyes on her own phone.

Well, here goes nothing.

I naturally catch up with Liam, who's also carrying my suitcase, and I realize we haven't talked to each other in a while now. How do I approach him? I ponder as I hold his pace.

Should I ask about the weather?

"Have you been to Florida before?" Liam breaks the silence, and a part of me jumps with joy.

"Not at all," I reply vaguely, and his precarious blue eyes give me a brisk glance. "But I suppose it's a very nice place, especially Miami." I glance back at him with a small smile.

"I guess," he prompts heedlessly, and his brows knit in apprehension. *What now?* "Are you still angry at me?" he asks, and I hold my tongue, taken aback. "You don't even want to talk to me, right?" He sounds hurt by my indifference.

"I don't know what else to say," I answer truthfully, sighing. I can't say that I'm crazy for him, and then back out when he asks me to make a move regarding this.

Liam's jaw tightens ruefully, shattering my faulted heart. He stays taciturn for a few seconds before saying, "I think—"

"Kiki, can you tell me what this word means?" Sam's voice interrupts our discreet exchange, and I thank heavens for that, unlike Liam.

He frowns a bit, looking defrauded.

"I'm not your dictionary, Sam," I reply while walking past Liam so that I catch up with Sam.

My heart and soul remain with him, however, thinking of only him.

"Oh, come on!" Sam laments.

"I don't understand why you can't download one and yet you have games for dressing up the dolls."

Sam laughs hard. "Are you going to ask why I don't have the Bible as well?"

"No, that will make God strike us both with thunder," I reply, making Malik Join the conversation.

"Professor, when was the last time you went to church?" he asks amusedly.

"Please, let's not use that road, Malik. I'm ashamed," I mutter.

"Liam goes to church once or twice a month," he says, and we all face Mr. Intense, who seems lost in his own world. He pulls my suitcase with ease while tossing his duffel bag on the shoulder.

Boy, he's aphrodisiac.

"What?" Liam snaps as we approach the authentication counter, discerning our collective gaze towards him.

"Nothing, brother, we all think you're handsome," Malik teases, making everyone laugh.

I watch Liam's frowning face as he mutters something under his breath, and his sight is not one to complain about. He's cute when flustered.

We board on the first-class cabin and I can't stop my jaw from falling down the floor. I'm seated comfortably behind Liam.

How will I ever avoid him, huh?

Sam beams at me incredulously, and I smile back. Settling myself without a fuss, my head gets occupied by the boy seated at the front seat.

I'm sure I can get through this, I sigh softly. Eyeing Malik at the other side, I find him busy into his tablet, oblivious of anything around.

Finally the plane takes off. I watch the Montana grounds for the last time as we ascend higher, before disappearing into clouds that take my mind off for a change. I can feel it's going to be a long ride.

Moments later I begin feeling tired of sitting and sleeping around; hence I get up and head for the toilet. The lights are off but I can imagine everyone's asleep, including my neighbor backseat.

Once inside the toilet stall I take a moment to contemplate these few hours that I sat behind Liam. Despite being so close, he's also very far. How I wish we could huddle up together like the last time in my bedroom.

I flush the toilet, clam it, and sit on it afterwards. My mind wanders off.

A short turbulence snaps me from the clouds and I realize it's ridiculous staying locked inside here. I rummage by the small door when I'm immediately forced back, in quite a speed.

What the heck!

"What do you think you're doing? Are you crazy?" I yell quietly.

Apparently this little cabin is barely enough for a single person, let alone the two of us. The light is dim, but I grasp Liam's facial features so well that I can see the smirk on his tempting lips.

"Depends on your answer, Ms. Jones," he utters. "What kind of games are you playing with me?"

A hard scowl settles on my face. "Game? What game?"

"Seriously, Kira?" Liam looks at me more intensely and he seems deadly serious, his gaze scorching.

"Look, let me just go before anyone catches us here. We can talk about that later, please." I try to slip but I forget it's impossible without his will.

"You are not going anywhere, Kira," he says with action, blocking my path with his towering frame. "Not until you tell me why you're angry at me. Why you're so busy avoiding me."

"What?" I huff, biting my lower lip hard. *No, let me go please.*

"Well, unless you want us to settle this in front of everyone, which I don't have any trouble with," Liam states with an indescribable tone of voice.

My God! I know he is not kidding.

I run my fingers through my curls, searching for an intelligent response. "What is it that you want, Mr. Darcy?" is the only thing I come up with.

How lame! My subconscious tuts.

Liam's eyes glow amorously, shutting the distance between us. I blaze inside, my blood thrumming riotously. I should move . . . but my legs refuse.

"I want you, isn't it obvious?" Liam whispers hoarsely.

"Huh?" Damn, he's really making me lose my mind. I gulp at his mocking and godly look that devours the tremble of my lips.

"And I know you want me, too," he remarks confidently, grazing his thumb on my mouth. Fuck! "However, I don't understand why you're pushing me away, and I can't stand it," he breathes against my neck and it feels quiet electrifying, lascivious in my part.

I can feel his heartbeat . . . and mine takes a dangerous pace. Oh yes, I want him, now, right in this place, but I'll never admit.

"I can't do anything about it, and you know very well the reason why I'm keeping my distance," I tell him softly, trying to avert my gaze. "Please, Liam, let's not complicate things more than—" I don't even have time to finish my sentence for he's already taking charge of destroying my resolutions.

He shuts me with a kiss. . . a possessive kiss.

I know for a fact that I can never resist him, yet I attempt to put up a fight, which I fail miserably as he makes me completely melt into his brace.

"Liam—" I breathe between his lips but instantly shut up. His tongue is forceful, relentless, such a turn on for my already enraged hormones. I hold his shoulders, and he my waist that he grips dominantly.

Oh Lord, I could die for his touch, kisses, and his imperial urge to have me in his mercy. I slowly submit, letting him take me wherever he wishes to take me.

And then, just as I'm about to fall deep and succumb to my desires, he sets me free. Damn it! It's a pure scam! I grunt inwardly.

"See?" Liam mutters coolly, his grin proud and censure.

"Jerk," I utter breathlessly and he smiles at it.

Fuck him!

He swaps me for a tight hug. "Don't run away from me, Kira. Please," he breathes and I still, transfixed, from his soft plea.

My heart shrinks.

"I'm not sure what it is that you have," he says gently. "I can't think straight since your arrival at my ranch and it's been so frustrating. And you know what else?" I pull back and stare unblinkingly at him. "I feel like I've known you my entire life; it's crazy, isn't it?"

I know the feeling, I think to myself, but it doesn't change anything.

"What a poet," I mumble with a small smile.

"Me?" He seems entranced, and I just nod.

I never imagined Mr. Intense to be this romantic. As always, I forget everything when I'm with him. I even forget where we are, and the kind of danger we're exposing ourselves with.

However, there's something wild about this secret romance. It's a wild bomb and time seems to be its detonator. It makes me feel like a teen in love, something I never experienced in my teenage. I don't want to wake up.

Suddenly Sam crosses my mind like a hurtful reminder and all the excitement fades away. I'm back to the backstabber friend who can't even do things in the open. I blanch at the thought of her finding out about us.

As if Liam can read my mind, which he certainly can, he slowly envelops his strong arms around me to glue us together once again. I accept willingly and embrace him tightly, afraid to let him go for good.

"You should probably go ahead first," I suggest, breathing in his tantalizing scent.

His body tenses. "Okay. But make sure to stay where I can see you," he orders, and I smile at the sound of his majestic voice.

"I will," I utter, I lie.

I feel extra terrible when Liam finally walks out of the stall. Tears slowly gather and start drenching my face, and with much difficulty, I collect myself and breathe in a meditating manner. It's so hard to understand how people stay in love.

Why does it have to be this complex?

I'm seriously regretting leaving L.A. I wouldn't be this undecided right now. I'd probably be sleeping inside my humble abode, watching some silly romantic comedy . . . or anything crazy from Kevin Hart . . . if not Madea.

Outside Miami International Airport, a classic black SUV is waiting for us. Pushing our way towards it, a man appears to regard our presence. He's around forty if my eyes don't lie; he is indeed older than the boys. He's an Arab as well, and possesses good features for a man to be termed as handsome, despite his faintly graying hair.

"Sir," he regards Malik with utmost respect, and then hands him the car keys.

What money can do.

"Jamal, everything good?" Malik asks casually, walking closer to him.

"All good," Jamal, as addressed by Malik, answers. Thereafter he turns to Liam, in the same manner; respective and gentle. "Sir Liam."

"Good to see you," Liam says with his sweet rare smile as they shake hands.

My poor heart. I could watch that smile the whole day long.

"Hi, there," Sam greets Jamal softly, hugging her purple camisole she's paired with a tight white jeans.

"Hi," he replies coolly.

I only smile at him, which he returns as given. He's already handling the bags, including mine, and I try to give him a hand with the task. Frankly, I'm used to do everything on my own, so it's kind of difficult to change overnight into a fragile little princess. Let's enjoy while it lasts, I make a mental reminder.

At last all our bags are filled in the car. Exhausted, I slip in the backseat, followed by Liam who uses the other door. My subconscious stays at the edge of her seat, totally intrigued, wriggling her behind gleefully.

I'm a little stunned, but I keep my mouth shut. Imagining what this cowboy is up to, especially after pinning me inside the plane toilet, I'm not sure what else to expect.

Malik sits behind the wheel, and Sam jumps at the front passenger seat, all smiley. Jamal exchanges a few words with Malik and the two agree to meet at home.

The engine roars and the ride commences from the Airport to some Miami streets. Just like L.A, the neon lights are all over and I can't contain my gaze from wandering. Not until I feel a familiar hand on mine.

Liam Darcy! My subconscious grins impeccably, her eyes fully awake despite the jetlag.

CHAPTER 23

Sam and Malik are indulged into a small talk. Being alone with Liam in the back is nothing but an ingredient for catastrophe. I'm almost yielding to this his little, enticing ploy of toying with my weak reserves.

"Oh God." I squirm, startled, Liam's hand reaching the apex of my thighs.

"What?" Sam cocks her head back.

Can't you be discreet? My subconscious yells, and back onto her seat, scowling.

"Nothing, I think I bit my tongue," I reply, feeling like the best liar in the world.

I hope they buy it.

"Damn you," I mutter soundlessly, eyeing Liam who grins like a child.

"Are you okay, Ms. Jones?" He keeps sliding his fingers smoothly all over my skin . . . heading to my— Oh no!

My tummy tightens, a foreign arousal invading me. "Um, yeah," I utter and grab *his* hand at the same time.

I swear I may start moaning all the saints' names if I don't deal with this playboy hiding behind an 18th century gentleman.

"Are you sure, Professor?" Malik asks softly, and it sounds more of a mockery.

"Because you sound like you've been stung by a bee," he adds, and the laughter fills the car.

Even Liam laughs this time. The audacity he has! I scowl.

"Very funny," I give out a sarcastic remark.

"Indeed," he mouths. I end up smiling as he struggles to get his hand away from my grip. Pervert!

Why do you like his game, nevertheless? My subconscious snickers, finding me absurd for my own good.

"Are you enjoying the sight of Miami, Ms. Jones?" he asks out of nowhere, making it sound like a normal conversation. *God, help me.*

"Yes, so far so good," I hardly answer, my voice as distracted as my body and mind.

This scheming Englishman! And here I thought he's all decent and grown up. Well, I'm not complaining, am I?

"Really?" Liam quips, caressing his strong fingers smoothly on my skin. I shudder at his touch, my body responding so easily, and my sex goddess keeps spiraling her sexy belly dance, dressed in a red Arabian costume with gold waist chain.

"Yes, it's not much different from L.A," I reply in a low voice, possibly hoarsely? I can't even tell, thanks to Liam's obscenity.

"I see." He now skittles his fingers tentatively to my inner thighs, making me undecided if it's clever of me to have worn a short skirt or not.

My breath quickens, feeling him nearing my panties. *Holy no!* I bind my legs briskly, stopping him, yet wanting him.

I'd really love to let him be as it already takes me heights, but I'm afraid they may call 911 thinking that I got bitten by a black mamba.

However, I can't help but smile at Liam's grinning face that looks radiant than ever with all the streetlights reflected on his eyes and skin. He's such a breathtaking sight, and his hands are incorrigibly playful.

What do I do with him? I mentally face-palm myself.

"Stop it," I mouth, staring at him.

"No," Liam returns similarly, and we both laugh in the same style.

Girl, you're going to get caught at this rate! My subconscious warns, but I'm not sure if there's talking to me at this point.

We drop by the bistro for dinner. Great, I'm famished. I always find it difficult eating in motion so I might as well have my fill now.

The tempting aroma makes my mouth succulent as we grab the menu. The place is warm and chic, beach style, packed with both the locals and foreigners.

"This looks yummy," Sam enthuses greedily, eyeing the pictured menu. "I'll have the dressed crab," she adds, and I don't really understand why people eat something that needs a hammer to break down.

I'm not a seafood enthusiast, I guess.

"I'll have chips and grilled tuna," I say in similar manner, thanking heavens my tummy is behaving splendidly.

"I'll have the same," Liam says quite casually, our glances meet. His smile is indeed provocative, not so easy to grasp.

But I've mastered plenty of him by now.

Malik prefers meat over fish, so he orders his fair share of a grilled steak with asparagus. "Oh, with some chips and salad, please." He grins innocently, and I huff softly. "Don't judge me, Professor! I'm very hungry," he snaps.

I stifle a chuckle. "I haven't said a thing, have I?"

"But you thought, I'm sure of it." He shoots me an accusing index.

"Shut up," I hiss laughingly, and catch Sam staring sideways.

The dinner goes smoothly amid chatting and laughing. We depart immediately after having a little cocktail for dessert. I don't even realize the time when we finally arrive at Malik's house, somewhere near the ocean. How lovely.

When we finally get out of the car, Jamal greets us once again. Oh, he's fast. I think he had to arrive here first, and that's why he left solo from the airport. He carefully takes our luggage in one go, except Liam's duffel bag which *he* carries it himself.

"Sweetie, what do you have to say about this place?" Sam whispers in my ear, making me shudder in a startle.

Jeez! She's grinning crazily with her knowing look.

"I can plainly rate it five stars," I whisper back and we share a discreet laughter. I feel five again, eyeing the luxurious modern villa in front of my eyes.

It is furnished in white, and half of it is built with glass, which includes the huge ceiling-tall windows and all the front doors. I can almost see the inside and its golden fluorescent lights. Such a lavish people live in, huh? My subconscious is ogling with doodle eyes, sighing dreamily.

Throwing my glance further, there's a vast swimming pool at the front yard, adjoined to this lawn garden. *Oh my!* My water goddess is officially resurrected. Several palm trees from different angles give the place a fine ambience of a little tropical paradise. In Short, it's an amazing house.

"Come in, ladies," Malik announces hospitably. "Welcome to Miami!" He dramatically claps his hands.

"Oh, we already are," Sam prompts, and as always, I only smile at the enthusiasm she exudes.

Liam, on the other hand, looks so well acquainted with the place that he's already heading in. He moves graciously whilst on a phone call that's seemingly important. He must've been here before, evidently. I just suck in a fresh breath and push my way inside, following Malik's lead.

Everyone seems worn-out from the flight. We all enter to our respective rooms without any further ado. I take a few minutes contemplating the features of my bedroom, a full white, including the beddings, except for the aqua blue plush couch and the ocean painting on the wall.

"Beautiful," I mutter, sauntering towards the wide window and see what lies behind the curtains.

It's incredibly marvelous . . . the splendid ocean view coupled with flashy buildings from a far. I smile softly, nostalgia surging like a tornado, ready to swipe me off. Why can't I stop thinking of him? He's stuck in my mind, his lips too, so is his touch. I hug myself instinctively.

"How I wish to feel his arms again," I breathe, shutting my eyes at the fantastic touch of his, imagining him near me.

Oh no! I need to shut these lewd thoughts, for I'm definitely getting sexually frustrated.

I need to change into something comfortable. A sleeping robe? No, maybe a T-shirt dress, I decide. When done, I climb on my bed, that's extremely comfortable, ready to call it a day.

Or maybe not yet, because a knock at the door flips my body over.

"Who is it?" I ask while fixing myself up.

"It's me." Liam's voice hits my senses, and I shriek.

God, what does he want now?

"Just a sec," I tell him hurriedly, trying hard to wipe off my stupid grin. How do I look? I put my messy curls presentable.

Just pathetic and horny! My subconscious answers with glee, enjoying my torments. With a sigh, I open the door.

"I came to say goodnight," Liam says while shutting the door.

"Oh really? I hope you do such a nice gesture to everyone, right?" I blush big time, folding my arms across my chest.

"Not really, I'm not that generous," Liam says with an exhausted sigh, his sexy eyes so tired and sleepy.

Oh, lucky me.

"You're very phony, you know." I smile. He's staring at me ardently, I can see it, and it's enough to start that shouldering heat I've been trying to undo.

"What are you thinking of?" he asks huskily, a tiny smile tugged on his lips.

"Nothing." *I'm just fantasizing about you, maybe?* Leaning against the wall, I eye him for a good while, wondering what to do with this mysterious man. He's really my rollercoaster, and I seem to be enthralled at each spin, ignoring the danger, and focus on the thrill only. *Oh God!*

"Really?" Liam queries, his face slightly furrowed.

"Yes?" I reply innocently, biting my bottom lip. "Is there something else you want, maybe?"

"Ms. Jones," Liam utters gently, closing the distance between us. *Oh boy!* My heart jumps a mile, my breath hitches. "Are you, by any chance, mistaking me for your kindergarten sweetheart?" he seriously asks.

"My kindergarten sweetheart?" I burst into laughter.

"Yes, because only he can accept this kind of goodnight arrangement." He laughs along, and looks so at ease while doing so, his eyes resembling a calm sea, unlike the first time I met him.

"Oh?" I mutter, having fun.

"Or is it that you are playing hard to get with me?" Liam proceeds and I end up laughing for good, ignoring Sam and anyone else who can possibly hear this moment. "I learned those words from you, if you remember correctly." He grins boyishly, leaning his face closer to mine.

"You've gone crazy," I whisper right near his lips, making my own body heat shoot high. Where is this going, dammit! "But I don't think it's a bad idea." I try to focus.

"What is?" Liam follows the sight of my playful eyes that tail his mouth. I can feel his breathing turning jerky, and no complaints coming from me.

I'm exactly the same.

"This one." I palm his face, and pull his head down for a kiss.

"Oh my," he gasps incredulously, making me chuckle.

Wrapping my waist tight, Liam's body crashes mine in a slow move. Our tongues roll and mingle sweetly, kissing each other deeply, and I melt in his furnace. *God, this feels right, but why is it still wrong?* I flounder.

Because you're a traitor unless you stop hiding, my subconscious replies coolly, no mockery detected. I cringe.

We keep kissing, Liam's hands caressing my skin softly, my back against the wall. It's so sweet, so delicious, and still so wrong. I feel the red alert in my head, impelling me to not do anything resultant to regrets. I decide to pull out when I begin losing myself into this bliss, afraid to cross the line.

It's true, we can't do this.

"Okay, this is enough," I utter breathlessly, chuckling.

Catching a breath, Liam bores his eyes into mine, and smiles broadly. "Evidently this is not enough, but I think you're right. Goodnight, Ms. Jones." He playfully lays another soft kiss on my lips, and my good night is guaranteed.

When I wake this morning I find my body totally invigorated. I had a dreamless night, which is always a good thing to me. I stretch up a bit, yawning, before opening the curtains to welcome the daylight. It's one of those beautiful mornings. I run for a quick shower without a soap and start making myself presentable.

Plucking some black leggings and a white T-shirt, I slip in them, and then tie my hair into a messy bun. Comfortable enough. With my slippers on, I finally leave the room. Everyone is still asleep judging from this silence. Well, Malik is in the living room.

I smile at his sight.

He is seated cross-legged in a white sectional couch, absentminded. He is immersed into a tablet, a steamed coffee on the side table. The frown of concentration on his face nearly makes me laugh, for it's rare to see him utterly serious. However, he does look dashing in both forms.

"Good morning," I greet him.

He looks up at me, a bit startled. "Hey, Professor. Good morning," he replies with a pleasant smile that could pluck a shining star from the sky.

"I can see." I take down the two wide stairs towards where he is.

"Did you have a nice rest?" he asks tenderly over a sip of coffee.

"Yeah, it was great."

"Glad to hear. Want some coffee? Apparently it's the only thing available here. We should probably go out for breakfast, right?"

"Really? Why don't we just restock the kitchen?" I say suggestively as going out for breakfast feels like a terrible errand for me.

"You mean, buying the groceries and stuff?" Malik seems way surprised.

"Yeah, just the basics," I say.

"And who's going to do the cooking? Because I don't even know how to boil an egg."

"Don't worry, I'll do the cooking," I answer laughingly. I miss doing it.

"You will?" he tags. "Wow, you surely know how to surprise me each day, Professor."

"Give me a break, will you?" I ignore his sarcasm.

The kitchen is sullen. I go through the fridge . . . only to find it totally empty. I thought Jamal lived here? Why is the kitchen so lifeless? Oh well, men will always be men.

"It's sad over there, isn't it?" Malik jokes.

"Yeah, very. Can we go right now?" I ask him.

"As you wish! I'm always up for a homemade meal." Malik is excited, and I only giggle at his cheerful mien.

"Okay, give me just a minute," I tell him, before slipping back into my bedroom. I need to get my wallet first.

Reaching outside, we slip into the dark grey Aston Martin that seems to have been parked for a good while. However, it's all clean and neat. Malik, dressed up in a vest and shorts, settles behind the wheel. It just takes a ten-minutes ride to the supermarket across the street.

"Okay, what are we buying exactly?" Malik queries jovially, his grey eyes full of excitement.

I wonder if he's ever done this shopping thing before; he looks like Alice in a wonderland. I laugh at the way he wanders his gaze around.

"Just push the cart, and I'll do the rest," I tell him while making efforts not to laugh again.

"Sure, Professor." He sighs dramatically.

I pick all the important things we might need including the toiletries, and other hygienic stuff. I add some eggs, vegetables, chicken, bacon and sausages among other few more.

For a moment Malik disappears from my sight, and when I find him, he's sucking a Popsicle whilst holding a bucketful of vanilla ice cream and a box of popsicles at the bucket top.

"Are you having fun?" I ask laughingly.

"Totally." He beams brightly.

Seriously? I just shake my head to the sides, stunned. "Okay, I guess." I shrug.

"I love this shopping thing, it's nice." He grins.

"Oh yeah? Because of having a popsicle so early in the morning?"

"Among other things."

"You're really something." We laugh,

Malik adds a carton of beer, four bottles of wine; two whites and two reds, and I add a gallon of tropical juice and two cartons of drinking water.

"Oh, I totally forgot," he utters, regarding the water.

"I know," I whisper in his ear, before pushing my way to the counter.

Our cart is full, and I'm sure we've got all the necessities. I open my wallet to get my card, but Malik stops me by holding my hand. I widen my eyes open at him.

"Allow me, please," he pleads, and doesn't even give me a chance to retaliate as he's already smiling flirtatiously at the lady who won't stop flushing pink unless we get out of here.

After the supermarket trip, we pass by this small bakery to buy some fresh bread; for which we end up buying more than just a bread. Again, Malik enjoys this new experience.

