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## ONE

"Aren't you joining us?" Gena, Claire's only friend, asked her sassily.

Staring around the shiny blue-lightened club, people who were mostly their classmates dancing and having fun, Claire smiled softly.

"No, I love observing from a distance," she answered. "Besides, I'm leaving very soon." She slowly sipped the champagne in her glass while eyeing her gorgeous Japanese friend she'd known throughout the college years.

Claire and Gena were more than just besties; they were sole sisters who had each other's back for thick and thin. Neither could imagine life without the other.

"Why now?" Gena cried, pursing her lips into a pout. "Are you in the mood to fight with your witch stepmom or something?"

Claire scowled. "Not really. She's the least of my concerns right now. By the way, I'm spending the weekend at the beach house. Would you like to come?" she asked, eyeing Gena hopefully.

As if she was going to say no, Claire chuckled inwardly.

"I'd love to!" Gena snapped gleefully. "You know that I love having a good time, don't you?"

"I was just making sure. Who knows?" Claire shrugged.

"Oh please! We both need a break, girl." Gena dropped on the barstool with a sigh, untying her dark, straight hair with a stout pull of the hairband.

"Well, let's do it then," Claire uttered. "I've got something important to do there." Her look was suddenly rueful, her eyes on the glass she was tilting nonchalantly.

Sighing, Gena pulled her face closer to Claire's. "Are you finally going to visit your father's grave?" she asked, and Claire nodded softly. "It will be fine, don't beat yourself."

"I hope so," Claire breathed, the feeling overwhelming her until today. "Anyways, let's forget about that." She tried to enjoy the graduation party that she only attended out of Gena's conviction.

The two had just graduated from college, a week ago.

"I can't believe we're done with the school shit," said Gena, beckoning for a drink from the bartender.

"I know, right?" Claire sighed, staring at her glass as if it was something interesting. And suddenly she looked at Gena with a bright, hopeful smile. "I wonder what awaits us," she uttered.

All she's hoping for is to bury the emptiness in her heart. Was there anything out there for her? Should she take a vacation or something? Claire couldn't decide, for she had a lot to think of now that the school was over.

"Hey." Gena snapped her fingers, disrupting Claire's trance. "What are you thinking of?"

Claire chuckled. "I want to feel alive, Gena," she said, making Gena frown bemusedly. "Even a little bit I want to feel like I'm really living."

"What?" Gena grabbed her tequila from the bartender.

"Never mind, it's nothing to stress about," Claire said dismissively. "I'll just go home now, I'm very tired. I'll see you tomorrow, huh?" She yawned while saying this.

"Sure," Gena uttered.

Claire didn't waste more time at the party; she immediately hopped into a taxi and rode back home. Today had been a bit emotional for her, and partying was the least of her needs.

The taxi pulled over in front of her house.

"Thank you," she told the driver, and immediately strode towards the gigantic gate.

Her house was a large two-story: electric fence and enormous gate made it utterly modern. Walking inside, Claire was welcomed by a well-trimmed garden, a vast swimming pool, and a pair of swings that always visualized her childhood.

A soft smile escaped her as she made her way inside, thanking the heavens that her stepmother wasn't on the loop to ruin her evening further. She was probably cooking her deadly potions somewhere, Claire thought, for she always considered *her* a witch.

Feeling emotionally exhausted, Claire kicked her golden heels, and then peeled off the white strapless dress she was wearing. She climbed on the bed right away, as though afraid to catch a cold. She just texted Gena about the time of their departure, and closed her eyes to rest her mind.

The next day, just as agreed, the two began their journey. They arrived in Montesby around one in the afternoon. It was a beautiful town with attractive natural scenery, where the green met the blue. The sea and the vegetation were hand in hand adorning the place. Claire smiled with mirth as they stepped out of the taxi right in front of the beautiful beach house.

"Claire?" An old man regarded her in awe. "What a surprise, my girl! You have gotten so tall that I nearly forgot you." He was around seventy or so.

"I will take it as a compliment, Grandpa. How are you?" Claire returned happily, her smile brighter as the golden sunlight nourishing her blonde hair.

"Very fine, my child," he said, throwing a curious glance over Claire's shoulder.

Gena was watching them without a word, smiling.

"Um . . ." Claire moved aside wittingly. "This is my best friend, Gena. And Gena, this is my grandfather," she introduced them.

"Nice to meet you, young lady." The old man smiled with politeness.

"Same." Gena grinned.

"Well, why don't you come in? I'm sure you must be hungry, right?" he said urgently, leading the way inside.

"You bet I am," Gena muttered.

A while later Claire was taking a little walk with the old man, hand in hand. She hadn't been here in ages, and the only reason she decided to come this time was to finally find peace for herself; after spending a long moment despising her late father.

The burden of hatred was too heavy to carry around for longer.

"What took you so long?" The old man asked tenderly, his steps slow.

Claire had no definitive answer for that. Maybe she was afraid?

"I was just waiting for the perfect time, I guess," Claire answered in a small whisper.

Or maybe she wasn't ready to accept some facts in her life, she thought to herself.

"Do you still resent your father?" her grandpa asked carefully, and Claire swallowed hard. "You can cry if you want to, and curse him out loud if you want to. But your father never forgot about you, trust me."

"I don't know about that." Claire laughed bittersweetly, trying hard to fight the pricking tears. "If he did . . . he wouldn't have left me believing otherwise."

"Not true, Claire. All he wanted was to prepare a better future for you," her grandfather insisted.

"Future?" Claire scoffed with incredulity. "What future is there if I'm now all alone? This is not what I wanted, Grandpa. I wanted a family!" She sniffed, her anger exploding. "I just wanted to go home and find people who would hug me, ask how my day was, and whether I'd want to join them for dinner. But he denied me that! He had the chance to do it but he didn't! All he cared about was his work!" She allowed the tears to swim in her eyes, and slowly slid down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, my child." The old man pulled her for a hug, and she completely melted in his warmth. "It will be fine, you'll see." He patted her back softly, allowing her sobs to pass.

"I'm only here so that I can finally let go of all the anger, and start afresh," Claire said as they pulled apart, sniffing. "I want to be free. I'll let go of all the hatred so that I can live my life without resentment."

"I understand, and that's very wise." He smiled proudly. "So, does this mean you're ready to take what he's left you?"

Claire blinked, but immediately recalled the meaning.

"I think so. It's what he wanted for me, right? I'll accept it now." She forced a smile despite finding it weird.

"Very well, that means you're a grown up now," her grandfather remarked, making them both laugh.

"I'll have to visit him. I'd like to do it right away," said Claire. "I believe a lot will change from today. I can feel it." She smiled optimistically, and the old man had nothing else to say, other feeling happy for her.

It was two in the afternoon, when Claire arrived at the cemetery. Nothing had changed, she thought. It had been four years since her father died, and that was her first visit since the burial. It felt terrible, but she had to do it.

Sighing heavily at the sight of several graves, scribbled with the names, dates, and lovely titles of someone's loved ones, Claire went straight to that of her father. It was in a great condition, green grass adorning it.

Swallowing hard, Claire placed a large bouquet of flowers on top of it, taking her sunglasses off. She slowly squatted down and ran a hand on the engraved words on the silver plate on the ground, her dad's name beaming.

"Hi, Dad," she uttered, smiling faintly. "It's me . . . your Claire." She pressed her lips together, fighting the tears.

She really wished that the dead could hear. She hoped her father could hear.

"It took me so long, huh? I know, I had no courage to face you. I just couldn't stand the sight of you anymore. You weren't the same dad I knew before; not that friendly one who loved me."

She broke into uncontrollable tears, sitting down on the soft grass.

"I'm going to be an interior designer, just as I wanted," she proceeded. "But you are not going to see it. You didn't even see me wearing the graduation gown. As always, you didn't show up. You're so cruel, Mr. Levy."

Claire knew it was pointless blaming the dead, but she needed to vent anyway. She just blurted all that she'd kept inside. Minutes passed, and she felt better somehow.

It was time to say goodbye.

With a deep sigh, Claire decided it was enough, hence made her way out. Fine or not, she felt like something was off her throat, and that made her feel better. Oblivious of anything and anyone, she suddenly realized that she had an audience.