"Who's going to eat all these pastries, Malik?" I ask, on our way towards the car.

"Professor, you're living with three healthy men now," he says like an old man. "Don't ever underestimate our muscles."

"You know what, I'm done asking questions." I grab the door handle, laughing, and he fills the delicacies inside.

"This was so much fun, Professor," he announces for an umpteenth time, and I love the sound of it.

From all this, I realize that sometimes these rich folks are missing a lot in life than we imagine they don't. Even if their daily lives are filled with glamour and flash, there are still few simple things in life that have greater meaning than any of that, and we should probably be grateful for those little things we have. Good memory and happy moments are what count the most.

By the time we get back to the house Sam is sitting by the pool, tapping on her cellphone absentmindedly. The car pulls over and that's when she finally sees us. She gets up as we approach while laughing at one of Malik's jokes.

"Hey, guys, we've been trying to reach you in hours! Where have you been?" She looks agitated as though we were trying to elope.

Malik and I share a glance, for it hasn't been that long since we left; hours is a very huge exaggeration. Well, that's Sam . . . queen of drama.

"Well, as you can see . . ." Malik lifts one of the bags to let her see clearly. "We went to buy some stuff for the house, professor's orders." He grins my way, his playfulness everlastingly stuck to him.

"Oh, great," Sam answers with a tiny smile, stretching her arms with a yawn. She is wearing shorts and a hoodie, her long legs adorned with fluffy slippers. "I don't even have a toothbrush and the bathroom is totally empty."

"Where is Liam?" Malik asks as we move closer, his eyes scanning around for any trace of Mr. Intense.

And as always, my curiosity shoots beyond reasonable range, wondering about the same thing.

"I think he went to shower or something," Sam replies vaguely, shrugging her slender shoulders. "I'm not so sure, but he's inside."

We all head inside where Malik places some of the things we bought on the kitchen countertop, and I do the rest. Now this feels like home, and it's exactly my scene.

The kitchen in its deserving glory.

We both laugh at the sight of the bakery we've brought home. I mean, it's probably enough for an entire week in case I follow that muscled-men speech Malik had given me earlier, let alone if we decide to eat out sometimes.

This is such a waste somehow. But no, I'm going to eat to my heart's content throughout my stay. What's the best part of a vacation? My food goddess seems elated, nodding her big head with clear ascertainment.

"Well, Professor," Malik says, "I did my part of the bargain as agreed. Can I leave now?"

"Yes, Malik, you can leave. I'll take it from here, thank you," I say and he nods.

Before leaving, however, he paces back as though he's forgotten something, and grabs another popsicle. "Sorry, it's just too refreshing," he utters with a wink.

Both Sam and I laugh this time. And here I thought Liam is the only childish one between the two.

Well, not that I'm being biased, but Malik is truly a breath of fresh air.

I start putting all the stuff we bought into their rightful places. While at it, Sam fixes her gaze on me with a big grin on her face. I won't like what's coming, I'm sure of it.

"Say it," I blurt out, on my way towards the refrigerator.

"So how is everything going on between you two?" Sam questions, and I'm starting to get tired of this insinuation.

"Everything is going fine," I answer.

"Come on, Kiki." She gives me playfully nudge. "I'm sure something is up, because you look in love, girlfriend. I know you well enough to notice that you're glowing for some reasons."

Really now? Should I say that I'm glowing and flushing crimson every now and then because of the same guy she's supposedly in love with?

And then what? Will Sam say it's okay? That she understands people can't choose whom to love? I feel like laughing out loud.

No, Kira, you'll never get to hear those words.

I don't realize that I'm zoning out until Sam waves her hand to literally wake me up. I glance at her and smile, wondering how we ended up here.

"Aren't you hungry?" I ask while taking the muffins from their package.

"What?" Sam squints her eyes.

"Try this, it's delicious." I hand her the muffin, and walk over the fridge to place the ice cream and Malik's popsicles.

"You won't tell me?" Sam yells.

"There's absolutely nothing going on between us," I tell her casually while stocking the fridge.

"Really?" Her voice is doubtful.

"Really. I don't know where you got the idea, but I can swear that it's not what you're thinking." I manage to face her this time, for what I've just said is the truth.

"Well-maybe-I-misinterpreted-things," she says, mouthful.

I pause for a second, watching her. I wish I could tell her that Liam is the one I'm crazy about but I don't have the guts to; call me chicken, coward, and all other names to fit the scenario, but this is it. I can't do it.

"Yeah, we just get along fine, nothing more," I stipulate seriously. "And please don't insinuate this again, it's annoying," I add, moving back to my business.

"Sure, if you say so," Sam mutters, and I know she's still unconvinced. "I got a call from the office," she says, and I smell trouble.

"Why? What happened?" I ask warily.

"They were asking if I'm in L.A, that way they can trap me into an emergency work." She takes a seat on the barstool, and I place my arms on the countertop.

"They should go to hell."

"I know, right?"

"Yes. They should find that bitchy assistant you hate so much." I laugh, and I'm sure I've landed myself a new topic.

There's one colleague of hers and they're like North and South.

"It's exactly what I told them. To think I got this vacation instead of her, she must be plotting on how to get back at me right now."

We laugh aloud.

"Well, I can always send a medical emergency saying our grand aunt has passed away," I say.

"Oh boy, this time they'll catch on," says Sam. "Maybe we should say grandpa. We found out we have one in the deepest part of rural Montana."

"Jesus. They'll sue us someday. Play hard that Ivy never finds out about our fake cousinhood."

"She can go to hell."

At last we close the subject and I start making some bacon, scrambled eggs and French toasts. Sam prepares some coffee, and green tea for herself.

We just set the breakfast right here in the kitchen, and in less than thirty minutes we are done.

"And now we're set," I say, sighing.

"Oh, finally," utters Sam ecstatically. "You know, we could've just gone out for breakfast instead of all this work."

"It's just breakfast, Sam, and it's tiring eating out every time."

"Of course not, you simply love playing mommy in the kitchen, which I absolutely love!"

"I bet you do," I say.

Now she smiles, and all of a sudden hugs me from behind. "My Kiki, I love you a lot, you know? You're like a mother I never had, and the best friend ever!"

The best? I highly doubt.

I stay rigid momentarily. Her words unleash the guilt that makes me swallow hard.

"No, I'm not," I argue casually.

I'm a backstabber, unfortunately, and you're going to hate me soon.

"You're not?" she gasps and cocks her head to look me in the eyes.

"I'm not your mother," I mutter so as to back up my earlier response. "My God, you're making me sound like an old lady."

I suddenly remember the things we've been through all these years, and I don't think I can bear to lose her friendship. It's been the only relationship I have had since I lost my family.

Sam calls the guys over for breakfast. It's now that I get to see Mr. Intense, all new and transformed. I glue my eyes on him, and he does exactly the same. His brown hair all messy, in a sexy way, he just looks delicious.

Could there be another perfect guy in my eyes?

It's crazy how in this one wide world you may probably encounter just one person that wouldn't wish to change a thing about them.

Maybe Liam is that person to me, despite any physical default or character flaw that other people may possibly crucify him for.

I think it's what they say, 'when you love someone, you deny the truth, believe a lie, and there'll be times that you'll believe that you can really fly'.

"Good morning, Ms. Jones," he calmly greets me. I can almost feel the mischief behind his gleaming eyes.

Focus Kira! Focus!

"Morning, Mr. Darcy," I answer curtly.

Malik clears his throat. "When will you guys drop this boring formality?" he queries.

"Exactly my thoughts," Sam says, and nearly rolls her eyes. "It's a little disturbing. I mean, do you guys hate each other or something? Then why are you so formal to each other? Sometimes I wonder if you even talk."

It's all that I needed to make this more awesome than it already is.

"I'm not sure why, but it's comfortable this way," I say in a perfectly normal tone of voice.

Malik raises an amused eyebrow, and tags, "Is it?" He looks straight at me. I know this look of his, and he is doing it on purpose.

I'll get you for this, Malik!

"I like the sound of her name, that's why I use it," Liam says flatly, staring directly at me. "And I don't hate her, Samantha . . . on the contrary." He now faces my friend whose eyes freeze.

On the contrary? What's wrong with him?

"I see," says Sam with an indescribable smile.

"I'm starving," Malik announces like a baby.

"Yes, let's have breakfast, please. I can't wait to taste the water, and I don't even have a bathing suit," Sam says enthusiastically. "Why don't we go for a little shopping, Kira?" She gives me a hopeful smile.

I don't know whether it's a casual attempt, or her way of trying to ignore Liam's remark. Or maybe I'm just going overboard right now.

Guilt is a bitch, after all.

"Sure, I don't have any either," I reply, and the peace is restored.

At least for now.

Around eleven we go out for the agreed girls' fashion extravaganza. Sam turns the Navigation on, and she's the one driving. As expected, she loves driving nice cars.

A few hours later, just as Malik suggested, we manage to buy all the goodies we need for a perfect beach day. The price isn't of peanut, but it's worth it.

"Can we take a little walk?" I ask Sam.

"Oh, Kira." She sighs. "Tourism . . . right now? Please, it's hot."

"Alright," I grunt, feeling shortchanged. I'd really love to take a walk around this Lincoln Avenue or whatever the name is.

There are plenty of shops and high-end boutiques around the street, and its architect of Spanish colonial style makes it look like something from a postcard. I hope I'll have another chance.

It's indeed hot as we finally find our road home. I'm the one driving this time and we no longer need the navigation. Sam is busy taking another look at the merchandise she's just bought.

"Oh, I love this cutie here. Don't you think it's sexy?" She shows me a piece of yellow bikini that's extremely eye-catching.

"I'm sure you're going to rock in it," I answer with a smile.

"Miami chicks, better watch out for your men," she screams her usual lines, forcing a smile out of me, before breaking into a heavy sigh. "Even if I can't have Liam, this has been the best summer ever."

Can we not talk about Liam?

CHAPTER 25

"Why can't you just tell him how you feel already? I'm tired of the same old song, you know. Are you afraid that he may not feel the same way?" I cock my head to face Sam,

Well, what can I lose from a simple question?

"Maybe," she answers with a heavy sigh. "I've never been rejected before, and I always get all the attention I need. But for the first time I'm scared to be a loser; I'm afraid that he—" She suddenly gives me a suspicious look. "Wait, why should I tell you about it while you refuse to tell me about your secret affairs?"

Secret affair? I almost hit the brakes.

"What do you mean?" I woman-up and ask, my heart racing.

"You keep exchanging glances with Malik, and when I ask, you keep denying," she starts the same speech, and I'm kind of relieved either way. "If it's not the secret romance, then there's something you two are hiding from us; I wasn't born yesterday."

Well . . .

"Suppose you're right," I say, and she stares intently at me as I keep my eyes on the road. "Let's say I do like someone, but that person is not Malik." I glance fleetingly at her.

"And . . . who would that person be, if it's not Malik?" she asks, curious, and my throat turns dry instantly.

Mustering the most reserved courage I have, I ask Sam, "What if it's Liam?" My eyes are bold and determined. "What if the guy I like is the same one you like?"

Unsettling silence takes a reign, our eyes fixed on one another. My heart beats at the speed of a rocket, wondering what I'm doing with my crazed life. But it's the truth, right? My subconscious is nowhere to be found.

Why isn't Sam saying anything? I can't help but worry over this intense atmosphere blanketing us. It's unnerving. And suddenly, she bursts out laughing, hysterically, forcing a small frown on my face.

Is she going wacko?

"That's pretty funny!" She keeps laughing. "You? Liking Liam? Seriously, Kira?" Her voice is wrapped with utter disbelief.

"Yes. Is it impossible?" I ask, not sure how exactly I sound.

"Totally," says Sam, and I just hold my tongue. "I mean, I don't think Liam is your type, Kira . . . let's face it." She's amused.

What does she mean by that?

"And may I know why?" I ask incredulously, my eyes wider in stun. "Or rather, who *is* my type?" I fail to hold the feel of offense I find in her remark.

"I don't know, Kira. I'd say someone like Malik, whom you get along so perfectly, but then he's also a playboy; he'll just play with your feelings. Maybe you deserve someone sweet and saint," she says. "Someone who won't give you a headache. But Liam, he's like . . . I don't know. He's just not for you. And Malik, he's so used to date worldly women so it'll be disastrous."

"Oh?" I'm unsure of what I'm feeling after hearing this. "So, men like Liam and Malik are not my level. Is that what you mean?"

I'm hurt.

"Well, something like that," Sam says, shrugging. "Kira, you've never seriously dated anyone before. If you begin a relationship, then it should be with someone who'll be a sweetheart and not some egocentric dude who knows so perfectly that he's great."

And that egocentric dude is Liam? I don't really like the sound of this, for he's not like that.

"Okay, I heard you." I smile, swallowing my displeasure. "And what if we happen to fall for the same guy?" I ask casually, my eyes back on the road.

"Why the fuck would you ask something like that?" Sam deadpans.

"Out of curiosity?" I remark coolly, shrugging. "Perhaps I'm trying to write a story about love and friendship."

"We're both going to give up on him," Sam answers right away, giving no room for thinking twice. "We're friends, right? No guy should come between us."

I wish it's as easy as saying it.

"Even if that guy loves you instead of me? Are you absolutely capable of giving up on him?" I ask, and she frowns, but I don't give up. "Suppose it's Liam, the man you love. Will you pack your bags and leave, just because I also happen to love him?"

"Kira, stop the nonsense! That's not even funny," she says sternly.

I know it's not, and I wish it was nothing but one of my nightmares.

"I'm sorry, I was just asking," I utter with a smile, my question answered with her reaction alone. "I guess you're right, friendship comes first. There are plenty of men out there, right?"

But will there be another one like him? I just shut up and drive.

It's finally time to swim in the Atlantic. The sun is shining so bright, and the sound of the ocean breeze makes my heart flutter. I miss Los Angeles and *our* Venice beach that's like a ladies-free night club.

"Are you ready, Kira Jones?" Sam shouts from behind me as we walk. "I know this is your scene, baby, but why the long face?"

I smile sullenly. "Can't I take in the details first? Let me enjoy the scent of the ocean for a while; I'll catch up with you."

"Oh, professor! So poetic." Malik appears out of nowhere. "I hope you're not going to swim like that, because you are going to break my heart." He walks away with a bashful smile. That's Malik.

The warm sand feels great against my bare feet. I immediately feel at home at the sound of the waves crashing each other without rage, as though inviting me to be the guest of honor.

At the corner of my eye I see Sam laughing by Malik's side, and without a doubt the Arab must've cracked one of his humorous jokes that's impossible not to laugh for. I click one photo of them without their knowledge.

Feeling ecstatic, I keep walking solo, checking my camera with a big smile. Oh, I love beaches! However, I think I'm forgetting someone, my subconscious reminds me with pleasure.

Yes, Mr. Intense.

Turning around, out of pure curiosity, I find Liam playing football with some kids. *Wow!* He's so serene and carefree right now that I enjoy devouring him with my eyes wide-open.

I never thought he has other hobbies apart from books and staying grumpy, but apparently he does know how to kick the ball. For the first time I snap a perfect picture of him.

He laughs heartily after being outmaneuvered by this dark-skinned boy among the other four. Immediately I forget everything else around me and focus solely on this scene, without forgetting the indiscreet grin on my face.

I could stare at him all day long.

I'm so immersed in the moment. I hardly notice that Liam is also staring at me. Blushing, I decide to continue walking after turning as red as a tomato from his smile alone.

Surprising, Mr. Intense hurries over to keep up my pace before asking, "Are you okay?"

He's still smiling bright.

"Yeah," I reply.

"Did you get enough pictures?" he asks again, and I know it's a mockery. "Why? Are you afraid I may charge you for using my perfect body as the subject of your interest?"

"What?" I burst out laughing. "You're so full of yourself, Mr. Darcy."

"I'm not sure about that." Liam laughs along. "I hope you keep my picture well."

"I will," I tell him, and we go silent for a while, meditating the surrounding. "I didn't know you play soccer . . . or football, as you call it," I strike a new conversation while we trail the others.

"You still don't know a lot about me, Ms. Jones." Liam throws me a playfully smile.

"Oh really, now?" I huff delightedly, and Liam shakes his head to the sides.

"But I'll be very glad to show you more." He wiggles his eyebrow, and I get thrown off at the sight.

Is he possessed? So playful.

"Sure, I'll be happy to see more of you, Mr. Darcy," I tell him, and he's no idea how much I'm dying to do that.

His smile broadens, but doesn't escalate the topic, which is good. I'm afraid if I dig deeper I may end up mouthful.

"Are you enjoying the beach?" he asks, his voice calm.

"Pretty much, you?" I gaze up at him, and he down at me.

"Looks okay," he quips.

I arch my brows. *Just okay?* I don't think he's excited at all, and I wonder what he really likes about his idea of having fun.

"You don't like beaches, do you?" I take my chances.

"I just don't have time for this." Liam smiles, but seems to really mean it.

"Oh come on, Liam! It's just once in a while, and you're on a vacation for Christ's sake!" I practically sound reproachful, and he seems amused. "You should seriously loosen up a bit, like what your mother said, work can wait sometimes."

"Liam, huh?" He looks down at me, and I gawp. "I love it, Kira." He gives me his best smile.

I've so forgotten about our infamous honorifics. I blush profusely.

"I mean, Mr. Darcy." I tease, and we both laugh. *God, I love talking to him.* "So you're not really happy being here, in the middle of this tropical paradise?" Our hands are constantly colliding, sending me a light shiver as our fingers graze.

"I'm only here because of you, Kira," he says.

"Huh?" I utter, startled enough to flush crimson.

"Only you, Ms. Jones," he adds, and his eyes plunge deeply into mine.

God knows what this man does to me. He always knows where to press so as to break down my walls. I stand still, when he slowly walks past me to join the others. I absently follow suit, with my face on fire from that simple remark of his.

We all stop around a huge umbrella with several adjustable chairs. Everything looks perfect, and I wonder who made this accommodation to begin with. And my question is immediately getting its answer as the person in charge finally shows up.

Jamal marches from the other side in a company of this gorgeous blonde with short, glamorous hairstyle. He must've been here before us, and evidently the one prepared this beach day, because we even have a small cooler with drinks, and clean towels.

Sam is asking Malik to help her applying some cream on her back, and I'm just standing idly watching everyone into action.

Jamal finally gets under the umbrella and gives Liam something like a receipt or a note. They exchange a little talk, in a serious manner, and I only manage to hear the last of it when I put my stuff down.

"I got it," Jamal says. "It'll be ready in a day or two."

"Thanks," Liam responds gratefully.

And it's now that I get to watch the blonde in a close-up. Well, she is indeed gorgeous. Her plump breasts swell rightly beneath the fabric of her white bikini top, and they are quite exquisite.

I wonder if they're natural or silicone, but for sure she's the type you'd want to keep away from your man. And she seems to know that. Liam looks at her once, but never twice. He doesn't seem affected at all.

That's our cowboy! My subconscious cheers.

The blonde smiles tenderly at me, and I respond similarly. She has a piercing on her bellybutton that makes her way sexier than she already is. Despite being occupied, Sam catches my glance and we share the usual knowing look.

I'm sure she's thinking what I'm thinking.

"Everything okay over there?" Malik snaps, his hands still playing masseuse on Sam's back.

"Yeah, all set," Jamal answers and in a few moment he disappears with his lady.

Sam peels off her sarong and runs for the water. I pretend to fix something on my camera, because I don't know how to strip in front of Liam, now that he's just a step from me.

"You coming, Kiki?" Sam calls.

"Yeah, just a minute." I dismiss her.

"Professor, hurry up," Malik adds. "You wanted the beach, remember?" He winks in a provoking way, knowing exactly what I'm thinking and feeling right now.

He's like Loki of Asgard. Full of mischief, damn it!

"Yes, sir, I remember." I roll my eyes, and he simply laughs while undressing his polo shirt, revealing his average bare chest.

Both Malik and Sam jump into the ocean, and I can only imagine how it feels to be in that holy water. Suddenly, a familiar voice startles me from behind that I nearly jump.

"Aren't you going?" Liam asks suddenly, his blue eyes full of mockery as though he knows my worry well enough.

"I am," I reply.

He only raises one eyebrow, challenging my statement. Sitting on the chair, he reclines back comfortably with both hands crossed behind his head.

With a sly look towards him, I whip off my top. His gaze stays firm on my upper body, a foreign gleam in his eyes. Yes, two can play this game, sweetheart! I smile. Bending slowly, I pull my shorts down my thighs. He sucks in a sharp breath, his lips curled into a sultry smile.

I'm remained with a pair of triple-stringed bikini, a fine green apple that fits on my honey-colored skin perfectly. I can feel Liam's gaze even when I'm not looking. Oh my! Well, enjoy the sight, Mr. Darcy! I lie my clothes down and turn around towards the ocean.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Ms. Jones?" Liam tells me as I'm about to go. I whirl towards him, biting my lower lip, and he's holding the sunscreen.

"Oh, right," I utter.

Unless I want to become a toast, I've got to apply some. I'm planning to stroll around. With Liam so playfully today, it gives me a difficult time composing myself.

Where is that cold guy I met a week ago again?

Maybe we've forgotten him in Yellowstone.

I start applying the cream, without revealing how uncomfortable he makes me feel at the moment. I never had time to feel insecure about my body before, but not today.

Liam marches behind me, without my knowledge, and starts taking charge of my back. As always, my body stiffens at his touch, and my breathing turns raspy at the nibbling of his fingers.

"Relax, baby, it's not a big deal," he sensually whispers in my ear.

"I didn't say anything, did I?" I moan softly, soundlessly, as he drops his touch about my waist. "Baby?" I smile, my eyes clammed.

"You didn't say, but you thought," he replies. "And yes, *baby*," he whispers again.

Goodness gracious!

"Oh, so you can read my thoughts now?" I chuckle. "And baby sounds sexy, Mr. Darcy," I say.

"I always do. And I do love sex, Ms. Jones," he tells me flatly, and I stifle a laugh.
"Please, relax your body, huh? Your friend doesn't mind at all."

Relax? Ha! All I want is to get cozy with you, Mr. Darcy.

I try turning around to face him, but the touch of his hands drives my resolution away. I still and follow his advice, enjoying the feeling of his strong fingers deep into my skin as he nibbles my shoulders.

"Liam," I moan his name.

"Yes, Kira," he murmurs, his voice hoarse and sexy, and I comprehend that I have nothing to say. "You're so beautiful," he breathes against my neck, and I suck in a deep breath. "I wish I could have you just for myself right now."

Damn, me too!

With that I manage to smile stupidly. I'm so glad that my friend looks busy enough that she doesn't even notice us. Liam finishes his job, and I feel great after the little treat from the King of my heart.

"Can you swim?" I ask.

"Yes, I can." Liam plucks a bottle of water from the cooler.

"So . . . does it mean you're . . . coming?" My eyes are hopeful.

"No, I'd rather sit here and watch you," he murmurs, smiling while uncapping the bottle.

"My pleasure." I wink, and he bites his lip . . . lustfully?

"But perhaps next time I'd love to swim with you." He winks, too.

Oh boy!

"Next time?"

"Yes. Just the two of us without an audience."

I chuckle with utter joy. "I'd love that, sire."

"Okay, go and have fun," he instructs like a wise old man. "And you look so sexy in that attire."

Oh my! I grin awesomely.

"Thank you, Liam," I reply, and he looks amused at the sound of his name from my mouth. With Liam's reassuring words my body confidence is back intact, and I immediately run to join the others, leaving him stalking my behind.

Naughty boy.

CHAPTER 26

We had an amazing time at the beach. After dinner we are now having drinks at this cool club with nice Latino music filling the air. Jamal and his gorgeous blonde are the one who led us here. I'm not really a clubbing material, but right now it simply feels perfect. I'm having so much fun . . . talking and drinking with my two girls.

The guys kept arguing about football earlier, so we kindly asked them to get lost. Who wants to know what Messi and Ronaldo did, or did not do last season? Even right now we can still hear them arguing as they're seated at the bar, not far from our booth.

"I hate football," Jamal's blonde utters.

"Tell me about it." Sam rolls her eyes while pulling the cocktail glass to her mouth. "But it's like every guy in the world loves it, and some of us just have to put up with the nonsensical arguments."

I smile and say, "Exactly how they put up with your discussion about the type of nude lipstick to match your skin tone." I cross my legs, amused.

"Jamal always gives me the you-look-good-in-everything speech whenever I ask him about my fashion scruple," the blonde says, making us all laugh.

Apparently her name is Natasha, and she is actually so cool and friendly. She's engaged to Jamal . . . which explains their relationship better.

"So, when are you two getting married?" Sam asks her and im glad she does.

I love hearing people's plans for marriages and other romantic endeavors. It's a reminder that love does exist.

"Maybe this autumn, because it's my birthday season." Natasha beams, and I can feel the ecstasy from the pink in her cheeks.

"So lovely," I comment dreamily.

"I know, right?" Sam remarks, her eyes gleaming in similar fashion as mine.

I sip my large pinkish cocktail while letting my glance wander around the dance floor. A few people are sweating their bodies out at the sound of samba or . . . salsa? Whatever the name, I love the sound of it. And all of a suddenly the music changes into a song that catches my full attention.

Macarena.

In fact, I'm not the only one who seems hyped.

"Oh, I love this song!" Natasha snaps sassily.

"Me, too!" Sam seconds.

"Me three." I raise a dramatic hand, and we all laugh; the kind of laughter that emphasizes naughtiness. "No, you can't be serious," I utter as my eyes snatch their nod.

"Yes, Kiki," Sam insists, up to her feet.

Natasha gets up abruptly. "Come on ladies, let's get this show started!" she screams, and I certainly can't believe I'm following them.

Sam and Natasha's minds seem to work alike, but am I capable of losing my head?

Why not? My subconscious remarks excitedly, ready to lose her mind.

We jump on the floor and catch up with the beat. We form a row and sway the same steps to follow the classic Macarena dance.

Perhaps this is the only song that can get me on my feet. Sam and I loved it since we were little. Plus a little bit of alcohol in my blood, I quickly lose myself.

The boys are completely stunned by this craziness; none of us contains the laughter. And now the entire population in the club has shifted attention on us.

More people join in, and together we make the night wild. Macarena is an old song but it never leaves anyone who knows it indifferent, even today.

As the song ends, the club is filled with cheers and whistles. I think it's enough dancing for a life time; now that another song plays I take a chance to slip into the ladies' room.

Inside, I splash some water on my sweaty face, and then wipe it with a tissue, staring at the reflection of myself before my eyes. The tight up-do of my hair makes me smile at this girl on the mirror, who has so many flaws.

So many issues to resolve. I sigh, tugging the hairband to free my hair.

I make my exit, passing by certain couple chucking under the dim light, entertaining their hormones. Yuck! I wonder if I'll ever get used to clubs and the things happening inside. However, this one is a bit decent compared to most.

I'm about to leave the restroom area when a hand takes a hold of mine in a soft but startling manner. I almost scream out of fear, but the face I decipher in front of me, despite the partial darkness, makes me change my mind. I sigh with relief.

I hate this feeling of someone touching me without a warning. It brings me some memories I'd rather forget. However, knowing the one touching me right now, changes everything.

"Did I scare you?" Liam breathes, enwrapping my waist closely that I crush my body against his hard chest.

"A little," I utter, trying to calm in his arms, his face quite near mine.

"What are—" I can't even finish my question when Liam takes possession of my mouth to shut me up.

Oh boy, he really turns me on. It's a short, lingering kiss mixed with a taste of Scotch that succeeds to really keep me quiet.

"I'm forever awed with your ability to find me, Mr. Darcy. It is plausible." I stare at him blushing, my arms around his neck.

"Really now?" He grins triumphantly, and I can still smell his nice aftershave even after we part. I guess he had a shave today and he looks five years younger. "I shall make it my mission to awe you every single day, Ms. Jones. It contents my heart."

Oh my! My heart has just trotted with amusement.

"I shall wait and see how you're going to do it, then. Just be careful with my heart, I can hardly handle the surprise attacks like this one."

He beams, his blue eyes in quite a sparkle. "That shall be kept in mind. I apologize for my recklessness," he says, melting my poor heart.

"You don't need to." I smile profusely, succumbing to the heat overpowering my body, little by little, making me yearn for one more of his kisses, touches . . . or more? Jeez!

"Miss me?" I glance up at him.

"All the time, trust me. And you dance beautifully," he breathes softly against my skin. "You're like box full of surprises."

"Thank you," I respond proudly. He's really mastered the art of treating a lady, I must confess.

"You are warmly welcome, babe." He grins.

Babe? I press my lips contentedly.

"Thank you, babe. Can I go now?" I arch my brows playfully.

"Not so fast, young lady." Liam pulls me back, fully aware of my game. Goodness he's just playing with my hormones right now.

"What?" I whisper, Liam's forehead against mine, my lips quivering as they brush slightly against his. "Are you drunk?" I tease, trying to free my mind that's so indulged into what my body wants.

"Me? I'm perfectly sober," Liam replies, his voice gentle and playful. "I drink responsibly, Ms. Jones, in case you're worried." His smile, full of gallant, mocks me sweetly.

"Oh yeah? Then what is this indecent behavior of cornering the poor, defenseless woman in the dark, huh? Are you infatuated by this lady that much?" I wet my lip audaciously, feeling so free while imprisoned in his arms, my little bliss.

"Yes." Liam leans back against the wall, dragging me with him, my breasts sagged by his muscles. *I need a fan!* "She drives me crazy, and it's impossible to resist her sphere of prettiness."

I burst out laughing, not knowing if I'll ever get tired of Liam's mischief. I know there's a lot more to him, and I can't wait to learn about it. All the mysteries of Darcy. *How many are they?* My subconscious is too busy ogling Mr. Intense to care about my inner trifles right now.

"Are you suggesting that I'm irresistible?" I tilt my head back to have a perfect glimpse of his facial profile, my body still into his tight grip.

"Are you having doubts of my speech?" he prompts, in a sound that only he can make.

Like an English gentleman he is.

"Hardly," I reply, "because I still wonder if being poetic is one of your tricks to capture the beautiful souls out there."

It better not.

Now he laughs hard. "I heard I have manners of an old, conceited lad," he tells me. "Do you think an average woman would stand here listening to my boring speech?"

Oh my!

"An average woman?" I raise a questioning eyebrow, a hint of pride pulsing in my heart. "And what am I, Mr. Darcy?"

He pulls my face closer, his eyes bored into mine condescendingly; but I don't fret. "The special one I've been waiting for," he whispers, and I turn into a melted cheese right away.

Damn! I want a piece of him. For the first time in my life I'm in an uncontrollable urge for the manly touch.

Liam's touch, to be more precise . . . Only him.

"Don't mislead me, Mr. Darcy," I remark. "It's easy to get confused with your promising words," I add, and he doesn't say a thing but smile.

The music is still rocking heavily. I hear *'hips don't lie'* by Shakira.

Again I feel like a teenager in love. Making out in the club, at some abandoned corner, and it's extremely exciting. I've never done this before, but better late than never. Liam nuzzles his lips against mine, tantalizing with a sexy smile.

How I want to go away with him! Somewhere far from everyone.

I decide to respond by digging my hands into Liam's hair, and pull him for a very long kiss. Our tongue dance in a synergy, holding each other tightly. *Man, I love this!* I gasp for air when I release my lips from his, but our foreheads remain locked in a passionate way.

I feel Liam's whisky breath that makes me want him even more. He plants a soft kiss on my forehead and says, "You're beautiful."

"So are you," I reply huskily, and we share a laughter, Liam's gaze solely on mine. I can see the longing, utmost affection, and fire in his eyes. Does he want me as I want him? I mentally stay anxious, hoping to find the answer.

"I love you, Kira," he mutters slowly, and awakens all of my five body senses.

My eyes widen, unable to trust my hearing ability. *Did he say he loves me? "Liam," I breathe, watching Mr. Intense with wonder.*

"I want to have you all the time, by my side." He hugs me tightly.

"Liam . . ." My eyes are lingered with tears, feeling overjoyed upon hearing these few magical words. It makes me wonder if I've ever heard them before.

Of course I have, perhaps once or twice, but why does it sound so new? So overwhelming? I'm so stunned.

"I just want to kiss you right now." Liam sensually trails his lips on mine, and I hold his neck responsively. "Forget Samantha, forget your sleazy excuses . . . I just want you to feel me."

Ignoring the music, the noise, the people, and everything else, my lips meet Liam's in such a smooth manner. The butterflies bat their wings in my stomach, our lips coaxed together promisingly. God, I love this man. I need him more than I've ever needed anyone before. Yet I know I can't have him; he near yet so far. A thin, stubborn wall keeping us apart.

His hands grab my waist possessively, and I his neck, while molding by the wall like two helpless souls that are lost in the darkness. When we pull apart, Liam's hands are inside my top, caressing my skin rhythmically. He turns me on, slurring me, making me forget the harsh reality even for a while. God, I'm so lost.

Seriously he'd managed to turn my hormones into a racing marathon, and I can feel his length pulsating against my thigh. *My . . . oh my!* That devil in me finally chirps in, putting her glass of *Cabernet Sauvignon* on the table while cocking an eyebrow at me.

"I swear I'm having hard time, Kira," Liam breathes, and I know what he means, "I really want to make love to you."

"Me, too," I whisper, smiling at the feeling of his turned-on boy. "You're so tempting, Mr. Darcy."

"Why don't we just elope?" he teases, but his gaze seems earnest. I laugh hard, ignoring any mixed emotion in his proposition.

"And then what?" I ask softly, tipping my head back.

"I don't know." Liam smiles fondly, his gaze fixed on mine intensely. "We can just go to England."

"Oh really, now?" I quip, regaling the idea in my head. How cool would that be, huh? My subconscious scowls, probably finding me insane.

"Yes, I'll take very good care of you, I promise."

"And forget everything?"

"And everyone." He cups my face, and the look of his glistening blue eyes makes me suck in a deep breath. "Can't we do that?" He kisses the corner of my mouth.

"How I wish it were that simple," I tell him softly, my inner conflict resumed to its peak. "Let's get back to the others, they may start to worry especially since we're both absent."

Why is it so hard? I cringe inwardly. I'd love to enjoy this moment without any mental distraction. I'd love kiss him, make out with him, and eventually make love to him, but it still feels wrong.

Because I'm still a traitor until I come clean.

I turn around to leave, but Liam refrains me with the back embrace. I stay rigid momentarily, feeling multiple emotions at once, my eyes going extra moist.

"How long, Kira?" he asks, and despite his half-drunk state, I can still understand the intensity of his question.

My heart tightens, guilty washing over me. I stay still for almost a minute, wondering what to say. Do I even have anything to say? I'm not being fair with him, I know, and mostly to Sam. Not even to myself.

"I just," I start, but end up holding my tongue, feeling lost.

Liam is right, one of my subconscious says, and I can't even tell who.

"Go ahead first, I'll go outside to get some air," Liam says, and I know he's hurt.

I don't want him gone. I don't even know what I'm doing anymore.

"Liam, wait." I hold him, stopping him from moving. "You said we should forget everything else tonight, can't we do that?"

What am I saying?

"Yes, I did, but then I think it's a bit ridiculous." He sighs. "Can you go with me to somewhere else tonight? And forget everything else, for just one night?"

Can I?

"Yes," I answer, and he just stares. "I can do it, Liam. We can go right now, and forget everything, just this one night." I turn desperate, holding his hand tight.

A little silence prevails, filling us with only the club sounds and that of our own thoughts. *Say something, please, Liam!* I stare imploringly at him.

"Kira," Liam utters, brushing a hand on my cheek. "I said I love you, and I mean it. I want you, so badly, and I need you, very much, but not just for one night." He hugs me once again, kissing the top of my head. "I want you as my woman, the one I'm free to be with, anywhere, anytime, and not a one-night-stand."

"Huh?" I hardly utter.

"I'll be outside, go and join the others," Liam says.

CHAPTER 27

Nostalgia enwraps me as I watch Liam moving away. It's suddenly cold, physically and emotionally cold. I embrace the loneliness, hugging myself tight, homesick, my mind ablaze.

He's mad . . . so mad and hurt.

Sullenly, I make my way back to the girls, and Sam's gaze is what takes my breath away as we bump into each other. She's on her way towards the bar, where Jamal and Natasha are having a lovebird moment. She looks dubiously at me, her face crunched.

"Hey, where were you?" she asks, and seems a bit tipsy that she nearly stumbles on the barstool.

"The restroom," I answer.

She doesn't buy my answer at all.

"I'm just coming from the restroom myself, you weren't there," Sam says.

Should I just blow everything away?

Staring intently at Sam, my heart beating so fast, I find myself uttering, "I was in the restroom first, and then I was with—"

"We were together. We went to get some air," someone interrupts.

I turn my eyes and Malik's hand slips around my shoulder casually. I gulp the lump in my throat.

"Oh, you should've just told me, Kiki." Sam grins, nudging me on the rib.

No, I should've just said it. I was with Liam, and I'm crazy in love with him. My head gets tenanted by so many thoughts and regrets.

"Do thank me later, Professor," Malik whispers in my ear, and I'm not sure if I should be grateful.

"I want to sit down," I breathe, my composure hardly sublimed.

Malik gives me an apprehensive look, his face worried. "Kira, are you okay?" he asks gently.

"No, Malik." I feel the pain in my chest, tears pooling in my eyes. "I'm not okay. This is not okay." I'm hovering.

Malik scoots me immediately towards an empty booth. "Hey." He sits next to me. "What happened? Did you fight with Liam?"

"I don't know." I press lips together, trying hard to stay composed. Malik scowls as I look up at him. "He's mad at me, he's tired, and he has every reason to be. And Sam . . . She doesn't even suspect what's going on. How can't she see it, huh? Why do I wish that she sees it? I want her to see it, Malik. You were able to find out, so why can't she find out? I won't be able to say it. I can't." Panic overwhelms me.

"Relax," Malik says softly, tugging my head towards his shoulder. I fully comply. "Forget about it for now, okay?" He pats my back.

"Mmm." I sniff, wiping the tears with the back of my hand.

"Forget everything, empty your mind, just listen to that music." Malik's voice is suddenly teasing.

I laugh. "I wish it was that easy."

"I know, right?" He laughs along. "Giving advice is so easy," he says, and I slowly begin to feel better as we keep talking. "It will be fine, Professor. It has to be."

I just give him a grateful smile, and somewhere deep inside my heart, I know all this has got to stop. I can't go on lying like this every time I get a chance to. I've got to make up my mind. It's either I'm in or out.

It's already past midnight as I pull the SUV in the parking lot. At least I was in a condition to drive. I can't believe the look of Sam lying into oblivion right on the passenger seat, totally drunk. I don't want to know how she was able to walk outside the club.

Sighing, I throw a glance at the two men in the backseat. Malik is at least in half of his faculty, and as for Liam, he's sleeping apparently. I smile bittersweetly. After our little moment in the dark, Liam made himself drunk as though getting back at me.

"Oh, we're back?" Malik utters once he's finally remembered the color of his house building.

"Yeah, and I'm not sure how we're going to take them out." I yawning, my eyes glued to the Englishman beside the handsome Arab.

"Oh, he's waking up." Malik grins, seeing Liam's eyes moving slightly. "Hey, bro, can you get up?"

"Of course I can," Liam grunts, squinting his eyes at the golden-yellow light beaming inside the car.

Yeah, sure, what a Superman you are!

"Sam, we're back." I try to wake my fake blonde, whose hair is collected to the side, half-hiding her tilted face.

"Hmm," she murmurs, and I sigh heavily. "Just one more round, please."

Oh God! This is going to take forever, I swear. When Sam gets wasted it's always a natural disaster, almost impossible to deal with it unless she gets sober.

"Get up," I snap, for the soft approach has never worked with her. "I'm counting to three; you know what happens after that." My voice is warning.

"Not the cold water, Kiki," Sam laments, making Malik laughs loudly.

Liam scrambles out of car without a word, his back sullen as my eyes stalk his sight. He's still mad, my subconscious mumbles sadly.

In what seems like the monument of time, Sam manages to get out of the car, with the help of Malik. Although she can't walk properly, her mouth is still as active as though she's sober. She's now singing *Macarena*.

"Okay, Sam, no more singing for God's sake," Malik scolds, scooting her inside.

"Come on, Malik, I've got a nice vocal so let me sing," she shouts ceremoniously.

A heavy breath leaves my lungs as I lock the car. "Well, Kira, the night is over," I utter, watching the shimmering night sky that always calms my nerves.

Liam's love confession hits the back of my mind, gushing my being with this overwhelming wave of mixed emotions. Closing my eyes, I end up smiling at the sound of his words replaying in my head.

I force my way inside the house and it's already silent enough. To my surprise, however, Liam is on the couch, gulping a bottle of water, and my brake is guaranteed. He stares at me, but says no word, again.

What was I expecting?

That he'd be smiling at me as if I'm the last cookie in the jar? Evidently he's getting tired of this stupid affair we're having like high school kids banned from dating before eighteen.

"Goodnight," I utter, forcing my reluctant legs to move. Can't he let me sleep with him? *What the hell, girl! My subconscious scowls at my insanity.*

"I'm not sure what's so good about it, but I'll pretend it is," Liam replies coolly while reclining back on the couch. What? My eyes broaden. "Go ahead, Ms. Jones. You must be having so much fun knowing this lad here . . . me . . . is witlessly into you! Yeah, great! Good for you!" He sounds drunk, accusing, and I'm so dumbstruck.

"Okay, that's it!" I take a seat next to him. "Are you angry at me because I refused to elope with you to England?" My voice comes a bit harsher.

Liam bursts out laughing. "You think I'm such a baby, don't you, Kira?" He moves closer, filling the distance between us. My pulse accelerates at the hot look he gives me, biting his bottom lip. "I said I love you, and you didn't say a thing. Yes, it makes me mad. Don't you love me, Ms. Jones? Am I not your type?" he demands in a low, husky voice.

Of course you're my type, dummy. I try my best not to laugh.

"So, you're mad because of that?" I ask, and he draws back, sighing. "I'm sorry," I say softly, leaning my side against the cushion, our faces near. Liam's eyes bore into mine, and I feel like he wants to touch me . . . my face . . . as his hand rises subtly.

I watch it with anticipation, my breath ragged, but Liam chooses against it as he drops his precious hand on his knee. He looks confused, and I know I'm the reason why. Oh no!

"You're so heartless." He shuts his eyes, and I can feel the sadness in him.

"I'm not heartless." I move closer, and he flies his eyes open with difficulty. "I just—
“ And my mouth gets shut by his lips taking mine briskly, surprising me.

“Don't talk,” he commands, placing my body secured in his arms. I say no syllable; I place my hands on his shoulders as he assaults my lips gently, making me feel his every move as our tongues swirl together in synch.

Holy Mother, will I get tired of it? The taste of scotch is such a turn on.

We kiss like there's no tomorrow, oblivious of anything and anyone. I can only feel the warmth of his body right now, as he presses me closely to his side, and the sweetness of his tongue that dominates mine wildly.

"You love my kisses but you don't love me," Liam whispers, giving me a punishment-like break.

I hate when he does this, and yet it makes me want him more.

"You love me but you refuse to fuck me," I reply huskily, and he bursts into a fit of giggles.

Oh God, what have I said? My sex goddess creases a proud, amused eyebrow.

"What did you say, Kira?" Liam asks, and I shut my eyes from embarrassment, my head on his chest. Damn! "Do you want it that bad, baby?" His voice is sexy, a pure torture.

"I do." I give him a coy look, blushing, my sex goddess sitting regal on her throne.

"I see." Liam nears his drowsy blue eyes closer to my face, a beguiling smile on his sexy lips. My whole body is on fire, and yes I want to cross the for red line. "You want to come to my room?" he keeps teasing me, nuzzling his thumb against my lips, tantalizing me softly.

Jesus!

"Will you let me?" I utter, feeling so high and needy.

"You know my answer, Kira," Liam whispers, the scotch in his breath turning me wild, heightening my insatiable desires. "But must we really do it like this? As if we're having an affair?" he adds.

No, God! Why is he always right? We really need to put an end to this sleazy relationship . . . or whatever the same is.

Gulping, I say, "Well, not really, I just—"

"Ugh, drunk women are weird and scary." Malik interrupts us, making me pull back immediately. After a short silence, I hear, "Okay, my life's a mess! Do I have to witness this as well?"

Damn this Arab! Can't he come back later?

"You startled me," I say, and he laughs loudly as though he's caught a big fish in a backyard pond.

"So, should I let you two continue kissing or should I take that drunkard to his room?" he asks, referring at Liam.

Maybe . . . the former?

"Take him; I think he's passing out." I watch the drunk cowboy who was all active a second ago.

"No, he's got some weird drinking habit. He can hear everything right now," Malik says.

"Really?" I ask.

"Go to bed, Ms. Jones, I love you," Liam says, and I bite my lip.

I love you, too, Mr. Darcy.

"Hmm, you've got some real deal, Professor. Do tell me everything later, okay?" Malik gives me a playful look.

"Shut up." I quickly run towards my room, grinning like a fool.

I wake up feeling energetic that I anticipated. I take a very long and relaxing shower. The same yellow sundress I wore when we first arrived at the ranch is what I put on afterwards. The memory is somewhat comic as I think of the first impressions. A smile crosses my face.

A little more determined to look great, I apply some makeup and style my hair into two side braids like a happy teenager. I'm satisfied with my look, my self-confidence at its peak for several reasons. I head straight to the kitchen.

"Let's see." I rummage through the fridge, questing for what to make for breakfast.

Listening to *Stay* by Rihhana through my mobile, I feel like I'm back to my little apartment in L.A.

"Hi, Kira," Natasha greets a moment later, holding her head.

I wonder when she and Jamal came back last night.

"Hi, feeling bad?" I ask.

"Worse. It's like there's a drummer residing in my head. How come you're so early and looking utterly good already?"

"Well, I didn't drink like a fish last night, remember?" I tease.

"You're playing smart, huh?"

"Could be," I tell her, "but no, I'm not quite a drinker."

"I see, and it smells delicious here." She ruffles her hair while taking a seat.

While having few stories with Natasha, I quickly finish the breakfast ordeal. The rest of the gang gather in the breakfast table, surprised to see whatever I've made.

"You're the best, Kiki," Sam says her usual catchphrase. "I love you."