What the hell? She screamed inside.

"Are you feeling better now?" a male voice asked.

Claire swerved around. "Are you talking to me?" she asked the owner of the voice, frowning.

"Yes, you," he replied, and she looked at him, puzzled.

"I'm not sure if I'm supposed to receive that from a stranger, but thanks for your concern anyway," Claire replied casually, and turned to where she was heading.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you, I should've introduced myself first, maybe?" he remarked, his manners gallant. "Hi, I'm Bruno." His bashful smile would have driven any woman crazy; but not Claire.

All she wanted was to get out of this place that could never be a meeting place, and definitely a place to exchange pleasantries from a stranger. For heaven's sake, he could even be a ghost! She thought.

She paced a few steps towards him, nonchalantly, and stopped. "Are you a journalist, by any chance?" she queried. "Because I don't have any scoop for you, in case that's your issue."



He better be a journalist and not a ghost, she kept thinking.

Bruno bursted out laughing, vividly amused. "A journalist? No, I just saw you in there and I felt concerned, that's why I couldn't ignore you."

"Oh, really now? How sweet of you, huh?" Claire retorted. "Well, you should stay here and do the charity job then, don't you think? Thank you for your concern, Bruno, but I'm fine."

"Ouch," he muttered, holding his heart as though highly wounded. "I'm sorry if I was rude, but you honestly looked devastated there. But well, I can see you are full of energy now, so I'll take my leave."

Eyeing him leaving, Claire felt somewhat guilty for lashing out without any grand reason.

"Wait," she urged.

"Yes?" Bruno quipped.

"I'm sorry. I'm not having a good day to be honest," she confessed.

"Apology accepted." Bruno beamed kindly. "And I'm sorry, I can tell you're having it bad."

"Well, thanks." She sighed, and they slowly continued to walk.

"I think I said my name, but I haven't heard yours yet," said Bruno while staring at her with a mischievous gleam.

"Claire," she told him softly.

"Oh. Such a pretty name." His voice was teasing with warmth.

"Um . . . thanks." Claire had no reason to stay sullen; her face brightened with an indulgent smile.

"So, are you new around here? I've never seen you before," Bruno proceeded.

"Oh, aren't you a know-it-all? How can you tell if I'm new or not?" she replied accusingly, and he laughed heartily. They were already outside the cemetery.

"Well, you can say that out loud," he bragged. "I know almost everyone around here, but this is the first charming face to meet the eyes."

"So that's how you get into them ladies, huh?"

"You're beautiful and funny," Bruno uttered, laughing. "Would you mind having a cup of coffee?" he flatly proposed.

"You're not flirting with me, are you?" Claire asked, and laughter escaped Bruno. "Well, I'm just warning you, because I'm not easy to handle."

"I really had no plans to, but I guess I've changed my mind a second ago," Bruno replied, and she gasped incredulously. "I'm just kidding, Claire. I'm only inviting you for a coffee, nothing more."

"Cool, let's have coffee," she relented with a little smile.

## TWO

Apparently there was a modern sleek restaurant Claire didn't know existed. The ambience was calm and friendly. Bruno's car pulled over, and the two went to one of the empty tables.

"Didn't expect to see you so soon." A young waitress passed by, her blonde hair in pigtails. She smiled blushing, making Claire stare at her stunned.

"Well, I'm as unpredictable as the weather," Bruno replied, shrugging heedlessly as Miss pigtails walked by with a tray of food.

He snapped a finger and another waiter made his way towards their table.

"You seem very popular here," Claire made a casual remark upon the gesture.

Bruno smiled and said, "That's because I live here."

"Oh, and what do you do around here? Photography?" Claire was bemused, her eyes squinted inquisitively.

"Um, I'm the restaurant owner," he replied.

Oh. Evidently Claire hadn't seen this coming. Well, he wasn't a weirdo after all, she thought to herself at the remainder of their meeting earlier.

"Congratulations. This place is terrific," she uttered, her eyes roaming around with admiration. The waiter inquired about their menu choice afterwards. "Chicken casserole, please," she replied.