Malik adds, "Yes, professor, do you mind if I keep you for my kitchen? I promise I'll pay you well."

"No, thank you."

"I'll double whatever you're earning now." He looks expectantly at me. "No, triple? Or better yet, just name your price." He grins boyishly, and I roll my eyes.

"Just shut up, and eat your soup," I hiss at him, and everyone laugh.

Well, everyone except my cowboy who has this tedious look as if embarrassed of something.

Is he having regrets?

"Professor, do you think you could help my brother cure his hangover?" Malik asks me pointedly, with a little grin that emphasizes what a tease he is.

"Um, are you okay?" I ask Liam, and perhaps my voice sounds weird as I find myself too concerned.

"Yes, don't worry." Liam smiles.

"Don't you have something strong to recommend for some chronic hangover or something?" Malik keeps making fun of me.

"Chronic hangover?" Natasha laughs heartily, followed by the rest of the others.

"Do you need some medicine?" I ask Liam, my worry evident.

Sam stares at him as well, expectant of what he's going to say.

Don't say anything stupid, Liam Darcy, or else I'll kill you.

"No, this coffee is fine," he replies, and Malik fakes a sudden cough that I fathom right away. I kick his foot under the table, and he laughs a bit.

"I'm sorry; I just read some funny news online." Malik makes his sleazy defense, thanks to the tablet he's holding.

"I do have some Advil, in case it gets severe," Sam says.

"Thank you, Samantha," Liam answers with a tight smile, and I resume my attention back to the breakfast. "And thank you, Ms. Jones, this will surely help." He lifts his coffee mug, his eyes gleaming playfully.

You're welcome, handsome, and I love you. "Okay." I smile curtly.

Later around noon Natasha bids us goodbye, promising to drop by soon so that we can go sightseeing more of Miami. I second the idea right away, for that's exactly my scene.

Nothing else goes on, other than a few stories while Natasha waits for Jamal to give her a ride. We mainly talk about last night.

"Guys, someone recorded a clip of us dancing last night, and it went viral!" Sam screams delightedly, and immediately shows us the video.

It has indeed gone viral.

How could I let myself be this stupid, my God? Now everyone I know will see what a crazy person I am. I hope not, because this is Florida and not California . . . right?

"Oh my, have you seen that part?" Natasha laughs her heart out.

"I know, right? Look at this," Sam says excitedly, and their eyes glue on the screen. "Kiki, come and see this!" she urges, and I follow with a sigh.

That's not all, apparently, for there's another article online about Malik and Liam, that the Boss and the Brain have been spotted at the *Treehouse*, Miami.

But I'm glad it doesn't connect us with the two; seems like the paparazzi wasn't so good at his job after all.

I gradually take a seat at the sunbeds by the poolside. The Florida sun is shining mildly today as I lie down comfortably with my eyes closed.

This is what I call tranquility.

But well, perhaps it's too soon to speak as we're suddenly startled by the arrival of this wild brunette who lunges in like a fighting bull. In a quick glance, I apprehend her

exotic beauty and frenzy mannerisms. She's on a phone call, and I think I know with whom.

Malik emerges from inside while muttering, "No, I can't believe this."

"Oh, you better do. Seriously, Malik? Do I have to read the gossips to realize that you're actually in Miami?" She's now smoking mad, clutching her sculptured waist.

"Don't make a scene here," Malik urges in a whisper, holding her arm. "Please, let's get out of here and talk."

Interesting.

"Fine, my car is outside. Let's go!" She orders.

Malik sighs heavily before giving us an apologetic look. He buttons up his shirt, and follows the lady who looks kind of Latino, judging from her accent, long dark hair, and the tone of her olive skin.

But who is she? My subconscious gets suddenly busy, hungry for some information.

CHAPTER 28

"That was quite a scene. Who is that woman? She kind of looks familiar," Sam asks about the wild brunet.

"Sheila Mateo, the CEO of SM fashion," Natasha answers indifferently. "Girls, I got to go. My puddles must be hungry by now, and I have a sleep to catch on." She is in a rush.

"Oh, sure," I reply.

"I hope to see you again before you leave, huh?" Natasha smiles, and Sam gives her a nod. "Now where is my mister again? He has to drive me home, there's no way I'm taking a taxi like this," she mumbles to herself as she wanders off.

With Natasha gone, my friend finally takes notice of me. She joins me by the pool and starts talking of Malik. We both wonder who that wild brunette is.

"Are you okay?" Sam asks afterwards.

And here we go again.

"Hey, how many times do I have to tell you that there's nothing between *us*? I do like him, yes, but only as a brother or a friend." I'm seriously getting tired of this.

"Okay, if you insist." She raises her hands in surrender, laughing. "But you look cute together." She lies gingerly on the sunbed while pulling her mobile into view.

"We're not puppies, looking cute doesn't prove there's love," I remark, and we both laugh.

"Have you seen Liam?" Sam asks all of a sudden.

"No," I breathe, my thoughts running speedily at him.

"He wasn't looking great earlier, so I'm wondering how he's doing right now. Would it be awkward if I check on him?" Sam asks.

What do I say?

"Um, sure, I don't see any problem with that," I croak before clearing my throat. This is harder than I thought.

"Well, I'm not sure." Sam sighs audibly, looking rueful. "It's crazy that I don't function around him. What's wrong with me, Kira? I never fret for a trouser and yet here I am, debating whether to go and ask if he's okay or not. How stupid is that?" She huffs a ridiculous laughter. My heart sinks.

"Do you really love him, Sam?" I think out loud, but its better this way. I'm very curious about the depth of her feelings towards him.

Sam flushes. "I don't know what loving someone means, Kira, frankly speaking. I've never loved before . . . like really loving a guy head over heels. But with him, I feel different." Her voice is amorous, dreamy, her eyes gleaming in similar design. I hold my breath tightly as she proceeds. "I'm trying hard not to show, because whenever I try to get closer to him, he takes a step back. It really scares me, and I know I don't have time as this trip will soon be over."

I feel a sting in my heart, the pain inexplicable. *Oh God, why is this getting more complicated? Should I tell her everything? Should I just let my biggest secret in the open regardless the upshots of my dark reveals?* My heart races rapidly.

"Sam," I call nervously, my lips barely parting as the voice comes out. She hums her assent for me to on. "I have something to tell you and I'm sure it's going to be hard for you to accept—"

"New number?" Sam scowls, interrupting my confession. "Hold on, Kiki, I need to get this. Maybe it's from my landlord, because I asked someone to send his number so that we can sort the leakage problem," she tells me.

I take a deep breath, partly disappointed, partly relieved. I don't know what I truly feel honestly. As Sam picks the call I take the moment to fetch us some drinks in the kitchen. Or better yet, to escape from the ticking bomb in the shape of my lies and deceit.

I stride in the kitchen and grab a gallon of juice, then the glasses. My thoughts are all over the place, deranged, and my anxiety causes a tremor of my hands. I place everything on the breakfast table, taking a deep breath.

"What am I going to do?" I murmur, rubbing my sweaty palms.

I don't get a chance to do a thing, or think, as Sam breezes in, a ridiculous grin covers her pretty face. "Kira!" she calls loudly.

"What?" I wince back a bit, serving us some safe distance as she gets closer.

She catches a long breath. "Guess who has just called?"

Not a guessing game, please.

"Who?" I ask.

It takes eternity for her to answer, something that usually annoys me.

She finally speaks, "Well, it was Jeremy."

"Huh?" My face blanches.

"Can you believe Jay is in Miami?" Sam sounds more excited, and I'm suddenly cold, frozen with this unexpected news.

My throat goes dry.

Jeremy Kruger is the last person I'd want to hear for the rest of my life. I hate the sound of his name itself, I hate to even think of him; I generally hate him as whole.

Taking a deep breath, I brace myself and ask, "What does he want?"

"To hang, what else? He saw last night's clip . . . that's why," she says. "Apparently he's come with the whole squad for summer, and they want us to meet."

"Okay, do it. They're your friends, right?" I retort, carrying on with pouring the juice.

I'm not meeting them.

Sam scowls. It looks like she's being bothered by the asperity in my reaction. Well, I'm not happy, and I can't hide it.

"You're not going? He asked about you," she says hesitantly.

"No!" My voice comes out harsh. Sam looks startled. "I mean, I don't feel like going out today." I mutter quietly, filling the juice in my glass without mirth.

"Fine, I'll just go alone," Sam utters, disappointed. "I hope I won't get lost."

"Why? Where exactly are you meeting them?" I breathe.

"Somewhere called . . . Coconut Grovel?" Her eyes are on the phone. "But well, I'll just get a taxi," she decides.

With that piece of news from Sam, my day has succeeded to get ruined. I'm mortified by this anguish inside. It's as if my old wound is being reopened.

I cuddle myself at the corner of my bed, thinking of nothing but Jeremy. The feeling is so disgusting that I grimace and hug myself even tighter.

"Damn him." I grit my teeth, and the anger rises increasingly.

I've been standing in front of the window for a while now, my head utterly empty, lost into the sight of the ocean. Its water rolls softly, reflecting the color of the blue sky, and I find myself peaceful momentarily.

It's the sound of my buzzing phone, a call from Malik that brings me back to Earth.

"Malik," I utter as soon as I pick up. "What's up?"

"Professor, are you still at home?" he urges.

"Yeah. Is something wrong?" My voice doesn't conceal my concerns.

"No, not at all," he says, his voice assuring. "I only wanted you to check on Liam. Have you seen him?"

"Not since breakfast, why?" My curiosity grows wilder at the thought that I haven't behold my cowboy for a while now.

I hope he is okay.

"Relax, Professor, I don't need you in panic, please," Malik teases, probably aware of my unbidden concerns. *Jeez, I can't help it!* "I think our liquor party last night didn't agree well with him. He might've had a little too much to drink and—"

"A little?" I quip, accusingly, recalling how many bottles went down the drain through their livers. Malik's laughter fills my ears. "So you think it's still getting the best of him?" I quiz carefully.

"Maybe," Malik replies coolly, his sigh slightly audible. "I know I don't need to ask you to look after him, do I?"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of him," I reply.

With pleasure! My subconscious grins. *So naughty!*

Before disconnecting, Malik adds, "Don't fall for it if he insists he's okay, he can be very tough."

"I think I believe you," I say knowingly, for I can tell how stubborn and self-reliant Liam can possibly be; some kind who hardly communicate his inner turmoil.

Malik hangs up after one of his teasing remark towards my secret romance. God, I wonder how this is going to end. Anyways, I love his relationship with Liam; they are so much like real brothers. Sighing, I begin thinking of the matter at hand.

Now where are you, Mr. Intense?

Without wasting a second more, I walk towards the eastern wing of the house, where the boys sleep. The layout of the building is a lot to take in. It's quite unusual, but in style. I'm not sure which room is Liam's, so I just make a random guess.

I stand in front of the first door, followed by the knock. Hearing no response, I open it and find a gigantic room with no one inside. I can smell Malik's cologne from here, which indicates that it's his bedroom. I subtly draw myself in.

The bed is a little messy, but all clean, which is understandable when it comes to most guys with no help around. But the rest of the room is very neat. I'd love to peek on its adjoining dressing room, but my good manners won't let me.

Or maybe you are already busy with something else? I ignore this nosy voice.

After a small trial and error, I'm finally at Liam's room. I barge in with a single knock, for I can't tell if he's in or not. Well, I guess he's right here! That very same voice mutters, impelling my heart to flip ridiculously. Damn! My cowboy is fast asleep, covered with a white duvet.

What a sight! My sex goodness pops her eyes wide open, unafraid to face the beautiful unknown.

It's just me and Liam in the house . . . in his room. Wow! It's a bit dark in here, the curtains are all closed. Either way, the Air Conditioner is on and I can feel the chill. How does he sleep in such condition? I glower as I get closer to him.

I take my time contemplating the sleeping handsome. Why am I getting excited? Get a grip, Kira Jones! Moving further, slowly, I reach the bed and sit down next to where Liam's head lies. He's totally oblivious, the sound of his breath regarding me with heartfelt delight.

My eyes find his relaxed face, smiling indulgently at the tranquil on his features. It's totally impossible to not touch him when I'm this close to him, so I do as my heart wishes. I delicately brush a hand on his bushy eyebrows, my face too near, and his eyes flex.

I quickly back off, feeling busted, when Liam tilts his head instinctively to my side, while slowly opening his eyes. I hold my breath, waiting for him to regain his full faculty. A soft, ruffled breath lurches from his lips. I smile. He looks like a baby, trying to familiarize with reality around him.

"Kira," he utters hoarsely, and I love when he calls my name. I just love whatever comes from him, I suppose.

He's simply the end and my beginning.

"Hi," I murmur, staring at him tenderly.

"Oh God." He tries to get up, and I place another pillow to support his back. "Thank you," he says gratefully, a warm smile splattered on his face.

He's actually shirtless, hypnotizing me with his masculine profile. *This is a pure torture*, I think to myself, and my sex goddess winks mischievously, twirling around as though ready to do the strip show.

"How are you feeling?" I pull back so that I sit next to him.

"I'm good, what a nice surprise." He finally breaks into a real smile, bright and sexy.

I smile back. "It wasn't really a surprise, actually, it's just everyone has left and I couldn't see you anywhere. But I'm glad you like it," I tell him calmly.

"I do, baby. Your presence is always a pleasure to me," he says, scooting me to his side.

Mine as well, baby.

"You're a flatterer, Mr. Darcy." I chuckle with delight. "But you don't look good." I immediately eject from his cocoon and palm his forehead, checking body his temperature.

I'm right, he's burning.

"No, I'm not," he breathes.

"Yes, you are," I argue, frowning. Before I take my hand away, however, Liam takes ahold of it and pulls me over so that I lean on his shoulders. My chest crushes on his bare one, quite inciting of a scene. My insides unfurl, my sex goddess hardly holding her legs together.

It takes me by surprise, a sweet surprise, so I set myself very comfortable in the same posture.

"I'm okay," he insists, his eyes fixed on mine impetuously.

"No, you're not," I answer in a whisper while holding his gaze. "Maybe you should stop drinking now, because it's obvious you can't handle it."

He laughs lightly. "You're very obtuse."

"I'm not obtuse. I'm being serious, and stop laughing." I nudge him, blushing at this close contact.

"Or else what?" he challenges me, his voice amused.

"Or else I'll do this . . ." I give him a very delicate kiss in a slow motion. Despite his lips being on fire, I still find them tasty on mine. When I draw back to see his reaction, he looks utterly turned on.

"Or more?" he says, and we kiss again, his hands coaxing my body smoothly, and it starts *that* fire. *Why am I so easy lately?* "I should protest more often, Ms. Jones, if this is what I get for a punishment," he says.

"I'll be rough next time." I smile.

"Rough is also good, with the right amount." He winks, and it's such a turn on too.

Oh God! Should I just attack his body like a trained slut?

"Well, how would I know if you refuse to give it to me?" I mutter in a very low voice.

"What did you say?" Liam asks, chuckling.

"You only had coffee this morning, so you need to eat. Is there anything I can make for you?" I change the subject.

"Yes there is," Liam answers. "Stay here with me; I want to hold you in my arms."

Just holding?

"Can you be serious for a minute? You need to eat. You had too much alcohol, and your stomach is empty," I snap.

"Come on, eating is boring right now," he whispers sleepily like a baby.

"Well, we could do something spicy if you weren't so barbaric," I mutter, but he fails to hear.

"Just five minutes, okay?" he says.

"Five minutes." I lie next to him, his arms encircling my body. "You're burning," I whisper.

"Because you're boiling my blood, Ms. Jones," he replies lazily. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," I answer. "Terrific, now that I'm here with you." I bury my face onto his chest, feeling this terrible urge to ask him to just take me away and forget everything as he suggested last night.

I feel vulnerable.

"Now I feel like you're the one burning," Liam says, making me sniff with a soft laugh. "What are you scheming, Ms. Jones?"

"Nothing. I just love this," I say. *And maybe something else will do.*

"What?"

"Laying myself next to you."

"We can do it every day, Kira, if you just say yes," he tells me, I smile, but say nothing. "Damn, I love you. You know, I never imagined this would happen so soon like this." He hugs me tighter.

"What would?" I ask in a very low tone of voice, enjoying his warmth.

"Me loving a girl I've just met a week ago." Liam laughs a bit, and I just pinch my lower lip between my teeth. "It's strange, isn't it?"

"Very," I utter.

"At some point I question myself if this is really love or my own infatuation," he proceeds.

"And then, what answer do you get?" I ask, and he takes some time to think. "Do you think it's love?" I ask again.

"I think it doesn't matter," he replies quietly. "It's something special, strong, irresistible, very beautiful, and that's what matters to me. It just feels right, so it's not necessary for me to debate what love is. It's what I've decided." He now kisses my forehead, forcing me to face him.

I feel overjoyed, overwhelmed even.

"I'm so sorry that we had to meet under these circumstances, Liam," I whisper, my eyes watery.

"Stop saying that." Liam cups my face. "It's not your fault, and we will sort it out." He sounds optimistic, but I'm not sure I have the same confidence he has.

Either way, we stop at that. Without another word, we keep hibernating and even fall asleep for a while. Well, Liam does, for I keep awake throughout the time with a lot in my head, mainly on what to do.

"Get up, Liam." I bolt up, sometime later. "Why did you drink if you're such a baby boy?"

"Because I'm adorable," Liam utters sleepily, making me forget all the troubles in the world with laughter.

"Stop your nonsense, and get up." I pull the covers off him. He is wearing black cotton joggers.

With a very exasperated sigh, he answers, "Okay, I'll take a shower first then we can go out for lunch."

"Out?"

"Yes, out." He now sits up. "I know you like taking care of everyone around you, which makes you more special in my eyes, but I want you to take it easy."

"But—"

"No buts, Kira!" he hisses. "We're eating out, and that's final!" he orders.

"Okay." I finally accept, chuckling like a giddy school girl.

"Good girl." He kisses me once more, before I give him some space.

CHAPTER 29

Liam appears in the living room all freshened up. He looks better than before, smells splendidly, and I fail to hide my smile at the sight of him.

"Done?" I ask.

"Yes, let's go." He hauls me by the waist.

We head outside and slip into the Aston Martin. Liam reverses it towards the gate, his eyes between the rear and the front. I didn't know a man could cause uproar with the mere sight of him driving.

"Oh, I love him," I think out loud, dreamily.

"What?" Liam utters.

"Oh, I was talking about—" I stammer, feeling coy.

"About who?" Smiling, he halts the car in the middle of the driveway, his eyes mocking with a fine twinkle.

"You," I breathe, my voice softer and lower. "That I love you." My heart beats faster as the words come out.

Liam's eyes glisten in that shade of blue as though he's been longing to hear me saying the words. I feel sceptered at the way he looks at me, so promising, so devouring . . . and I so love it.

He moves close, too close that I start feeling the heat heightening in my blood: but my body stays fixed on the passenger seat, making me anticipate for his next move. *Is another kiss happening? I want his lips, now.*

Right next to my face, smiling, Liam bends over and tugs something from my seat . . . *the seatbelt?* I can't tell until he fastens the seatbelt on me, and then breaks into the sweetest grin.

Ah, this jerk!

"I love you, too, Kira Jones." Liam manages to light up my face for a change as these words slip out of his mouth, staring deeply at me.

And It's a cue for me to do what he's failed to. Seizing his face, I spare not his lips and he grants me the access so easily. His body leans over mine, arms wrapped around my waist, and his warmth does the magic. We kiss slowly, and it's quite a delicious one, leaving me with butterflies.

"Your lips taste heavenly, Mr. Darcy," I whisper, my eyes tender on his, and we both laugh.

"Aren't you getting a bit too daring recently?" He looks amazed, happy.

"I have you to blame," I answer, and he laughs more.

We had delicious pasta and meatballs at this fancy Italian restaurant. I specifically made sure Liam wiped off his plate without complaints, and he did as much. Now we're strolling alongside the ocean with our takeaway coffee, holding hands like good lovers should.

Smiling without any reason, I sip on my cold Latte, and Liam his second cup of Americano. This feels right. My hair flips accordingly to the breeze, giving me a hard time and a feel of resentment shoots for having too massive hair. I should've left my two braids.

"Shouldn't we do something about your hair?" Liam looks up at me.

"Like what?" I flush.

"Wait a minute." Liam gulps the rest of his coffee and throws away the cup. "Let me see what I can do to this beautiful hair." He moves tentatively behind my back.

What is up to? My curiosity is at its peak, waiting with so little patience. Carefully, Liam collects my hair into a thick bun, his fingers grazing my ears at his grand efforts to seize every strand into one piece.

Oh my! My subconscious jumps up and down, excited.

I hold my breath in anticipation of Liam's next move, and he takes his white handkerchief, and then uses it to tie my hair. Wow! It's not the perfect bun, but comfortable enough. Plus, I appreciate the efforts more than the results.

"Wow, Mr. Darcy! May I know where you learned the trick?" I whirl around to face Liam.

He shrugs. "I'm a man of many talents, Ms. Jones, and you look good wearing my handkerchief," he teases, smiling.

I squint my eyes dubiously. "Why does the compliment sound like a mockery? Do I really look good, Mr. Darcy?" My voice is strangely playful.

"Well, you do. Trust me." He moves closer, fixing the bun once more to his liking.

Oh, I love this! I'm sure I look like Minnie mouse but I don't care, if it means seeing Mr. Intense happy and content as he is right now.

We continue walking. Liam is a little farther, avoiding the ocean, a smile on his face. He's holding my sandals, watching my childish acts as I get my feet inside the water. The feel is celestial when small waves crush against my legs.

I'm dying to pull him here, but I wonder what strategy to employ. He's wearing a white T-shirt, denim shorts and Reebok's waterproof slippers, which suggests that I can do as I please . . . right?

"Oh no," I suddenly moan, feigning a muscle cramp or something.

As expected Liam rushes towards me. "What? What's wrong?" He looks startled, hands on my leg.

"It hurts," I tell him, and he frowns while taking a close look.

"Here?" He touches the back of my leg.

"Yes?" I fail not to giggle, and he immediately catches on.

He casts me a glare, and slowly gets up, with this dark look that shuts me up in an instant.

Oh no! Is he angry? Please, don't be angry.

"Don't blame me for this, Kira," he mutters threateningly.

"What—" I'm stunned when he quickly throws his shoes to the shores before lifting me into his arms. "Liam, what are you doing?" I start wriggling, and he laughs soundly, threatening to throw me in the water.

"I'm only doing you a favor, don't you love swimming?" he mocks, and I keep screaming his name.

"Please, I don't have anything to wear, Liam." I continue my pleas filled with both happiness and worries that he might actually do as he says.

It goes on for almost a minute, and he has a great deal of pleasure.

"Do you promise to graduate from kindergarten now?" he queries, and his question doesn't stop me from laughing.

"Okay, I'll do that," I surrender, laughing and he graces me with a few giggles. "I'm sorry for tricking you." I give out the lamest apology, clinging onto his neck tightly.

He downs his laughing face to meet mine, and a sweet kiss follows. Like a punishment of a kind, he makes it short, just when it's getting better.

"You want more?" he asks, and I nod. "Well, work for it."

"Scheming Englishman." I pout.

"Thank you, American swindler," he retorts, and we keep laughing like crazy. Oh, this is sweet. Where has he been all my life?

We're are now relaxing on the white sand. I'm sitting between Liam's legs, and he behind me. Reclining comfortably against his nestling chest, I feel I'm in heaven as the cool breeze serenade my ears, its voice harsh yet soothing. My water goddess is on her throne, smiling.

We take a silence oath for a while, doing nothing but watching the ocean waves crashing each other, rising and falling, and the birds flocking in the sky above, A phone call drags me to out of my reverie. I frown, but immediately smile at the caller's ID.

"It's Malik," I tell Liam, and he picks up.

"What do you want?" he asks, his voice cool. "I knew it was you so cut it out." He now smiles, kissing my hair. "Oh, so have you solved it?" he asks, and a little scowl appears between his brows. "Not at all, we're just around Dolce Italian and you're disturbing us, so I'm hanging up," he casually snaps and what follows is a very long laugh.

What are they scheming? My subconscious hates being left out. Liam hangs up, still laughing, and it drives me nuts that I don't know the details.

"Hey, why didn't you let me talk to him?" I whine.

"Because he doesn't have anything important to say," Liam replies. "Besides, this is our time, baby; just you and me." He urges me to lie back against him, and I do it with pleasure.

The evening is so far proceeding smoothly. Liam and I talk about anything and everything. He questions about my life at the orphanage, and I tell him the details with a big smile. I feel free conversing with him.

"I can't say we were too deprived of happiness," I tell him while toying with his fingers. "They treated us okay and I'm naturally not fussy. But I did miss my parents at times, especially when I was down for some reasons." I glance up at him, and he smiles tightly.

"So, when exactly did you leave the orphanage?" His voice is gentle, laced with melancholy.

"Um, when we were thirteen we went to this foster home. A woman took care of us and other kids until we turned of legal age," I say. "Sam and I refused to be separated; there was a time that I nearly got adopted by some Italian couple, but I ran away."

"Why?" His eyes widen.

"I never wanted to leave Sam alone," I breathe, smiling sadly.

"And then what happened?" Liam sounds pretty interested to know more about me, but I'm not as ready to open up as I thought.

However, I'm glad he doesn't ask about my parents and anything regarding their death. It's still a tough subject for me.

"I hid to a place where only Sam knew, and she'd bring me food and water for three days, until mother Clara busted us and gave us a long lecture." My smile is bittersweet.

Luckily the couple decided to choose another kid with similar color as theirs. Sam and I made a pact to never leave each other's side no matter what. I don't tell Liam this part of the story, though.

"Okay, that's enough for today," Liam says as though at knowledge that I'm beginning to feel overwhelmed.

He cocoons me with his arms, and a soft sigh escapes my lungs. I don't want to spoil the moment, hence I change the subject.

"Do you happen to know Sheila Mateo?" I peek at him over my shoulder, and he seems to be thinking. "The brunette who left with Malik this morning."

"Malik left with her?" he queries.

I face back the ocean and say, "Yeah, and she looked pretty much upset. You know her?"

"Yes, I do know her," Liam replies heedlessly.

It sounds like he doesn't want to say much but I don't think I'm ready to settle for so little information about the pretty woman and Mr. Loaded.

"Are they in a relationship?" I take my chances.

Liam takes his time to answer, "They do share a history."

Oh? How elusive!

"Any romance involved?" I keep prying.

"Maybe in the past," Liam answers me anyway, "but it's strictly professional now." He leans over to kiss my shoulder, his lips soft against my skin. I flex. "I hate talking of other people so let's forget about Sheila."

Well, neither do I, but sometimes we live for curiosity.

"You're right, you might start thinking I'm a gossip." I pout.

"A gossip? No." Liam laughs heartily. "Perhaps a little snoopy."

"I'm not snoopy," I strongly deny. "It's not my fault that your friend has a reputation of his own."

"Not everything you read about him is true," Liam argues. "Those people who call themselves journalists are capable of making up just anything so as to sell whatever they have to."

Apparently I'm witnessing the male solidarity, and I must admit that I like hearing this from Liam. Malik always speaks highly of him, so it's nice knowing that he too has a high opinion of his best friend.

"And you? Why don't they write those sickening stuff about you?" I stare at him this time, determined to see his answer.

I hope it's not a filthy one.

"I just try to make my life private, that's all," he gives me a short and direct answer.

I don't like it.

"Does this mean you do fuck around but never gets caught?" I ask hesitantly.

"I don't fuck around, Ms. Jones." Liam responds calmly, smiling repellently. "But that doesn't mean I've never gone out with a woman. I don't celibate, just so you know."

Yeah, yeah . . . and you just had to be blunt about it! My sex goddess curls her lips wickedly.

"I see," is the only decent response that comes from my mouth, other than the crooked one in my thoughts.

I go silent, embracing this feeling of same color as . . . jealousy?

"Are you okay?" Liam queries softly.

"Yes." I nearly roll my eyes.

Does he think I'm dancing with joy hearing about his sex life? But wait, I asked for this, so why am I getting all wrecked up? I sigh heavily mentally.

It's crazy how we, women, tend to start a fire with nothing to cook sometimes, and end up burning ourselves.

Smiling, Liam says, "You're so predictable, Kira."

"What?" I snort, and he deftly pulls me in his arms, hugging me tighter.

I easily oblige, stilling in his brace.

"But maybe I could start fucking around with you, and just you, if you agree to be mine," Liam whispers in my ear, and I burst into a laughter.

And I regret using the F word with him, because hearing him using it, in that accent of his, stirs my hormones.

"What are you saying now, Mr. Darcy?" I flush crimson.

Liam shrugs. "I don't know what you did to me to make me fall for you the minute I first saw you. And you were wearing the same dress you're wearing right now."

He remembers? I feel privileged.

"You have a great memory," I breathe.

"That I do; however, it is not the only reason why I remember," Liam says coolly. My eyebrow rises speculatively. "There was a coffee incident, plus the insolent gaze you kept throwing at me as though challenging my intelligence." He grins.

"Say what?" I feel wrongly accused. "I was never insolent. It's you who was quite rude, or maybe cold . . . I don't know how to put it."

"No, I think people confuse between being reserved and being cold. Not talking as much doesn't necessarily mean rudeness. I refuse to think I'm rude, for it's one of the reasons I don't make unnecessary comments on people and situations."

"Wow," I utter. "You're quite persuasive, Mr. Darcy, I'm already agreeing with you."

"Crazy." He kisses the top of my head,

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I'm lost into the blue sky. "I wish we could escape from here, to a place where only you and I will be." I sigh.

"Let's do it," Liam says, his fingers playing with my curls.

"We can't, and you know that," I utter in a very low voice, dismayed at by several reasons.

"You know if we just tell your friend the truth everything else will be solved, right? I'm not sure what you're expecting from all this, Kira, but I'm getting tired, to tell you the truth," Liam says, his tone hurt and accusing

"But it's not that simple, Liam," I whisper.

"Why not? Do you realize that at some point she'll have to find out about this?" He shifts back, and we're now distant, both physically and emotionally. "Or could it be that you're planning to live your vacation while doing this secret romance, and then forget everything about us once you're done?" His eyes turn dark, and his words inflict nothing but pain.

This is unfair.

"Of course that's not my intention. I do want us to work out, Liam, but what am I supposed to do now? You've no idea how crazy this whole situation drives me. I have to put up with Sam's speeches that she loves you every single day, and you don't know how that feels." I'm suddenly overwhelmed, fully aware that I am mostly to blame.

"So, what do you want me to do?" Liam snaps. "Do you want me to accept her? Because it's you that I love, Kira, and if you can't tell her, then let me do it for you. I want you, I need you . . . I'm willing to do anything to make this work. And the first step is coming clean about our affair."

I just stare at Liam with my eyes wider. Thinking of Sam, I don't even want to imagine such a thing, but it's the worst case scenario.

She'll hate me forever.

I know how resentful Sam can be; I know how ballistic she may get knowing that Liam's rejection towards her has something to do with me.

I'm not sure how she'll take it.

Ever since she learned that her mother had personally abandoned her to the orphanage, that it wasn't an accident or anything similar, Sam became fragile.

"No, I can't let that happen," I think out aloud, shrilling inside.

"Is that so?" Liam murmurs threateningly. "Then why are we wasting our time here?" he remarks, his eyes raw.

My heart pounds faster. "What do you mean, Liam?" I breathe, staring him deeply in the eyes.

I hope it's not what I'm thinking.

Liam gets up, and I follow him with my gaze. I'm horrified of his upcoming words. "I think it's time you make up your mind, Kira. It's either Samantha, or us," he says.

"Are you giving me an ultimatum?" I ask carelessly, unable to move.

"Perhaps that's the right word," he tells me crisply. "I can't be your summer adventure, Kira, if that's what you want from me."

"Summer adventure?" I manage to stand up stoutly. "That's not true, Liam, you're being unfair."

"Unfair? And what do you call this?" he says sharply. "Are we fifteen? We're adults, right? Then why do we have to hide? Until when? Tell me, Kira."

No! "Liam—" I stammer.

"I hate games, and it's precisely what we've been doing," he snaps.

Me, too, but how can I do it? I'm trying to think but my cowardice won't let me. I'd hate to be a reason behind my friend's heartbreak.

"Maybe you're right," I say, sniffing like a crying baby. Maybe I've become one. "But I don't know what to do, Liam. I don't—"

"I'll take you home, Ms. Jones." Liam starts moving, leaving my speech hanging. The playful Liam is gone; there's only the cold Mr. Darcy, and I'm back to being the mundane Ms. Jones. *Oh Lord.*

In a few minutes we're on the road, an utter silence blanketing us both, only nonhuman sounds take the reign. Sighing, I reach for the radio and turn it on, only to bump into '*Because I'm happy*' blaring so merrily that I nearly roll my eyes. I quickly turn the radio off.

When the car pulls over in the parking lot, it's already dark. Our ride has been extremely grave. Liam refused to utter a word, and I wasn't audacious enough to make him. Now that we are home, I stay put for a minute, hoping to at least hear something from him, but he says nothing.

Can't he even say he's angry? I hate the coldness around us. It's too much to bear.

"You won't talk to me again?" I ask like a child, staring hopefully at him.

"There's no point and I'm tired." He unbuckles his seatbelt.

There is . . . I love you.

"So, we're like . . . breaking up?" I tease, ignoring his angry face.

"Do we even have a relationship to break? Can you name it?" He glares at me but I persist.

"Liam, you're being too harsh," I tell him. "I swear—"

"Aren't you getting off?" he interrupts me, and it's more of an order, and it makes me mad.

How dare he? It's like I'm the only reason for our problem. Am I not? A mental reminder doesn't help a thing.

"Of course I am, you think I'll sleep here?" I snap, taking off the filthy belt.

Liam's lips tighten from my reaction. "Kira, what else do you want from me? To continue playing around with you? I'm sorry, but I can't—"

"Shut up, I get it!" I lash, trying to unbuckle the seatbelt. *Damn, I hate that he's right.* "Fuck, why doesn't it open?" I struggle for almost ten seconds and Liam stares intently at my crazed hysteria.

"Kira." He bursts out laughing, and I shoot him a glare. "Wait, let me do it." He moves closer. I want to reject his offer but the smell of skin takes my breath away. I still.

My face stays an inch apart from his, eyes on one another, and his body weighs slightly over mine as he unfastens the seatbelt.

"Liam," I whisper, feeling my body unrestrained as the belt loosens across my chest.

"It's done," he says. My heartbeat accelerates. He doesn't move an inch, he stills himself, staring at me tentatively; his eyes as blue as the stormy sea, looking hurt and deprived.

I slowly raise my right hand, trying to reach for his face, but he catches it on time. My subconscious gasps, my eyes wide open. *He doesn't want me.* He doesn't even want me to touch him. I feel the tears escaping my eyes.

"You—" I start, but he unexpectedly shuts me with his lips, kissing me hard as though communicating his pain.

What do I do? *I don't want to let him go.* I kiss him back, my tongue demanding, holding his firmly. We are breathless as our lips part.

"God, what do I do with you, Kira?" Liam pants, his forehead against mine. "Why are you playing with my patience like this?" he breathes, piercing my heart with his rueful words.

"I want to be with you," I utter, my emotions out of proportion, feeling afraid to lose him. "I really do, Liam."

"I believe you," he says. "But it can only be possible if we face what needs to be faced. It's the only way, baby, unless you're ready to run away with me."

"It's not funny." I sniff, holding onto his soft caress on my cheek.

"I'm not in the mood for jokes, either. I'm serious about both options." He pulls back to the driver seat, filling me with the void. "Go," he utters, looking so distant; both physically and emotionally distant.

"Okay." I sigh softly in defeat, and slowly exit the damned Aston Martin. I think I've lost this round and I wonder if there's any more left.

Could this be the end? I just suck in a deep breath.

Inside the house I find everyone in. The guys are watching a boxing match, and Sam is busy with her cellphone and ice cream in a huge cocktail glass.

On the table lie some empty beer cans and two boxes of family-size pizza. I can smell the garlic and cheese, and it turns on my stomach a bit.

However, my mood disagrees with it.

"Hi," I greet casually.

"Hi, Professor." Malik grins. "I thought you'd be home a little late."

Me, too.

"Well, you thought wrong, Malik. Here I am," I return exhaustedly, and Jamal stares at me with a knowing smile.

I flush. I think Jamal knows my little secret, and Malik likes tormenting me without thinking of my position with Sam, who's currently looking at us with ambiguity.

How does she not notice?

"And Liam, where is he?" she asks.

There's something about her tone of voice that rather disturbs me. I don't even have to answer, however, as Liam shows himself up. I openly look up at him, and he only walks past me to join them. I swallow hard upon seeing his pensive look and indifference. My karma.

"Aren't you sitting down? I brought pizza," Sam says.

"Maybe later, I'm feeling tired," I reply and leave.

Locked up in my room, I cuddle myself in bed with my head on the clouds. It's hard to believe that I'm actually on the point that I've been so afraid to be.

I think my journey with Liam has finally come to an end.

It's either I choose him, or my best friend, I can't have them both. I end up laughing maniacally instead. *Why do things happen this way?*

And just as I want to be alone, Sam walks in after a knock.

"Hey, what's up? You look like shit," she mutters.

"Shit happens, right?" I wipe any trace of my displeasure.

"Yeah, they do." She sits down. "So, where did you go with Mr. Darcy? As you call him." She forces a smile, but I know it's hideous.

"We went out for lunch, we took a little walk at the beach, we talked, and returned," I say, absentminded.

"Oh?" she utters.

"Does that bother you?" I glance at her.

"No, why would I be bothered?" she snorts quickly. "It's only surprising since you two don't get along that much."

"We don't get along?" I huff; feeling like it's the best joke of the year.

"I thought you don't like him that much, to be honest," she says incessantly.

"I have nothing against him, so why would you assume that?" My voice is flat.

"Maybe because you hardly talk to each other, the same way you talk to Malik, and suddenly you went out with him," she says in an accusing tone of voice.

"I don't know what it is that you see, but we get along very well. He's nice, a gentleman, so why wouldn't I get along with him?" I say, stunned.

"Not that I'm bothered, but it feels horrible knowing you went out with him, while so aware that I—"

"That you have a crush on him?" I interrupt, scowling. "Well, I'm sorry. I won't go out with him again. Is that okay?" I almost yell, for she's really driving me insane right now.

And I don't want to take it out on anyone but myself.

"It's not a simple crush, Kira. Also, you could've hinted me that you two are together, right?" she says softly, then sighs heavily. I almost smirk at my pained emotions.

"Anyways, what did you talk about?"

Now it's getting annoying.

"I don't even remember," I reply, and it's the truth as my heart is on a leash right now and my mind isn't cooperative either.

"Cool, if you say so," she murmurs. "So what are you up to? Won't you join us for some movie?"

"I'm going to sleep. I have a slight headache," I reply.

"Okay." She gets up. "Can I use your charger? I'm not sure where I placed mine."

"Inside my handbag, over there," I answer, and in a couple of minutes she's gone.

What's happening? I sigh heavily, running fingers through my hair, which unties Liam's handkerchief.

I breathe in, holding the wrinkled piece of white fabric to my face. It smells like him, or rather his cologne I'm not sure what level of craziness I've reached, but I'm not feeling myself, and this migraine is just adding to it.

I think it's midnight. I get up abruptly from a sleep with both my skin and lashes drenched. I gasp for some air while holding my chest as though I've been chased by a monster in my dream. However that's not far from the truth, I had the same nightmare; the accident scene, and I try sniffing the tears away. This day keeps getting terrible.

I'm not sure how I was able to fall asleep with all the emotional turmoil I'm living at the moment. But now that I'm awake I realize I've had a few hours nap as it's around

eleven, and my head hurts a bit. I sit up, pulling myself together on what to do next; I know I can't go back to sleep even if someone sings me a lullaby.

For once I miss my little home big time. I wish I could fly back in time and pretend none of this has ever happened. No Liam, no Montana, and definitely no Florida; I wish I could just forget it all. My heart tightens when I recall *our* stiff conversation at the beach earlier and all the harsh things he said.

The image of his angry and pensive look when he stated that we should end this game haunts me. I find myself laughing bittersweet while drying my eyes. He probably thinks I'm too indecisive and immature, and it hurts a lot. I do understand his point; however, it's just too hard to accept things sometimes.

"Well." I sigh. "It's over, Kira Jones. The sooner you accept the better." I need something that can take my mind off things.

Maybe swimming will do, my water goddess whispers.

I flick the lights on and change into a bathing suit. I don't care it's late at night or not; I'm really doing this if I don't want to completely lose my mind. Inside my bag, I fish for a towel and this silky robe that I barely use. I wrap my body with it, ready to free the stress.

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Outside the atmosphere isn't the one to call bliss. The darkness is here, and so is the light. My heart is heavy. A little sigh escapes my sullen lips as I move my gaze around, getting acquainted with the chilly breeze enveloping my skin. The palm trees are dancing gracefully, forcing a smile amid the sorrow, and I decide to join the calm swimming pool.

I slowly take off the robe, without any frenzy, just calmly and smoothly. Again, the coldness wraps my skin, but my body refuses to succumb to its charm. *Could it be I'm burning inside?* I just smile, heading myself towards the pool entrance. I take the stairs in similar pace, slowly, getting intimate with the coldness against my feet. I love it.

My body sinks unhurriedly into the depth, and I feel resurrected. I start propelling like a dolphin. Tears begin cascading down, yet again, making me speed my swimming pace to the pool end, where I flip back in the same manner. I just cry in the water, for it's easier to even fool myself that I'm okay while I'm not. The water washes my tears as quickly as they come.

I can no longer take this feeling. I love him, I really do, and losing him terrifies me now. *What should I do, Dear God?* I break into heavy cries while taking a breath, floating. Why did I agree to leave Los Angeles in a first place? Why did I have to meet Liam only to lose him? My heart tightens.

Feeling too weak, I lie flat on the water, facing the dangling stars that mock me in a dazzle. If someone appears right now may think I'm a dead body. Well, I won't be surprised if I'm dead, it'll be much better. Have I reached this point, really? Is love the reason for my insanity?

"No, Kira Jones," I breathe.

"Kira!" I suddenly hear a sharp voice screaming in horror.

I roll my head quickly, and my body loses its balance. I sink partially, watching a familiar body charges my way at the speed of the light. Woah! I don't even have time to react, as a pair of strong hands grabs me in what seems like a rescue.

"Malik?" I utter slightly, breathless, and realize he's gravely worried as he pants vigorously with relief upon meeting my safely looking face that's between his big palms.

I'm stunned.

"Are you okay?" he questions, and I smile, bobbing my head. He's all wet, and we're floating in the middle of the pool like a scene from the movie.

Titanic? My subconscious appears unbidden.

"Of course I'm fine." I laugh. Malik pulls me to his side for a very tight bear embrace.

It takes me by surprise at first, but I end up clinging onto his neck, to reassure him that I'm perfectly okay.

We're both drenched but I can still feel the warmth of his body that strangely reassures me that everything is really okay.

I hold him a little longer than necessary, and I feel like only he understands my pain, as he doesn't let go, and allows me to grieve my sorrow.

"I was so scared," he says in a whisper, without letting go of my body. "I thought you—" He stammers, looking flustered.

"I drowned myself?" I tease between my tears, and he immediately pulls back.

"Don't say that, pleas." He sounds apprehensive, his face blanched. I shoot an amused eyebrow at him, smiling gratefully. He slowly wipes my hidden tears with the tips of his thumbs.

The look of his eyes is so intense and hypnotizing, but I immediately tug into a safe distance.

"I'm stronger than a bull, my prince, but thanks for being such a knight."

Now he smiles and looks quite handsome. "You have no idea what I felt." He sighs ruefully, his face hardening mindful. I pinch his nose. "What kind of swimming is that?" He grimaces.

"Snap out of it, mister! Let's get out of here," I urge with a lighted laughter.

We get out of the pool and I quickly dry myself. As the adrenaline withers Malik's gaze rests on my bikinied-body. Our eyes collide and he instantly averts his. Oh boy! Turning the night into a beach day is not a clever decision, is it? He probably has a lot to ask.

"I'll be back in a second, wait for me," he says and rushes inside the house.

I stay puzzled for a while, staring at the Miami night sky. It's not as starry as the Montana sky but it momentarily helps me to drift away. It makes me wonder how it feels like to be up above, where I can see everything before me, and able to fly high.

"I hope you can see me," I say in a whisper. I can't help thinking of my parents.

I miss them.

It usually happens when I'm too overwhelmed. I wish they could show me a way so that I won't get hurt in the end than I already am.

Malik returns and he's already changed. "I think you've had enough, Professor. Let's get back inside," he says gently, yanking my shoulders. I smile indulgently as we walk in. "You're so crazy about water, aren't you?" He glances down at me.

"Mmm. It's magical," I murmur, and he shakes his head to the sides, amused.

I'm lucky to have his friendship.

"Okay, Professor," he says with a deep sigh. "It may be summer but the night at the beach doesn't justify the shit; you may catch cold," he admonishes.

I notice he's not as cheerful as he was a while ago.

"Are you okay?" I ask, gazing worriedly at him.

He smiles, but it's a sad smile. "I am, Professor. Let's go in." He removes his one hand that's been dug inside the pockets of his sweatpants and pushes the door.

Inside the house feels warm.

"How did you know I was here?" I no longer tolerate the curiosity.

"From the very start," Malik prompts pensively as she shuts the door. "I heard some noises while in the kitchen so I came to check, and there . . . you were heading outside." He smiles playfully; his eyes regain the usual gleam.

"And what were you doing in the kitchen?"

"Having a late-night snack?" He grins. "I mean a glass of whisky." He now wriggles his eyebrows, and that's the Malik I know.

I finally smile. "Maybe I could use one shot myself, or double," I blurt out and I'm damn serious.

I want to get wasted.

"I think a tea or coffee will be best for you," Malik suggestively says, "so as to warm your body."

Before I sit down on a kitchen barstool, Malik takes off his oversized cardigan and wraps it on my shoulders. He's wearing a white singlet inside so no harm done for the sake of my broken heart, and he's such a darling.

"Thanks," I utter.

I'm back to my trance as Malik makes me a cup of spicy tea, claiming it works best for cold. I don't argue. I'm not a tea person but I like the flavor of spices and their enriched aroma. I think it's from India.