"Thank you, I guess." Bruno's smile was brighter. "I'll have the same," he said, and then faced Claire. "Care for a drink? The cocktails here are to die for; not that I'm bragging."

"Oh? Is that true?" Claire asked the waiter. "I know he's your boss but I'm the customer here. I'm the King . . . No, the Queen!"

They all laughed.

"They are great." The waiter nodded in agreement, his smile assuring Claire of this grand allegation.

"Sure. Why not? Worst case scenario, I'll just not ever come back if you both scam me." She let the gentlemen win.

"So . . ." Bruno resumes his full, undistracted attention back to Claire. "Why are you around here? Because I know you're not from here." His brown eyes were blazing with wonder and playfulness, his smile boyish.

"Well, I just came to relax over the weekend," Claire answered with a deep sigh. "And to visit my parents." Her voice was low without ecstasy, and it seemed Bruno understood why.

"I'm sorry. I was also visiting my mother," he said in a similar tone of voice, reclining back in his seat.

"Really?" Claire uttered, and this turned to be an ordinary talk as Bruno talked of his dead mother. "I'm sorry for your loss," she breathed.

"It's okay. We're still surviving, aren't we?" Bruno enthused, his sassy mood restored.

"Yeah. Surviving." Claire's mind was back to her house in the city where her stepmother was always on her neck, turning her life a living hell.

It was time to maybe move out, she'd constantly say this, but the memories of her childhood would always hold her back.

"Are we on the memory lane?" Bruno snapped his finger on her face, chuckling at how lost she looked.

"Oh, come on!" Claire dismissed with a smile. She was indeed enjoying the moment, and so was Bruno.

"And where exactly do you live?" he asked after a short pause of laughter.

"Lisbay."

"Hmm . . . that's interesting."

"Why? I'd much rather live here if it weren't for other reasons," she said truthfully.

"I agree. I do like this place better than the city," Bruno said, running a hand through his funky curls.

Smiling, Claire's tummy started rumbling, and she eyed him blankly upon his small laugh. "I think food would be better than your teeth," she said, and now he laughed even louder. So did she.

"Wow! Big appetite, huh?" Bruno teased.

"What can I say?" Claire flushed. "I love eating."

And indeed, she loved eating. Maybe food was the best part of her life.

"Okay, beautiful." Bruno got up, so as to personally speed up their order.

"We can just wait, though! Don't pay attention to my rumbling." Claire tried to stop him, but he was too adamant. "Gosh!" She laughed, allowing herself to relax.

Between lunch and talking, time seemed to be going quite fast. Bruno was quite friendly, and it was impossible not to get lost into his ability to converse.

Claire had nothing much to tell, however, for her life had been a dull, empty page with nothing but her step family and the failed romance during high school.

Well, only Gena was her tale to tell. She was missing the Asian already.

As for Bruno, he was spontaneous and adventurous. He'd been to major cities of Europe, and studied in Barcelona. He was just a free spirit, enjoying life and the simple things it had to offer.

Photography was Bruno's biggest passion, and he loved it. He saw beauty in everything he took shots of, according to his own words.

Nevertheless, Claire never stopped staring at him, sometimes. He was handsome, charming and boyish in manners, with something special that makes one feel at ease with him.

He was probably in his mid-twenties or so, Claire reckoned.

But that was all. She had no time to crush over some guy she'd just met in the cemetery. However, she liked his company quite well. Her phone buzzed suddenly, and it was none other than Gena.

"Hello," Claire answered while looking at Bruno, who was also looking at her with a small frown.

"Hey, where are you?" Gena replied from the other end, her voice ballistic.

"Um, with a friend," Claire replied, smiling. "Why? Do you need anything? Or you just miss me already?"

"Which friend that I don't know about? Spill it, have you met some cute guy over there?" Gena asked her in a naughty way.

Claire rolled her eyes. "Is that the only thing you could think of? We'll talk later, be there soon!"

"You better, because I can't wait, you know. And I'm bored to death here," Gena lamented and it was the end of the call.

"Oh God!" Claire exclaimed.

"What?" Bruno abandoned his mobile.

"It's already six and I am still here! I've got to go, Bruno." Claire collected her bag in frenzy.

"Alright, but—" Bruno chuckled at her haste moves. "Take it easy, Claire, it's not the end of the world."

"Yeah, right! Talking to someone who lives right here."

Bruno couldn't hold his laughter as he stood up. "I can give you a ride if you don't mind," he suggested.

"No, you've done enough. I don't want to trouble you anymore. But thanks for the nice lunch, really," Claire assured, her smile grateful. "I've completely lost track of time from the talk and all, and maybe I should blame you." Her pink lips pouted cutely.

"Me?" Bruno uttered, wide-eyed.

"Yeah, you." Claire grinned, fixing her wavy, golden hair with her fingers. "Bye." And then she kissed him on the cheek.

"But—" Bruno started, but she was already striding off, waving at him in child-like manners. "But it seems like it's going to rain soon," he muttered apprehensively.

The weather changed abruptly. The sky was too dark as if a very heavy rain was going to crash. Claire didn't care, however, because she had an umbrella inside her backpack.

Ten minutes passed but there was no sign of any taxi on the main road. She decided to walk, hoping to find one on the way.

After a short while, the rain started pouring. Claire fished the umbrella and opened it immediately. Not having a choice, she decided to walk through the rain that was increasingly heavy.

She tried to call Gena but there was no signal. Her jeans and sneakers were all wet, for it was quite windy, and the cold had started to get into her skin.

"Crap!" Claire snapped. "I'm so damn tired, and this stupid umbrella is totally useless!" It was already dark, and about fifteen minutes had already passed.

Still there wasn't a trace of any car, bus . . . or even a taxi. She kept walking.

The geography of the place was terrible as far as heavy rainfall was concerned. It would easily get slippery, and tremendous erosion would take part thitherto. She had to walk carefully, but one can't always be careful enough.

She suddenly slipped and fell, without noticing that she was walking onto a little slope. There was an eroded part that formed a temporary reservoir in which rain water collected and cascaded away. Claire slid straight towards it, and only managed to grab the tree branch which supported her balance.

Looking down she felt terrified. She tried to hold onto the branch tightly, but it was hard. The rain water kept rippling past her heading onto the little railing bridge.

Damn it!

Claire tried to pull herself up, several times, but still couldn't. She screamed for help but there was no one there. Not even an animal passing.

It was so strange and sudden. Coming from a perfect nice day, and in a blink of an eye she was fighting for her life, in such a stupid manner. She even had to laugh a bit. She was cold, and the water wouldn't leave her in peace.

What the hell was happening with her life? Was this real or some kind of a bad dream? Was she really hanging by a tree branch amid the rain? Claire wondered inside and the fear began consuming her little by little.

"Ugh!" she bawled, trying once again to push herself up, her heart beating fast at the speed of the running water cascading vigorously.

Was she going to die? Was she even afraid of dying? If she thought better, there was nothing major to live for in her life. Could this be the sign for her eternal salvation? Perhaps it's her ticket to see her mother, and her father as well.

And maybe ask him why he neglected her like that.

Claire began laughing. She was laughing between the tears, thinking of her horrible life so far; the life filled with longing and loneliness. She was tired of holding on, in both this moment and all those times she'd forced herself to do so.

Perhaps it's time to let go, time to be free from this cruel world.

However, just as she's about to give it up, willingly and free, something happened. Like an angel shining from afar, Claire glimpsed the double lights approaching from a distance. It was a car, she thought, and perhaps her final moment wasn't yet.



### THREE

The evening was stormy. Mr. Stevens and his grandson, Ryan, were on their way home as the rain kept pouring intensely with thunder striking eerily in the sky.

"We should've gone to your house, son," said Mr. Stevens warily, his eyes gleaming from the blue light in the sky. "This rain won't stop now; are you really able to drive this way?"

"Don't worry, I know this road better than you think," Ryan said confidently, and he meant it. His muscular arms gripped the steering tightly, tentatively avoiding all the weak spots as he kept driving the large SUV.