"Now tell me, what's really going on with you?" He suddenly changes attitude, from the sweet prince charming into an overly meticulous butler.

"I don't understand, nothing is going on with me," I lie, staring innocently at him.

"Well, your eyes suggest otherwise." He plays with the glass of his amber liquid.

"Because I've been swimming for an hour, maybe?" I shrug elusively.

"No, you were crying," Malik rebukes. "It's about Liam, isn't it? I thought you were having fun earlier at the beach, what went wrong?" Now he looks at me in the eyes, incessant.

Everything went wrong.

The tea gets ready after a ping from the kettle. He pours me a cup, and refills his glass of whisky. Smiling gratefully, I take a sip of my delicious tea with a million thoughts in my head, while mustering the courage to answer his pending question.

"I'm thinking of leaving," I utter in a low voice, staring at my cup. "Maybe tomorrow . . . or the day after." I raise my gaze at him, and he looks shocked.

"You're leaving? Back to L.A? Why?" he snaps, and I hold my breath. He takes a deep sigh. "Don't tell me you're running away! I thought you're braver than that, Professor." He sounds thwarted.

"Yeah, I am running away," I admit, and a soft sigh escapes my lungs. "I'm such a big coward, right?" I scoff at my own demise.

Malik stays taciturn for a while, gulping his drink in one swig. I take a sip of my tea and then stare at him, hopeful.

"Well," he starts. Obviously he seems to be having a difficult moment as he even pours himself another round of whiskey. Oh no! I feel like so source of all troubles. "Look, Kira, don't you like Liam?" he suddenly inquires, his voice utterly calm.

"I love him," I say recklessly, but there's no lie in it.

Malik looks startled that he actually winces back. "That's deeper than I thought. Well then, what's getting in your way? Because I'm sure my beloved brother has got himself caught in you. He is totally, stupidly smitten by you." He grins.

"What?" I find the strength to finally laugh heartily.

"Trust me, Kira . . . I know Liam better." He sounds earnest despite the small smile tugged in his lips, and I keep listening; I'd love to hear more. "He may act all cold and inflexible in the outside, but he's really a hopeless romantic."

"My cowboy?" I blurt out, and he laughs at the name.

"Yes, *your cowboy*," he muses. "If we were in a different era he'd probably write you a countless love letters and poems just to express his feelings for you," he says, and we both laugh. "My point is, don't let this chance slip away, Professor. Not everyone is as lucky enough to love and to be loved back in return, at the same."

He sounds sad for some unfathomable reasons, and I hate seeing him sad.

I take a heavy, audible sigh, meditating his words. "I understand, Malik. But the thing is—"

"I know you're caught between him and Samantha," Malik interrupts. "But do you think she likes him as much as you do?" he asks and I don't know the answer. He sits straight. "I mean, if your friend really likes him as she claims, then why hasn't she done anything to win him over?"

Well . . . I don't know.

"Maybe she's scared?" I return. He creases his eyebrows with a speculative look. Another sigh leaves my lungs. "Oh, I don't know, Malik." I drink the tea.

I've already thought of too many possibilities and they all drive me insane. Deep down I know Malik has a point. Why isn't Sam doing anything about it? She's not the type to keep her feelings to herself from what I know.

Well, not in this case, maybe? She says she's never liked any other guy as the way she likes Liam.

"I'm not an expert on the subject, Professor, but I can come up with two possibilities," Malik continues. "Either she doesn't like Liam as much as she thinks, or maybe her pride is bigger than the Pacific which proves she really doesn't like him as much."

Hmm, I don't know. I can't make anything out of this mess. But one thing is for sure; I need to go back home, and I've already decided. A very long silence keeps us company and my head seems to be clogged. I take the last sip of tea and decide to break the silence.

"Aren't you asleep yet?" I ask Malik.

"No, and I don't understand why." His lips curl into a cheesy smile. I can feel some naughty idea coming my way. "I know what we can do to utilize this time," he says.

"What?" I smile.

"Tom and Jerry." He grins.

"Seriously?" I have to make sure.

"Seriously," he quips. "I always do it when I feel down."

"But you're not feeling down, are you?"

"You are," he returns, and I can't help but smile gratefully.

For once I wonder how things would've been if I fell in love with Malik instead. I know better that he's only nice to me with no feelings attached, but I do feel so comfortable around him, and he never fails to bring back my smile whenever things go wrong.

Well, who knows, perhaps there'd be another mishap either way. No love story is a bed of roses and hearts only. Maybe he has a girlfriend, right? I smile to myself as we stare at each other. For sure things would have been less complicated, I still believe.

"You're right, let's hit the boomerang," I say with great enthusiasm. I can't wait to revisit my childhood.

I'm one of those few adults who love cartoons, and I'm glad to find an ally.

"You're also a fan, huh?" Malik brags as we advance to the living room.

"I am." My smile widens.

We completely forget about the time and get swallowed with the cat and mouse tales while cuddling with the comfy sofa. I forget my problems, at least for now. Life must go on.

CHAPTER 32

Croissants, bacon, eggs, and a cup of coffee. What a morning! I smile from ear to ear as I sit down on the barstool, all alone in the kitchen.

"Slept well, Professor?" A voice I recognize snaps from behind me.

I cock my head and smile warmly. "Yeah, if you mean the three hours of sleep," I mutter and Malik laughs vigorously at the memory of last night.

We stayed on TV until four in the morning. Cartoon, movies, and whatever that I fell asleep beholding was all that it took.

"Enjoy your breakfast, you need your energy after the swimming marathon you had last night." He winks and disappears.

Smiling, I make my all to omit any ill thought about my recent affliction. My standing is still that I must go back home. And speaking of which, I should probably make a flight reservation as early as possible.

I can't imagine how Sam's going to recoil about my decision but I don't think I care right now. It's better this way. I can't ruin her dream vacation just because of my emotional crisis which I'm so ashamed to even share with her.

Back to the important agenda, the Airlines usually have a blast during this season of the year. I take my phone so as to see if I can get a ticket for tomorrow or the day after, at the very least.

It only takes few minutes to get myself booked for an afternoon flight tomorrow.

I take a deep breath now that everything is going to an end. I intend to make the most of the little time I'm left, with these amazing people I've met shortly but managed to hold a special place in my heart.

Looking back, I don't have any regret. I've felt nothing but love throughout this vacation. I remember my neighbor, Amelia's words. *Luck?* I smile at the memory.

In the afternoon I take a shower and slip into of white bikini and a golden kimono that's a bit transparent. My hair flows loose. I'm planning to relax by the pool, with a drink or swimming if my mood will finally allow me to. Jamal has decided to throw us a barbeque party, and Natasha dropped by about half of an hour ago.

I step out feeling okay with myself, and it's all that matters.

The patio is literary on fire and the alluring smell of grilled ribs, Korean style, catches my nostrils. *Ooh, baby I love your ways . . .* Bob Marley's voice fills the air, urging my lips to move in synch.

It quickly makes me think of '*Jumanji*' when Ruby fought the enemies while dancing the song. I like sweet reggae, and you can't go wrong with the combination of Kevin Hart and Dwayne Johnson.

Malik is discreetly join Malik who is lying on the sunbeds, with his huge sunglasses and a popsicle.

"Can I have one?" I startle him.

"Wow, you look stunning! Be careful with my heart, please," he says, almost aloud that everyone turn to our direction.

"Thank you," I respond while taking a seat next bed.

"Care to join?" He offers me another popsicle, and I quickly peel it off.

Glancing away, I spot Liam laughing briefly. He's standing between Jamal and Sam who are busy tending the beef. He watches me momentarily, and what I see doesn't leave me indifferent.

He's really cold and distant.

Natasha emerges from inside and announces that the barbeque sauce is almost ready. She's also brought champagne and glasses. She pours herself then Sam, who is now

sitting at one of the scattered chairs busy with her cellphone. She mutters her thanks as she takes the champagne.

She seems to have been swimming. Her hair is damp, the oversized T-shirt she has on a bit wet from the soaked bikini she is wearing inside. From the background now comes Madonna's *La isla bonita*. I sing along in a low voice and I am starting to enjoy the moment.

"Are you still thinking of leaving?" Malik asks, a slight discomfort in his big eyes.

"Why? Are you missing me already?" I draw my full attention back to him.

"Of course, Professor," he says softly. "But I simply think you were out of your mind yesterday, weren't you?"

"It wasn't me who took down half bottle of Scotch, remember? I only had tea, so between us, I was fully sober," I joke, and at last Mr. Loaded gives me his sassy laughter.

"Alright. If you say so." He lifts his hands up in surrender and I smile indulgently, my eyes on the prepossessing swimming pool.

"I'll be over there." I slowly get up and follow my water goddess' desire. Malik nods.

It's going to be fine, Kira. I sigh as my feet sink into the soothing water after seating down at the pool's edge.

Sam is talking to someone on the phone and a bright smile illuminates her face. She quickly runs to our side, and reaches Malik who's few steps behind me. I'm not sure what she tells him as I immediately get lost into Liam's eyes.

I'll surely miss you.

For a change Liam is staring at me without flinching, and we hold our gaze for a long while. I wonder what he's thinking, and it's something I wouldn't like even if I knew. Sam's voice breaks the spell and I look up at her.

"Hey, Kiki." She grins. I questioningly arch my brows. "Jeremy is coming," she announces joyously.

"What?" I utter. My insides tighten.

"I've just asked Malik and—" She suddenly halts and looks at her vibrating phone. A smile stretches across her face. "Hold on, I think he's here," she mutters, leaving me in a total chaos as I watch her marching away while chirping, "Hey, Jay! I'll be out in a sec."

Could this day get any worse? I close my eyes momentarily. When I flash them open, I meet Liam who is now looking at me so intently as if worried about something. I don't like at all this Sam's idea of bringing her ex over here.

I suddenly feel like throwing up. I quickly head back inside the house, to my room, without looking back. Once I'm inside, however, I just drop on the bathroom floor right near the toilet, feeling beat.

No, Kira, it didn't happen. I shut my eyes at the memory I want to erase.

I grimace at the psychological pain it inflicts on me. I shut my eyes to the image of Jeremy forcing himself on me. His inappropriate touches, the forced kisses, and even when he ripped off my clothes.

My hands wrap my upper body defensively.

It feels so real that tears fall down without a warning. I've tried so hard to forget that night, but he's about to ruin all my efforts. Snap out of it Kira, my inner voice tells me, you're stronger than this.

I slowly breathe in and out while getting up. Quickly I grab a toothbrush and paste, before cleaning my mouth violently. I hate feeling his mouth on mine! So filthy! I growl, anger taking over my whole composure.

Panting, I stare at the mirror for over five minutes, my mind revisiting the same night. No! I dry my face hastily with a towel, doing the thoughts away.

I hear footsteps approaching. It's probably Sam. Decidedly I get out of the bathroom. However, what I find isn't Sam but Liam. *Huh?* He frowns at the sight of my disoriented look as I gasp.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly, his eyes apprehensive.

"Yeah," I murmur while grabbing the sheets to wrap myself with, but my voice betrays the bold facade I'm putting up.

I feel cold.

"Kira!" Liam snaps as I drop haphazardly on the bed, my mind all over the place. He breezes my way. "What's wrong? You look pale." He quickly takes me into his arms.

"I'm cold." I shiver, and he looks even more bemused. "I'm fine, I'm just cold." I yield in his embrace.

"Okay, relax," he breathes, hugging me tight. "You're not burning, are you in pain?" he asks as I breathe soundly, my cheek against his firm chest.

I thought I'm done with this feeling, why is it so strong?

"Nothing happened, I can do it," I think out loud.

"What?" Liam questions, his brows creased together in confusion. "What's going on, Kira?" he demands quietly.

"Just a moment," I whisper, savoring the warmth of his body.

"Okay, calm down," Liam urges, despite being confused. I curtain my eyes at this serendipitous feeling, his palm rubbing my arm smoothly, cooing me.

Moment passes by, and my mind empties itself, regaining the vigor in my body. I would love to be in Liam's arms forever.

"I think I just got nervous from all the stress I'm going through." I pull out of Liam's embrace, and looks down at me with hooded eyes. "I'm sorry that I—" My voice stutters.

I'm sorry that I'm such a coward.

"Is this about what I said yesterday?" Liam asks. He suddenly looks dismayed. "I'm sorry, Kira, I was out of my mind. I understand your situation, trust me. I only believe it's better to be upfront about this matter so that—"

"No, it's not about yesterday." I get up, tears pricking my eyes stubbornly. "I'm the problem, everything is wrong with me. I feel like . . . I don't deserve you now." I gaze at him, panicked.

I feel so insecure inside.

"What?" Liam scowls.

I can't even say it again. "Why are you here? I forgot to ask." I try changing the subject.

It takes a giant of time for Liam to answer, "Some friends of yours are outside. You'd probably want to see them." His voice is deadpan.

"My friends?" I utter, laughing pathetically.

"Are they not?" Liam scowls again, confused with everything I say and do.

Who wouldn't? My subconscious finally rises from the depth of her cave, appearing when I least need her.

"No," I say, leaning against the wall, arms crossed on the chest. "But as a good friend, I've got to see my best friend's friends, right?"

"You're acting really strange," says Liam, his eyes narrowed.

Abandoning the wall, I move closer to him. His gaze fixes mine intently, confused and I hold my steps right before his towering height.

"Can I kiss you? Just one more time?" I breathe, my hands finding his beautiful face and stroke his stubbles. *Perhaps I'll never get to kiss him again after this momenta hurtful reminder gives me a shrill.*

Liam flexes, his head follows my caress on his cheek. "Kira," he murmurs, sadness and longing laced in his voice.

"Just a kiss, Liam, I'm not begging to have sex with you," I muse between the threatening tears. My heart tightens at the look of confound he gives me.

Without saying a word, Liam's hand slips about my waist, and slowly he lands his lips on mine.

Could I have this kiss forever?

I let myself enjoy the moment, and it takes my fears away somehow, until I meet the blue in his eyes.

"I really love you, Kira," Liam whispers softly, his eyes staring at me tenderly. My heart tightens, feeling both the joy and an intense pain. *Oh God!* "Do not forget that," he rasps, and gain our lips touch, and I kiss him deeply this time, hoping to take my pain away.

"I'm sorry," I mutter abruptly, drawing back.

"We can have more than a kiss, Kira . . . forever. Only if you let us fight for this. The truth can set us free, even if it'll be hard at first. Like I said before, I totally respect your decision." Gloomily, Liam walks through the door, and I remain still as though frozen.

Moments pass by and I'm still trying to contemplate Liam's last words. The Sam I know, my best friend who's almost like a sister to me, will she understanding?

I know how resentful she can be when someone takes something of hers. Yes, Liam is not hers, I know, but does she? Am I ready to live without her if she chooses to see me as a traitor?

I fix myself up and immediately head outside.

"Kiki, look what I found." Sam invites me by the front door, and I can clearly see the new three guests that aren't foreign in my eyes.

I immediately notice Jeremy, still tall, unfairly good-looking with his long hair, Roman Reigns style, except for his slender body. He grew some beard which makes him older than his actual age.

His mere sight sickens me but I compose myself with everything I've got. Beside him I see Traven, his cousin, and Veronica McClellan; she's forever glued to *Jeremy* like his personal entourage since back then.

"I see." I force a smile as Sam ushers me over to join them in the garden, where all are seated on the deck chairs near a pair of palm trees.

"Guys, Kira is here!" Sam announces proudly, and I suck in my discomforts by smiling feebly.

"Hi, guys," I utter calmly.

Traven, short and handsome brunette, regards me with his usual charming smile. He's been a very good mannered guy, which still keeps me in suspense of why he hangs out with his stupid loser of a cousin.

"Hi, Kira Jones. Long time, huh?" he tells me, and I nod agreeably.

"Well, you look hot in that thing, teacher." I hear a sickly voice mocking me. I know it's a mock. I turn to see its owner. "I heard you returned to UCLA . . ." Veronica continues her sarcasm, her smile as plastic as her well-done boobs.

"Thank you, McClellan. You're as beautiful as always," I say, and I can clearly see her cheeks turning rosy.

Of course not, bitch!

I can't believe she still loves compliments. She's like Sam's twin sister, and that's how people called them back in college. I'm about to take a seat when someone I forgot finally makes an input.

"What about me? Don't you remember me?" The voice makes me squint for a second, my heart racked.

I perfectly do, and I'd love to cut off the thing that makes you think you resemble a real man.

"I hope you're healthy and fine," I tell him curtly and our eyes lock.

Regardless how sarcastic my voice sounds, I'd like to stab this jerk in the heart and put on those orange overalls. Yet he smiles at me so brightly.

This son of a dick!

"Oh, Kira, still so tough, huh?" Jeremy retorts, and I see Veronica frowning at this short exchange.

"Honey, I'm still here, you know. I may start thinking you're hitting on her. Do you now prefer dark-colored women or something?" Veronica says, clinging onto his arm.

Oh, darling, you can be jealous at all ladies but me. I would never take him even in priceless price tag. I grab a beer from the icebox and finally take a seat. Sam asks them of someone and immediately a new topic arises.

CHAPTER 33

Liam is now out of sight and I'm only thinking of him. I wonder what he is doing right now. Malik, Jamal, and Natasha are still around the grill, chatting over something humorous judging from their laughter.

I have been oblivious of whatever Sam and her friends are hilariously discussing about, and only drop a comment when necessary. Sickly enough, Jeremy has been eyeing me and it's uncomfortable.

"This house is so damn terrific," Veronica utters, her eyes batting around like butterflies. "Who's the owner?" she inquires while her boyfriend stares around snobbishly.

Sam gives them a clear picture of the owner by pointing out at Malik's direction. She tells them more than asked when Veronica swears to have seen Malik before. Discretion is never in my friend's dictionary.

"And are you the one riding his dick?" Jeremy asks Sam, and the two ladies laugh as though it was something beautiful to say . . . or hear.

So disgusting.

"Jay, dear, when will you realize that not all men are as imbeciles as you are, huh?" Sam admonishes at him.

"Statistics prove otherwise though." He shrugs while sipping his water.

"But of course it does," I make an input. "If people like you conduct it, what else can we expect?" I gulp more of my beer, maybe furiously that they all eye me. *Who cares?* I'm so distressed.

"I totally agree with Kira," Traven says coolly, his eyes on his mobile. "Not all guys are crooked. There are still good men out there, or here." He points at himself. We all laugh. He's comic, and I badly want to believe his words.

“If you find that good man who doesn’t want to whip your panties let me know. Like I said, statistics shows otherwise. And you ladies know this so well and still you keep throwing your ways onto us.” He gives a look.

What is he insinuating?

"And since when do you read anything, Jay?" Sam asks. "You know, I like you a lot, darling, but that doesn't mean you're charming, and not everyone is impressed with your fake macho act."

I stifle a laugh.

"Easy there, girl," Veronica jumps in, "Jay is mine so you better watch out, huh?"

"Why don't you eat him while at it?" I think out loud. She glares sternly at me. "Sorry, it's just too ridiculous to think everyone has the same taste as you, McClellan."

"I didn't know you can talk," says Veronica, full of hatred. "Since when do you talk, huh?"

"Veronica, shut it!" Sam exclaims.

"No, let her," I intervene. "I'd like to hear what you have to say, girl, say it," I add, and Veronica glares dangerously at me.

Yes, bring it, bitch! I think I'm in the mood to blurt out and maybe pull someone's hair.

I just don't understand what her deal is. She's been quite a blabbermouth ever since we were in college; not a second passed without making those stupid comments. If it weren't for what I wore, then it's my personality, *just to annoy me*.

Fuck, not this time.

"You just think you're so special, huh?" Veronica says, and I only scoff. "The innocent one while in reality you are nothing but a slu—"

"Stop it, V!" Jeremy snaps, furious. "Are you five or something? If you add another word—"

"What?" Veronica snarls, and everything gets ugly in a whiff. "Are still nuts over her? Is that it?"

What's going on? What was this bitch about to call me? I get heated, and the others are in wonder.

"I said shut up!" Jeremy stands up briskly and his voice reverberates furiously. "I don't do stupid insecure jealousy chicks and you fucking know that!"

"Okay, all of you chill." Sam tries to calm them as Malik and his crew turns their attention to us.

How embarrassing.

"Okay, I'll keep quiet," Veronica says. "Breathe in, breathe out." She demonstrates.

Are we high schoolers or something? This is so pathetic.

"Hey, guys," says Traven abruptly. We look at him. "Jasper has just landed, and he said we're meeting up at LIV tonight. You in?" He smiles sheepishly.

"Jasper Orton?" Sam cheers.

"The one and only, darling," Veronica tells her. "Get ready to relive the past and maybe rekindle the fire of passion."

"Oh please." Sam rolls her eyes. "I never swallow the puke."

"I'm damn serious, twin," Veronica insists. "I heard he's now living in Paris and so very single, ready to mingle."

"That's news," Sam says, a little absentminded. "Maybe it's time I give a little payback for catching him with that bimbo on the same day we broke up. How I love revenge."

"So, are you going?" Traven asks.

"And what's that LIV?" Sam asks.

"The hottest club, apparently," the other girl prompts.

"You can't be in Miami and never set foot on it, that's abomination of the word *fun*," Traven says, and gets a big laughter including a little bit of mine.

Sam turns towards me immediately, and I know what she's about to ask. I'm seriously not up for it. "We are going, right?"

"No, we're not, I want to rest tonight," I tell her flatly.

"Lame!" Veronica snickers.

"Can't you just shut the fuck up, you brainless bitch?" I face Veronica furiously.

"Your voice is so annoying if no one had told you yet!"

All I can hear is a gasp of shock.

"What did you say?" She gets up, and I move closer.

"I said shut the fuck up. What? Are you going to fight me? Let's do it, because I'm so sick and tired of the insults every time you want to deal with your inferiority complex!" I feel the rage overflowing my Anger Management System.

Damn, she makes me mad.

"Kira," Sam utters, stepping between the fuming Veronica and me, then pulls me aside. "Is something wrong with you today?" she asks.

Everything is wrong.

"Why? Can't I be mad when I'm being provoked?" I ask.

"No, I just—" She runs a hand through her hair, bemused.

Yes, I never lose it, but there's a limit to everything.

"Yes," I say, sighing heavily, "there's something wrong, but I'm pretty sure you'd never understand even if I tell you."

"I'm sorry if I've offended you by bringing them here," she says, and I can't believe her.

"You know what, don't make me feel more miserable," I tell her sternly. "Sorry, guys, I'm not in the mood for the party." I turn my heel, unable to even stare back at Sam.

You're indeed going nuts, Kira. My subconscious sighs after observing taciturnly for a long while.

"What's wrong with her really?" I hear Veronica's pissed-off voice. "Did she just call me a brainless bitch? How dare—"

"Just shut up, will you!" Jeremy snaps.

I lose the audibility of their voices as I make my way inside the house. However, I don't even get to leave as Natasha calls after me with a sweet grin on her sun-tanned face.

She beckons me to join them since the feast is ready, and I force a smile.

I've lost my appetite all together . . . but suddenly my lifesaver drags me by the pool to share his large bowl of Korean vegetable noodles and ribs.

I guess God hasn't forgotten me after all.

"Cheer up, Professor! You look like you're carrying the world on your shoulders right now, let's dig in." Malik hands me the chopsticks.

"Sure, my prince." I smile back and gets into the noodles.

"So spicy!" Malik cries. I laugh heartily.

"You should drink milk instead of water," I tell him jokingly, and he quickly shifts to the alluring ribs for a change. "And Liam, where is he?" I fail to conceal my curiosity.

Malik pulls an exaggerated sigh and shakes his head. "He's probably going through the weekly report sent from London." He gives me a weak smile. "What did you do to him? I've never seen him acting like this?"

I've hurt him.

"Are you accusing me of something now?" I pretend to get mad, all in the way to lighten the mood.

As expected, he laughs wittingly.

"Aren't you responsible?" he prompts with a huge bite that fills his mouth.

"Well, I won't deny, but I never thought that I could be so irresistible," I brag, and it makes him laugh harder.

Once again Malik restores back my sweetest smile. Only he can influence good even in bad times, and I'm so grateful for his being supportive: at least I've got someone to share this ordeal with. Jamal and Natasha join us shortly, and I believe I'm more relaxed with them than my previous companion.

"And my job here lads and ladies . . . is done!" Jamal announces cheerily, and from a distance I see the others enjoying the self-service.

"You're the best barbeque maker, I swear." I give compliment when due.

I can't explain how tender and juicy this meat tastes inside my mouth.

"I know, right? My boo is the best." Natasha kisses him.

Malik and I share a smile.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Kira," Jamal says, his voice calm and reverent.

"Oh you got that right." I thumb up. "And I seriously need the recipe for this vegetable noodles," I tell Natasha and she promises to give it to me anytime.

The sound of water splash catches our attention. It's Sam, Traven, and Veronica in the swimming pool.

"So, those are your friends?" Jamal asks.

"Not really," I reply with honesty. "They are more of Sam's friends, but we attended the same college." I add, and I feel the urge to get away for at least a minute. "Um, excuse me for a while, I've got something to do inside," I tell them while getting up.

"Something to do, huh?" Malik mocks. "Are you sure about that, Professor?" He throws me a mischievous glance that always involves Mr. Intense in the equation.

"Shut up, Malik," I snap quietly while moving. He laughs audibly, and I think the others have caught on given how smiley they all are.

I'm not sure why I'm in the kitchen though as I find myself useless today. I'm dying to see Liam but I don't know what to say to him if I decide to confront him. He's evidently trying to avoid me, for he can no longer stand a sight of me, I suppose. I gulp a half glass of water while running a hand through my thick curls.

I start looking around for the toothpicks. I remember we brought some when we shopped that day . . . right? I search through the cabinets and finally get them. I shift around to make my way out and what I encounter turns me stiff right away, a cold shrill thrumming in my blood.

Jeremy is standing in front of me, only a few steps apart.

"At last I get some alone time with you," he tells me, deadpan.

I suck in a sharp breath. "What are you doing here?" My voice is strong but I don't think my legs are. His sight terrifies me until today.

He licks his lips, sighing. "Relax, Kira. I came in peace," he says gently, and I frown. I don't trust him. I never will. "Besides, aren't you the one who purposely led me here?" He starts laughing . . . But I can't tell if it's his idea of being funny or not.

"I did what? You are so sick, you know? Why would I do that while I can't stand your name itself?" I instinctively stride to the other side, for I hate to even feel his presence.

"Is that so? I thought you called me here, what a pity." He slides his hand absently on the marble countertop, his legs moving ditto. I gulp, holding myself tightly inside. He then looks up at me. "I tried so hard to forget you, Kira, but you see this?" He shows me the little scar on his left jaw, and I swallow hard at the recognition of it.

I inflicted it on him, and I could do it again without thinking twice.

"This keeps reminding me of you. I could easily get rid of it by surgery, but I just can't. It's like a souvenir from you, and I want to keep it." Now he grins like a predator, eyes raw on mine.

My stomach furls up. "Serves you right," I mutter valiantly. "And you better get out of here, if you don't want to end up with the bigger one. I'm not interested in hearing any of your tales." I search around subtly in quest for anything to defend myself in case he gets aggressive.

"You really despise me, huh?" He takes another step, gaily, as though admiring the kitchen interior. What is he up to? My brain gets wary. "But don't worry, Kira. I won't do anything to you. I never meant to harm you, it's just . . ." He's suddenly a different person, his face softer and . . . regretful? He stares strangely at me, his eyes clouded with sadness.

No! He is a jerk, that's all.

"Whatever, Jeremy, please leave." I hold his gaze firmly and He extends his hand to touch my cheek, which I brush away quickly. "Don't you dare touch me, you jerk!" I snap, pulling away.

"Or what?" He smirks, his face back into the bastard I so well know.

What an actor!

"I'll kill you with my own two hands and this I promise you," I say in an angry trembling-voice, panting with rage.

Jeremy's eyebrow shoots up, stunned by my resolution. He bursts out laughing. "Oh, Kira." He shakes his head to the sides. He's definitely sick . . . like mentally, asylum mentally sick. "Fine, we'll see about that." He waves his hands up in surrender.

Is he threatening me?

"You know what," I utter with a soft sigh, "get out of my way." I saunter towards the exit.

"Not so fast!" Jeremy blocks my path, and I rigidly cock my head to the side. My heart accelerates, feeling the horrible sense of déjà vu. "So are you fucking him?" he demands, glaring angrily at me.

"What?" I twist my face.

"The rich guy I saw you flirting with earlier," he snaps distastefully. "Are sleeping with him?"

Now he's making me lose all my patience. *I mean, how dare him? Who does he think he is to question whom I flirt or don't flirt with? And . . . was I even flirting with Malik?*

"Yes, I'm fucking him. Got any problem with that?" I snap back, slowly losing it.

"After all he's a real man, not an excuse for a man!" I end up adding with contempt.

"Kira." Jeremy flinches his fists, but ends up sighing.

"Have I ever mentioned that I hate you?" I snarl at him, and his forehead twists with anger. "Yes, Jeremy Kruger. I hate you with all my heart. You disgust me, and you make me sick to the bones! If I find you on the road, I'd probably run you over with a car. Yes, that's how much I hate you!"

"Shut up," he speaks between his teeth, and then runs a hand into his dark hair as if possessed by the spirit of some sort. He definitely looks brainsick, and I should be afraid of him.

But I don't even care about his reaction.

"I will shut up," I tell him seriously, "if you get the fuck out of my way!"

Seeing no . . . reaction from him. I force my way out by shoving him aside, but he clutches my hand instead, tightly.

"You and I are not done, Kira!" His eyes are vicious. "No girl walks away on me, you hear that?"

"Because you're an alpha? Let me go, you jerk!" I pull out fiercely but he fastens his grip. "I said let go of me, Jeremy!" I repeat but it's like he's competing with me like a maniac.

I eye the knife, menacingly, and I can swear there's a part of me that calls for blood. I feel the anger feeding in me, and I remember that I'm not alone in this house. Should I scream for help? No, I'm not a defenseless woman if I'm inside the kitchen full of weapons. However, I don't think I need any of that,

"LET GO OF HER!" A familiar, yet very scary voice strikes. I quickly lift my eyes up and meet Liam's solid look directed to Jeremy.

CHAPTER 34

"Are you deaf? I said let go of her." Liam's voice isn't harsh, but the threatening vibes it exudes is quite alarming.

"Easy there, bro." Jeremy releases me from his grip. "We're just talking," he says and my eyes are on my wrist, faint finger marks accented on the skin.

"Don't call me bro, kid!" Liam snaps, his fists clenched as he glares at Jeremy with blazing eyes while pacing closer. "Are you okay, Kira?" He glances at me . . . at my wrist, too, and I nod like a little girl would.

His jaw ticks. He pulls me to his side and I'm worried whether he has heard the rest of our conversation or not. I hope he hasn't. He then glares back at Jeremy, eyes dark.

"She told you to leave her alone, didn't she? Why were you forcing your hands on her?" He places himself between Jeremy and I, making me stay behind him. He's tense.

Jeremy roams around, like a tamed dog, holding his head and waist with either hand. I know he usually acts macho and all, in front of ladies, but deep within he's nothing but a big soft marshmallow. I'm sure he didn't see this coming, and it's a bit exciting. I'm totally fangirling.

"I said we were just talking, bro! So calm down," Jeremy says, and his temper slowly rises.

"And I told you not to call me bro!" Liam lashes, and I can feel him getting more explosive.

They glare at one another like beasts, their chests almost touching. Even if this bastard, Jeremy, doesn't deserve a pinch of consideration, I still don't want any fist fight at my expense. I decide to intervene.

"Liam . . ." I clutch his arm. His muscles loosen a bit, but he doesn't look at me.

"Get out of here," he tells Jeremy, whose gaze has turned into a disturbing glare at the sight of me in close contact with Liam

"Jeremy, go," I also tell him, and his jaw clenches with anger, disapproval, or whatever it is that he's currently feeling.

I can't tell how this male ego works but it's a very terrible thing in my opinion. Liam's hand slips behind my waist, protectively, pulling me to his side. Again he doesn't look my way, but I can still feel the anger running in his blood.

"Look, young man," Liam says, moving quite closer to Jeremy while scratching his chin arrogantly. He is contemptuous. What a sight! "I'm really trying to be civil here. Get the fuck out of here! Right now! Unless you really want me to lose it," he orders this time, his voice authoritative.

"And who the fuck do you think you are?" Jeremy clenches his fists, angrily, ready to pounce on Mr. Intense.

"I dare you," Liam utters, his voice calm and emotionless, eyes on Jeremy's bloody gaze instead of his fist. "Go ahead and try it, kid." He smirks and I swallow a bile in my throat.

Jeremy stills himself, panting.

No, this shouldn't happen. Not my Liam in a fistfight with this brainsick jerk. I instinctively move over and firm my grip around Liam's tight waist. Jeremy takes a hint; he backs off while frowning incredulously at the gesture.

"Fine," he agrees reluctantly. "As you wish, I'll leave you two alone, lovebirds." He throws me a spiteful look as he starts moving.

"What's going on here?" Sam asks suddenly, startling the three of us.

That's all I needed.

I look at her over my shoulder and I can see her eyes resting on Liam's possessive hand around my waist, and I his. She gulps tightly. I slowly pull away while turning around wholly.

My skepticism doesn't help at all as Sam's face tells exactly how disturbed she feels about the little gesture. And I feel like she knows something, or feels something about *us*.

"Nothing," Liam articulates. His voice betrays his words, for he cannot hide his anger even at this moment. "You're fine, right?" He faces me, his eyes worried, and I nod.

"Jeremy was just leaving, right?" I glare coldly at *him*, and for once we seem to speak the same language.

"Yeah," he prompts with a nod. "I was just on my way out." He is pissed.

He disappears through the front door as I peek a glance back at Liam. I truly appreciate his intervention but there's no way I'd say so, considering how awkward the atmosphere has become.

Sam is eyeing me suspiciously without saying a word, and it's so evident that she doesn't buy whatever the story we've just sold her. She's with Veronica, apparently, and they are both looking at us bemusedly.

"Excuse me," Liam says and slowly walks back to his room.

"I'll be in my room." I also force my way out, leaving Sam and Veronica, who'd been glaring at me as though I have been pole-dancing for her boyfriend.

What the hell has just happened? I drop heavily on the bed, sighing.

My mind drifts away immediately as I think of my immediate future. What will happen next? It feels like I'm slowly losing something, and it's a bit scary. I get too engrossed to even realize that Sam is here now.

"I told them to leave," she tells me.

"Hmm," I answer curtly, facing the ceiling above.

Sighing, Sam walks towards the window. She says nothing, but stares at the ocean streaming into view from a distance, and I wonder what's up.

"Do you remember the first time you arrived at the orphanage?" she suddenly asks. I gaze at her as she turns around to collide our eyes.

"Yeah, why?" I utter, my mind in refusal to think of anything behind this so unexpected speech.

"You didn't want to talk to anyone. You zipped your mouth for an entire week," she says with a little laughter. "It's crazy I still remember even though I was just eight." She shifts to the wall and leans against it, facing me.

"What are you trying to say?" I rise up to take a seat.

"Even though you refused to speak to anyone I still forced my way, over and over again, until you talked. But when you did talk, I wished you didn't, because what you said broke my heart." She now moves towards me, sniffing.

My eyes well up with tears at the memory of those days. It was just a month after my parents' death, and I felt like a part of me died along. I couldn't remember much, but the pain was unforgotten.

And suddenly I was in a place where kids had no homes, no parents, I was one of them. I felt lost, I wanted to die, and I believed it was the only ticket to see mom and dad again. I always stayed at the corner, my mind blank.

They tried talking to me, the girls, the boys, but none succeeded to open my mouth. The world had lost its colors in my eyes, but some brunette kid named Samantha didn't give up. She tried until I opened my mouth.

"It hurts," I utter, tears streaming down. "That's what I said." I lift my eyes at Sam. "Why are you reminding me?"

"Nothing," Sam says softly. "I just want to say that you're the person I love and trust the most in my life. I know you'd never hurt or betray me, because you're my best

friend. I want to be that person to you too, Kira. I know I can be bitchy . . . but I never intend to hurt you. If I did, by any chance, please forgive me." She sits next to me, and my heart shatters.

Guilt. Pain. Loss. I feel them all at once.

"No, you haven't done anything to apologize for," I breathe and I know I'm the one who should apologize to her.

But I don't have the guts to.

"Did Jay do anything to offend you earlier? I know how crazy he gets when drunk but he didn't drink at all today," Sam asks, her voice laced with concerns.

"Why did you bring him here? He's your ex, Sam, so why the fuck did you invite him here?" The mention of Jeremy stirs me all over again. "Did you do it to make *him* jealous?" I can't help the anger.

"It's none of your concerns, Kira!" Sam snaps, getting up.

"Right. None of my business." I sigh, staring into space.

"We're talking about Jeremy. Did you fight with him? Did he offend you?" she continues.

"He always offends me, in case you haven't noticed," I tell her, and she swallows with confusion.

"Kira, if you don't like them just tell me so. They are my friends; no matter how weird they are, so it hurts me seeing you so hostile towards them."

"Oh, I'm very sorry that I'm not as hospitable with your friends as you want me to," I say sternly, annoyed. "Do I have to force myself into liking them?"

"You're being harsh," Sam mutters.

Harsh? I mentally scoff.

"Seriously, Sam? Do I have to say everything with words for you to understand? Okay, you're no psychic so let me tell you clearly. Yes, keep them away from me. I don't like them."

Maybe I'm stupid by thinking she would understand my feelings even when I don't say it out loud. We're different, right? What a terrible combination we make! I can't speak, and she can't hear.

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes. And just to be clear, they're your friends, not mine, so stop associating me with them. I'd rather die alone and bored than being around those two dimwits!"

"Okay," Sam answers and she's hurt by my words, I can tell.

"Okay." I lie down, feeling spent.

"Sure, I'll be outside," Sam mutters. I don't even bother to respond as she leaves instantly.

Perhaps we've been wrong from the very beginning. Maybe something was never right even before stepping out of California. Where have we gone wrong, though? Is there a way to fix my personality? Or hers? Are we really friends?

I exhale audibly at everything that's going on. I don't even know what I'm doing with my life anymore. I lie down for a while and my head goes jumbled at the recollection of all the events since the moment I boarded a plane at LAX.

Just a week or so and I'm this beat?

Feeling myself going insane, I decide to finish arranging my suitcase before changing into a green mini jumpsuit. I put on the same slippers I've been wearing around and make a quick call to Malik. Luckily he picks right away.

"Professor, everything alright?" He sounds a bit worried, and some laughter from the background.

I restlessly walk over towards the window. "Yeah, everything is fine," I assure him, which is a total lie. "Um, can I please use your car?" I can clearly imagine his startled look.

"Are you going somewhere?" he asks.

"Yes, please," I urge. "I need a little escape, and maybe sightseeing while at it."

"Well, sure." Malik relents.

"So . . . can I have the keys now?"

"If you want to, I've got them with me."

With that I just grab my handbag, camera, and sunglasses. It's decided, I need to get away for a second; anywhere but this house. I fix my curls quickly and slip outside.

Malik hands me the Aston Martin's keys and I can't thank him enough. He even offers to take me to wherever I'm intending to go, but I kindly refuse. It's important I stay alone for a while and I'm glad the Prince understands.

After all he is already busy with his tablet on the lap, which usually indicates business. With Sam and Natasha busy talking, I manage to tell them that I need some air without any annoying reproaching.

Well, other than Sam's skeptical look that I deliberately choose to turn a blind eye at.

Liam and Jamal are in the middle of a serious discussion over some beers, and I barely look at the former. I don't bother to say a thing more, other than leaving. I walk over the parking area to finally slip into the fancy dark-grey car.

I'm not really sure where I'm heading, sometime later, so I just follow my instincts and slide the straight asphalt.

My head is on thick clouds that I fail to pay attention towards anything I pass by. I'm usually careful on the road but today I seem so out of it, handling the wheel with one hand while digging in my hair with the other.

At least I get to see the red light on time before I make any trouble with the cops, if not causing an accident. Jeez! What I'm feeling is beyond misery, I don't understand how I got myself into such a mess.

"Damn it!" I groan aloud.

The vexation makes me pang the center of the steering and the honking sound startles me like crazy. I exhale deeply and for once I try to look around. I still have no idea on where I am, but it doesn't matter. I'll thank later whoever invented the navigation and Google maps.

I take a left turn and go on with my ride. At least the fresh air rebuilds my homeostasis little by little. When I stop the car, I find myself along the greenish garden square with palm trees. Glancing further, I see a beach volleyball ground and few people playing happily.

Well, this is exactly what I need to calm my anxiety. Putting off my glasses, I get a chance to watch the beauty of this area nakedly. I exit the car, with my camera on, and began roaming around. I go deep into the street, taking pictures, smiling from time to time, and at least I'm feeling better.

CHAPTER 35

I return to where I parked the car. I can't say I've had my fill, but I've quite enjoyed this Ocean drive neighborhood. Well, eventually I realized where I am during my promenading. I even had a pleasure to relax and grab a big bite of cheeseburger so cheer myself.

And I usually eat a lot when I'm stressed.

I'm about to hop in the car when the incoming call on my cellphone stops me halfway. I slam the door sharply before rummaging inside my bag. I clutch my phone and a hard scowl appears on my face when I find it's a new number. I swipe the receiver hesitantly.

"Hello?" I croak.

"Where are you? We need to talk." A male voice snaps quickly, causing a shiver throughout my skin.

And I could recognize this voice even in my deep sleep.

"Liam," I breathe softly.

"It's good that you know my voice by heart," Liam remarks. "Where are you, Kira?" he practically snaps at me again.

"Liam, please, not again." I sigh, running a hand through my curls, my energy inadequate.

"Will you stop being stubborn, Kira? Tell me where you are and I'll come for you right now." He sounds desperate.

"Don't bother, Liam. It's over." I enter the car and settle behind the wheel.

"Okay, listen," says Liam, his voice painfully echoing through the speakers of my phone. I cringe. "I can't take this anymore, Kira . . . I can't get you out of my head and . . . and it's driving me crazy." He sighs, and my eyes prick with tears at his devastated voice. "I've tried, okay? I've really tried but—" He sighs again, and I hiccup. "But it's just so impossible. Let's talk, please. We can still fix this, baby, trust me."

I'm still quiet, my lips pressed together, and my eyes watery. Liam sounds despaired and I hate the fact that I'm the reason why.

"I'm scared, Liam," I utter, tears streaming down unbridled.

Liam sighs heavily. "Kira—"

"I'm so scared that if I hold your hand I'll have to lose Sam's." I sniff, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "She's a family to me. The only one I have."

"I'll be the one to tell her," Liam says. "I'll take the entire blame, Kira, because I'm the one who started it all. Maybe I fell in love with you from the first moment I saw you getting from the car. Something changed right away, and I knew you wouldn't be just a woman I met by chance."

Oh God.

"Liam . . ." I hold the steering tightly as though my survival depends on it.

"I had no idea that your friend had other intentions coming to Montana, so I'll tell her about my clear intention now. I'm going to do it whether you like it or not, Kira," he says stubbornly.

"No, Liam." I rub my fists, nervous.

"Yes, baby. Unless, let's leave this place. Tell me where you are and I'll get you right away." Liam's voice is gentle, imploring me to change my mind. But all it does is adding more pain to me. "Kira—"

"Where will you take me? To England?" I laugh amid the tears, the situation a bit funny regardless the odds.

"Yes, to England. Don't you love it there?" I can picture his sad smile.

"I do."

"So, can you tell me where you are, please?"

"No, I'm going back home," I say, taking a deep breath while pulling the seatbelt.

"Okay. But I'm serious about telling Samantha of how I feel. I'll do it as soon as I return to the house," Liam tells me quietly.

"Liam, I won't forgive you if you do!" My voice is harsh.

"My feelings are mine, Kira, I don't need your permission on this one, I'm sorry." He sounds determined and it freaks me. What if he does as he says? My heart tightens. “

"Liam, I know but—“

"Good. I'll see you later."

"Wait!" I snap and he obliges. "I have something else to say, Liam." My voice shakes from fright.

"Later. You can tell me later tonight," he says and hangs up.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I whisper, more to myself.

I reach home around seven-thirty and slowly pull the car into the lot. My heart is pounding rapidly against my chest and I can't tell why exactly. The lights inside the house are on, but the party is long dead and gone. I don't see the black SUV, either, which means one of the boys has left.

Both emotionally and physically I'm a wreck. Maybe a shower will help, I decide. When I get inside, it's Malik's voice that welcomes me. He's pacing around the living room, seeming on an important call, his tablet in hand as though discussing the contents on its screen.

He looks at me expressionlessly, and I do the same while pacing over. I slowly put his car keys on top of the coffee table, right beside the ashtray in which a piece of cigarette smokes out. He walks over and grinds until the flame dies. His eyes are on mine and I wither under his scrutiny.

Oblivious of Malik's worried look and facial pleads for me to stay, I decide to leave. I'm so ashamed to even face him. He cares a lot for his best friend, and I've

hurt *him* too much already. What can I possibly tell them now? That I'm sorry? I don't think anyone can understand my reasons, so I'm not going to even try explaining.

"Professor, wait," Malik stops me just as I'm about to leave. "Hey, I'll call you in an hour," he now tells the person on the phone and hangs. "What happened?" he asks me gently.

"I don't understand," I reply. Malik beckons me to sit down, his big grey eyes so earnest than I've ever seen them before. Am I in trouble again? I sigh.

We both get seated.

"What do you think you're doing, huh?" he finally snaps out, his voice unfriendly.

"Malik, will you just go straight to the point?" I urge, feeling too exhausted to make a guess.

"You're being so unfair with Liam, and I don't think I agree with the games you're playing, either," he deadpans. "If you love him as you say, then why are pushing him away?" His gaze is defensive, protective of his best friend.

I sigh heavily, fiddling with my fingers on the lap while staring intently at them as though I've had an expensive French manicure from the famous nail shop in Paris. I finally raise my gaze up at Malik.

"What if you and Liam were to fall for the same girl?" I ask out of nowhere, and Malik swallows hard.

He looks uncomfortable.

"What are you saying now?" he mutters softly, something unexpected on my part considering how lashing he was a moment ago. "Why are you asking me that?" His face looks guarded.

"Just a simple question, Malik," I return with a weak smile. "What would you do if you find yourself in that situation?" I ask again, but unfortunately our conversation

gets cut off by another phone call that seems to be important, judging from the sorry look he gives me.

"I need to take this," Malik says.

"Sure." I can't even wait to continue this conversation as I get up to leave, and I'm glad he no longer stops me.

He only says, "This conversation isn't over, professor." He moves on with his call, our eyes locked fleetingly.

"I don't think so," I breathe, fully aware that I'll be gone in a few hours.

As I pass by Sam's door, I find myself on a halt. I suddenly recall the first time she told me about Liam and the plans for me to join the trip to somewhere I didn't even know at the time. I was her best friend then, but I'm no longer sure if I am. *Are we really best friends?* Can we seriously go back to how things used to be? I honestly don't know.

Reaching at my door, I frown to find it slightly open. I halt a bit, refreshing my memory on whether I left it unclosed or not. But well, does it even matter? I simply push it and draw myself in. After flicking the switch on, my gaze falls on Sam who's sitting motionless on the couch at the corner.

I almost drop a life at her creepy silence. "You scared me, Sam! Was it hard to turn the lights on?" I nearly yell while holding my chest, my heart pounding hard against it; a feeling of something bad waiting for me.

I hope not.

"Sorry," Sam says, deadpan.

Hmm! My subconscious stays alarmed and it feels eerie.

"What are you doing in the dark, anyway?" I ask while closing the door behind me.

Sam glares at me in some unusual way that I haven't seen before; a deathly cold kind of glare served to an enemy. I must admit it scares the hell out of me. She slowly gets up, and when she does, I stumble back at the sight of my diary in her hand.

Oh no! This can't be real, can it? The world seems to have stopped revolving, my heartbeat accelerating incessantly. I'm done for . . . I'm so busted . . . I'm so screwed. Has she opened it? Did she read my diary? I can't help wondering, rubbing my sweaty palms, anger and fear combined.

CHAPTER 36

"You're finally back," Sam utters casually, her eyes stone cold. Seeing my astonished face upon the sight of the diary, she lifts it up, smirking.

"Did you read my diary?" I manage to ask with much difficulty, as though a fishbone is stuck to my throat.

"Oh . . . tthis? I didn't mean to read it," she says coolly.

"What?" I scoff angrily. "That's my fucking diary!" My body trembles, fear and worries engulfing me wholly.

"I only wanted to return your charger, and by pure coincidence, your lovely diary dropped and flipped." She smiles, a very bitter smile, and I'm stuck to my feet. "Why, Kira? Why this?" she asks me in a soft voice while getting closer.

I press my lips together to repress whatever that's about to burst in me. My worst nightmare is here. I'm not sure which one is scary, between my dreams at night or this foreign situation that I've brought upon myself.

What should I say now? That I'm sorry? That I can explain? Nothing comes to mind, my brain is frozen and my lips are stuck together. Staring at Sam, all I see is pain and rage, and I am the reason why.

"I can explain, Sam," I utter the lamest quip I've ever used before.

Sam laughs incredulously. "Explain? What's there to explain? You want to explain how you've been fooling me this entire time? Or how stupid and laughable I've been to you? Explaining what sort of a friend you truly are? What else do you want to explain?"

"Sam—"

"I just don't believe this," she says, cutting me off, her eyes on the diary. "How could you?" She now faces me, her gaze so impermeable, her usually sassy eyes so dark and clouded. *Oh God!*

"I didn't mean to do it?" I breathe, for I don't know where my voice went when I need it the most. "I swear, I didn't mean to—" I pause, sighing, unable to even come up with an intelligent excuse. "I'm sorry," I say in a very defeated tone of voice . . . and I mean it.

Sam strides fiercely and slams the diary on my chest. I stare nervously at her, tears pricking in my eyes. It hurts seeing her glaring at me like a criminal, but I don't know what to say in order for her to understand my defense on this one.

Do I even have a defense?

"Spare me your fucked-up excuses, and much less your crocodile tears," she blatantly nails the words. "You are a traitor . . . a backstabber . . . you're the worst, Kira." She doesn't bark, nor snap, she just snuffles some tears away.

I'm suffocated. "Sam," I utter, shutting my eyes from both lack of words and this feeling as if the world has collapsed on my feet, the air barely enough for my lungs. I'm terrible in arguments, and even more when I'm the guilty one.

"How could you, huh?" Sam utters, disbelief lacing her voice. "After everything I told you, every feeling I shared with you, you still had the guts to betray me like this? Was it fun?" She takes a seat on the bed, as though she can no longer stand up. "Was it fun listening to me whining over and over again that I like him?"

"I'm sorry, Sam. I really wanted to tell you about but I couldn't." I move closer, and she bursts out laughing, making me stop in my tracks.

"You wanted to tell me?" She bolts up furiously. "What did you want to tell me, Kira? That he loves you and not me? That you two have been having a secret romance behind everyone's back? What the fuck did you want to tell me, damn it!" she yells.

I feel like my head's going to burst and everything goes blurred momentarily. Not knowing what Sam is saying right now, I just clear my vision and lift my eyes at her. And that headache I've been feeling comes back. *Just great!*

"You're right, Sam." I sigh, my defeat evident through my voice. "I'm really sorry that I couldn't tell you sooner. I just didn't know how to do it. I tried but I couldn't stop falling for him, and I don't know what to say about that." I look at her, hoping to at least make her understand me.

Do we have control over our hearts? It suddenly crosses my mind, because it has been difficult governing myself from falling for Liam.

"Oh wow, what an actress!" says Sam with disdain, but I choose to ignore.

"I don't even know how it started," I say, absentminded, recalling all the encounters that led Liam Darcy engraved in my heart. "But I'm sorry for hiding it, Sam, I just couldn't let it out," I plead, fully aware that it's too late to apologize.

Ignoring my rumble, Sam starts clapping. "Bravo, Kira Jones! Bravo! How easy, huh? You speak as if it's something simple." She grits her teeth, staring at me menacingly.

"What do you want to say, Sam? I don't have anything to say than apologizing for hurting you." I stare beseechingly at her.

"I don't know! At least make up something so that I don't hate you than I already do!" Sam shouts, completely out of her composure. "Look at your face right now. You look like what you did is nothing serious! You seem as if you weren't doing anything wrong all this time! You're thick-skinned!"

Oh God! A soft sigh leaps out.

"Tell me something, Sam," I say, moving closer to her angry face. "Would it be fine if I told you about it from the start? Because I'm not sure what I had to do, honestly."

"Shut up!" Sam utters between her clenched teeth.

"Would you understand me if I told you that I'm feeling something to the same guy you kept mentioning that you loved?" I keep asking, and Sam eyes me gravely. "It just happened and I have no excuse to make about it! I don't think even if I go back in time I would be able to tell you," I add truthfully.

"You're right, nothing would've changed," Sam says, her voice low. "You know why? Because you're a backstabber from the very beginning."

"Okay, let's go with that. I'm a backstabber who fell for the same guy you did. No, stole him from you. But sorry is the only thing I can say." I can't argue anymore.

"I can't believe this! So you're trying to excuse yourself by pretending that you had no choice?" Sam is gravely amused.

"No, I'm not making any excuses! The last thing I wanted in my life was hurting you, and you know that perfectly well."

"No, I don't think I know." She shakes her head in denial. "And you've succeeded to hurt me, just so you know, Kira. And I'll never forgive you for this."

"Sam," I breathe, "I'll understand if you decide to do so. But truly, I'm really sorry."

"With that face of yours, everyone thinks you're a saint," Sam snarls with a fine deliberate to hurt me, which works perfectly. "The nice one." She twirls around me. "The good one . . . Always the loved one." Now she stops moving.

"Sam, that's not true." I wipe off the fallen drop.

"And of course I'm the bad one, right? So tell me, Kira, how did you seduce him?" she mockingly asks. "How were his kisses like?" she adds, and I swallow the anger that's slowly consuming my soul. "What about his caresses? Did you have sex with him? How was it?"

"Stop it, Sam," I breathe.

"You're shutting me up? Why? Don't you want to talk about *Mr. Darcy*?" she keeps talking, and as if the mentioning of the name reminds her of something, she suddenly huffs. "Mr. Darcy? So that was just an act? What a pro, huh? You're really something else, best friend. What else are you hiding? Do I even know you, Kira Jones? Who are you really?"

I just cry like a fool, letting Sam's words pierce in my heart like a katana. Do I have the right to get mad at her? Then why am I so angry at her right now?

"Okay, that's enough!" I snap, taking a long breath of composure. "I'm not standing here listening to every bit of your insults!"

"How dare you!" she exclaims, her eyes aflame.

"I don't know what else to do, Sam." I slowly move my legs away from her and sit on the bed, feeling physically weak now. "I made a mistake. I shouldn't have allowed myself to love Liam. Is that what you want to hear?" I ask her, and she says nothing. "Well, I won't say such a thing because loving him is not a mistake and I refuse to think that it is."

"Love? Did you just say love?" Sam utters, amused. "Oh please, Kira, don't make me laugh."

"Yes, Sam. Love," I say weakly, lifting my tired eyes up at her. "I do love Liam Darcy, and I'm not ashamed to say it loudly."

"Oh." Sam folds her arms across her chest, staring at me in a derisive manner. "How lovely," she utters.

"Let me ask you something." I rise up once again. "What is it that you're angry about? Is it because I fell in love with Liam? Or that I didn't tell you about it?" I look her straight in the eyes, and the anger in them is increasingly visible. "If I'd told you the truth, would you've allowed it to go on?"

We both hold our tongues, beholding each other's gaze for a few seconds.

"Never!" Sam answers, her teeth clenched. "I'd never let that happen!" She moves her face closer to mine while saying this.

"Why?" I squint my eyes as I try to scrutinize her reactions. "Because you love him? Do you really love him, Sam? Can you honestly say that you love him?" I ask more strenuously.

"What are you trying to say, huh?" Sam snorts disdainfully, her face guarded that I can no longer tell if the question disturbs her or not.

"That I don't believe it," I reply. "I don't think you're angry because you love him! Nor because I hid the truth from you! I know you so well, Samantha. The only reason that makes you angry right now is the fact that it's Kira who's been standing in your way!"

"Shut up!" she snaps.

"An insignificant best friend of yours who is nothing compared to you, am I wrong?" I also raise my voice.

"Shut up!"

"He's not your type, Kira. He's too good for you. It's what you always tell me. But why? Why are they always good for you but not me? Why don't you give me the chance to make my own choices? Have you ever sat down and ask what I want? No. My choices are always limited. They are either too good or not good enough."

"Stop making things up!" she lashes. "I'm not like that! I only tried to protect you so that won't make a fool out of yourself!"

"Oh really?" I laugh, letting the tears flow as they please. "Because I'm too naive to take care of myself, huh?" She clenches her fists. "Because to you I'm just a stupid girl who doesn't even know what she wants with her life."

"So, are you happy now that you've proved to be a great seductress?" Sam questions, arms folded across her chest. "You have them all at your leash, right? Liam, Malik, and even Jeremy that I always suspected he had a thing for you."

"No," I say unwaveringly. "I'm only happy because for the first time in my life I found someone who saw a value in me. Someone who took me as I am, without putting the butts, nor trying to change a thing. He accepted me, as boring as I am, and that is something I've always wished for. I knew you'd never understand even if I told you this. Everything has always been about you, Sam, and I just had to follow through. But this time, I don't regret anything, even if you condemn me as if I'm the most evil person in the world."

"You bitch!" I feel is a heavy slap on my face, which makes me cock my head momentarily.

Without making a face or grimacing from the pain, I slowly fix myself with a bold sigh.

"Does that make you feel better?" I ask softly, making sure that I don't break down so easily. "Would you like to slap me again?"

"You-know-nothing!" Sam snarls, speaking between her gritted teeth. "You don't know anything about what I feel being your shadow."

"What are you talking about?" I ask with squinted eyes, so bemused.

"You always take the spotlight," she answers, and it's a real shock to me, I swear.

"Always making me feel inferior, the second best, and I hate it!" she yells to my face.

"I saw him first. I liked him first, and you know that!"

"Do you even realize what sort of nonsense you're talking about right now?" I ask, totally amazed by the ability she has to victimize herself. Always the victim. "Sam, this is real life, for God's sake! We're not kids! We're in no competition!"

"No!" she says loudly.

"Okay, fine. Have it your way," I say in a resigned manner, fagged. "But I've never compared myself to you! In fact, I never desire to get the attention you always deem to have. It's so disappointing that up until now you know so little about me."

"You're a traitor, and I'll never *ever* forgive you for this! You hear me? Never!" Her voice is promising and I'm dismayed. "And I'd rather not see your shameless face for as long as I live."

"Don't worry about that," I utter painfully. "As you can see, I'm already packed and I'll leave this place right away as I've been planning to. You won't have to wear a mask just so you won't see my face."

"Yeah, you better!" Sam says. "You can even die while at it!"

My heart sinks.

CHAPTER 37

"What happened?" Malik eyes my suitcase with pure dismay.

"She knows," I sob, wiping my tears. "She's found out already."

Malik says nothing. Slowly he pulls me into his arms and I easily dissolve in his embrace. My hiccups take the best of me like a child, my chin on his shoulder. I feel

lost and empty. I just cry . . . and he rubs my back gently, no word coming from his mouth. I still can't believe the worst has happened.

"I'm sorry for this." I finally tug out and manage to smile while picking my bags, ready to face the aftermath; my scary unknown after ruining everything.

"It's okay," Malik tells me softly, smile forced and rueful. "You're still leaving?" He sounds indisposed.

"Yeah, I can't stay here anymore." I lift my eyes to meet his, a bittersweet laughter escaping my lips at this mess I'm in. "I don't want to be here, Malik. I don't have any right to be here." Tears fall down yet again, blurring my vision, urging the back of my hand to immediately reach for my eyes.

"Oh, Professor," Malik breathes, and the sadness paints his eyes as though I'm divorcing him after ten years of a lovely marriage.

"I'll be fine," I say stubbornly, and his lips harden into a hard line.

"I'll take you to a hotel or something," Malik offers, taking my bags.

"No, Mali, I'll just—" I try to argue but the look he gives me shuts my words.

If Malik gets to know where I'll be sleeping tonight, then obviously Liam will. I'm not willing to put up with another reproaching right now, especially from *him*.

"It's late, Kira. You won't get a taxi until the main road and it's pretty far from here. Let me drive you; I insist." His importunate eyes gaze at me and I don't have a heart to reject his kindness.

"Okay," I relent, "but only until town. From there you leave me alone."

"Whatever you want," he says in a low voice, his usual playful air gone.

We slip into the Aston Martin, and hit the driveway. Malik drives in a deadly silence, making med wonder what's going on in his mind. As for me, my head is slowly experiencing a migraine that's probably from fatigue, and a faint fever from a distance.

It will be fine, I tell myself.

I watch South beach sliding by, and a couple of sighs escape my lungs every now and then. Liam will never forgive me for this, I think of him and only tears prick in my eyes. I immediately do them away, sniffing, my face hidden to the side.

"I still think this crazy." Malik opens his mouth at last. "I mean . . . what for? Why would you sacrifice your happiness for her?"

"I don't know," I utter with my eyes fixed on the road, not knowing what to think or feel regarding what I'm doing.

"Well, maybe I do," Malik murmurs.

"Huh?" I glance at him.

"Nothing," he utters, and the silence resumes.

As instructed, Malik drops me to a place where I can easily grab a taxi. I can't say it's been easy convincing him to do as I want, but in the end he complies with every wish of mine, as he always does.

Another hard part is saying goodbye to him. He has been very good to me, and I'll forever remember him as a wonderful friend he is. I watch him taking off my bags, and I feel nostalgic already. I'll miss him so badly, and I honestly wish that I'll get to see him again.

"Thank you," I say with my best smile at the moment, forcing myself to stay composed.

"Are you seriously doing this, professor?" he asks yet again, while I put my suitcase

inside the taxi. "There's still time to change your mind. You can—" I hear a heavy exasperated sigh from him.

Turning to face him, I hold tightly the two sides of my long Cardigan, not knowing what to tell him again. I walk forward with a smile, and could only see the gloomy face that I'm only used to see as smiley and bright.

"I'm just going to California, Malik, not Africa," I say, and we giggle together for a change.

"Well, I'd have gone to Africa to get you, if you'd let me." He grins.

"Yes, that's the Malik I know." I smile the threatening tears away, as he looks at me too deeply in the eyes.

"You can visit me if you want," I say truthfully. "I wouldn't be happy to lose you too."

"You won't," he utters, and it feels like a very beautiful promise. The promise I wish I could hear from someone else. *Enough, Kira!* I left him so I shouldn't even wish for such a wish.

I march over and encircle my arms around Malik's and hug him tight. It's now that I realize how much I hate goodbyes after all. It's so depressing, and I nearly forgot the feeling since I don't even have a lot of people in my life.

Malik feels stiff at first, as though I've taken him by total surprise, but he slowly relaxes in my arms. I feel his hands tightening my lower back, and the smell of his expensive cologne engulfs my nostrils.

I may never see him, and much less Liam whom I couldn't even say goodbye to. I tighten the embrace at the thought, and it's like I'm scared to let go; that if I do it's all over for me. But I have to, and so then I do exactly it.

When we pull apart, I read sadness all over Malik's face, and another kind of emotion that I can't quite explain. Well, a lot can happen when we part with people we like, so it's probably nothing new for me dwell on the subject.

"You're an amazing woman, Kira," Malik says.

I'm not so sure, really. Not after failing to keep everything I consider dear.

"And you're a very nice guy, dear Prince. Thank you for making this trip full of smiles for me," I tell him truthfully, recalling our first meeting and all the times he made me feel at ease when I got tense or happy when I was sad. "Oh, I'm also sorry that I misjudged you the first time I saw you."

"Say what?" He eyes me sideways, laughing.

"I like you, professor, I really do," I mimic his signature quip.

"You're crazy." He squirms around, laughing crazily. "I don't sound like that."

We laugh in a brief moment, joking around, trying hard to accept parting our ways. How I wish I could halt the time! Just an hour. No . . . just a few minutes more.

"I got to go," I finally get serious, my eyes getting extra moist once again. "Thank you for everything." I rush to kiss him on the cheek, and he shuts his eyes adorably.

Smiling faintly, I turn my back to hop into the taxi that's been waiting for ages. The driver is probably wondering why we're having a display of affection in the middle of the city, instead of wherever we came from.

It's when Malik grabs my wrist suddenly, right before I grab the door handle.

He steadfastly pulls me to his side, like he's forgotten something very important. I'm so startled as I land my hands on his chest, and find myself tightly against his body. He swallows nervously, his shiny eyes piercing into mine.

I don't understand this attitude, until his lips land onto mine.

I don't do a thing. I'm just too puzzled to react. He's kissing me, I know he is, but it's like I'm hypnotized with the shock or something. Everything ceases to exist, and I can't even feel my own heartbeat.

What is this? What is Malik doing now? My two subs widen their eyes, utterly shocked.

He suddenly frees me, and I look up at him, just to see a foreign type of Malik that I never imagined existed. *No, it can't be!* The look in his eyes, the feeling it deciphers as he stares deeply into my eyes, it's so confusing.

"I'm sorry, Kira," he utters, breathless and remorseful. "If I hadn't done this, I'd probably regret for the rest of my days."

Oh God! I swallow hard.

"Goodbye, Malik," I say, in almost a whisper. "Take care."

"Professor," Malik utters, but ends up sighing. I give him a faint smile and a nod, before turning around.

I don't know why I smiled, but I just wanted him to see that I'm not angry at him as his eyes suggested. I slowly slide into the taxi, and delicately seat myself down. He kissed me? Did he? I try to shut my eyes, hoping it's just an imagination.

"No, this is not happening." I shake my head to the sides as the scene flashes back in my head. "No, it can't be." I refuse to believe.

About an hour later, I'm finally set into my room, in a nearby hotel to the Airport. I turned my cellphone off as soon as I checked in. I don't want anyone finding me, especially after what happened earlier with Malik. I refuse to believe that such a thing is happening.

I roll over the bed, and pull the covers to my neck. I feel like I destroy everything I touch. I've ruined my own friendship, and now this? No, I can't deal with too much emotion in one day. I just need to sleep, and get the hell out of this place once and for all.

Thus morning I wake like a zombie. After two hours of forcing myself into breakfast and getting ready for my flight, I finally check out of the hotel. Now I'm off to the airport for my departure in forty minutes. It's been a very long and tough night, but it's over now.

Goodbye, Miami.

There's this one scene in the movies, when a leading girl decides to leave the city or country, and the male lead would come and stop her from leaving. He'd use all kind of words, and other romantic tricks, and in the end they'd have a happily ever after.

I always find loads of crap in such scenes. I mean, how do they manage to run that heavy traffic, the flat tire or the security check in the Airport so easily? I'd always laugh at the idea, but then again, it is possible, I guess. And today, I just remembered those sappy parts while thinking of Liam.

I eventually board the plane, and guess what? It's already taking off, and nothing happened like in the movie. I laugh to myself like a retarded woman. You're not the lead character, Kira. My subconscious laughs at me. Well, maybe I'm not the heroine of the story.

The plane finally lands at LAX runway. It's been a terrible flight of my entire life. I could neither sleep nor stay perfectly awake. I'm just glad to be over with this entire summer ordeal. Talking of my appearance, I look haggard. I slide the sunglasses on as the L.A. sun welcomes me unpleasantly.

My body heat isn't normal, yet I tightly wrap my cardigan tight. It's strange that I feel cold amid the summer, and now it's the L.A. summer of all places. As though I'm being forced to walk, I take my bags ready to go home. I jump into the first taxi I come across outside.

"Where to?" the driver shoots sassily.

"Venice," I utter.

Home . . . my sweet little home.

"Right away," he answers with some kind of enthusiasm that doesn't touch a bit of me.

The taxi halts by the heavy traffic jam. *Yes, this is home.* The noise, the traffic, and the heat . . . I nearly forgot how crazy the Lincoln Blvd can get around the rush hours, but looks like my driver knows his way better as he outmaneuvers the streets to avoid the jam.

My head feels heavy and I can't stop thinking of Liam.

He probably hates me by now, thinking that I played him for a fool, or worse. The idea makes me sick and the sadness takes me all over again. Now I hear *Ed Sheeran* and his photograph song, which drives me crazier. I can't take this, it's so harder than I imagined.

When I arrive home, in such a state, I drop my bags by the door. I don't bother with anything else, other than throwing my shoes, before changing the bed sheets and fall flat on the bed. Even though I don't pay much attention to my apartment, I can tell how dusty every corner is.

I pull a pair of pillows and comfortably lay my head on one, and hugging the other. I should be saying it's good to be home but it's the opposite that I'm feeling. I want to sleep and forget. I want to lock everything up.

It's over, it's the end. I shed a few more teardrops and try to sleep once more. I hope tomorrow will be fine, it has to be. I have to wake up feeling energetic, strong enough to accept everything and move on. I have to go back into the woman I was.

The End!

Authors Note:

Thank you so much for giving this book a look. I know you're highly disappointed that I stopped here. And you're absolutely right, for this is not the end. Hell, not even the middle of the story.

However, for security reasons I'm inclined to stop here.

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