Ryan was an epitome of handsomeness; tall, athletic built, with amazing facial features that deserved more than one glance. He was also a matured guy, with a very stronger personality than his actual age.

"Okay, if you say so." Mr. Stevens pulled a bottle of Scotch.

"I thought the doctor forbade that," Ryan remarked, scowling, and it was always a fool's errand.

Mr. Stevens was crazy for whisky, but it wasn't enough for him to be an alcoholic, thankfully.

"Son, if I die, I'll just die," he said. "Might as well do it as a happy man instead of a sad, old bag of bones!"

"That famous speech," Ryan muttered, rolling his eyes.

Ignoring the sarcasm, Mr. Stevens added, "I'm not spending a few of my last days in the world like a warrior who's left his wife and kids at home." He cleared his throat at the burning sensation upon chugging the drink, and it was enough to make Ryan shake his head to the sides.

"I was able to convince the shareholders about the redevelopment deal," Ryan said, finding the distraction from this horrendous weather. He glanced at his grandfather as

he added, "Considering the cost and benefit analysis, it wasn't hard getting the majority on our side."

"I knew you'd do it; I had absolutely no doubt," Mr. Stevens remarked, a proud hint in his smile. "Now you can focus on getting the permit, and by luck, I know someone who can work on it as soon as possible."

Ryan nodded, marveling at his upcoming project.

Mr. Stevens was the founder of the SK group of companies. They owned plenty of buildings, apartments and shopping malls, among other things. Ryan was the CEO of SK Real Estate, one of the best in the country. He'd taken over the reign upon his grandfather's retirement.

He was the best, nevertheless, and even admired by many as the youngest entrepreneur compared to many in the real estate industry.

His eyes were careful on the road. But suddenly, out of the blue, his attention was stolen by the bemusing sight. He briskly hit the brakes, staring outside attentively via the side window.

"What is that?" he thought out loudly, squinting his eyes at the sight of a person hanging on the tree, holding it tight.

It was a woman, Ryan comprehended, and she seemed in deep trouble.

"Hold on a second, Grandfather," Ryan announced while unbuckling his seatbelt.

"What's going on? You nearly gave me a heart attack!" Stevens barked over his whisky.

"Over there," Ryan uttered pointedly, and the old man caught on immediately. "Can you see it? I think it's a person."

"Yeah, I can see. Is it a woman?" Mr. Stevens asked, squinting his eyes beneath the pair of spectacles.

"I'll go check," Ryan said, determined to unravel the mystery.

It was a scary predicament, but he was far from any fright.

"Be careful, son," Mr. Stevens said, sounding displeased with the idea somehow.

He was probably worried.

Slamming the door shut, Ryan hastened through the treacherous raindrops and peered his way towards the subject of his attention. It was indeed a woman, and he had no time to think or wonder of her deal.

"Here, hold my hand!" he urged, narrowing his eyes as the rainwater harassed his sight.

"I . . . can't," the woman uttered faintly.

"Of course, you can. Try harder. I got you." Ryan grabbed her hand sharply, followed by the bag hanging barely on her back. "There." With all his strength he held the tree for support as the ground was very slippery.

Eventually he pulled her up and out of danger. He could tell she'd slipped, given the slope and the mud smeared in her clothes and sneakers. But how did she end up like this? He wondered to no avail while taking her away from the slope.

"Are you okay?" He was holding her tight, her stance unstable. However, she eyed him up, only momentarily, unable to decipher a thing.

She was in shock.

Puffing the dripping water on his face, Ryan witnessed the woman burying her face on his chest, both drenched, for the rain wasn't friendly even now.

"Hey, can you hear me?" He tried to wake her but it was useless. "Damn!" With a single grunt, he lifted the unconscious woman in his arms, carrying her bridal style, and scurried towards the car.

"Oh God! Is she okay?" Mr. Stevens opened the backdoor in a hurry.

"Not sure," Ryan replied, and smoothly placed the lady inside. He pulled the jacket on the backseat, and covered her hastily, fully aware that it wasn't helping a thing.

"What is wrong with her? What was she doing here? I don't even think she's from around here!" Mr. Stevens' gaze was profuse towards her.

"I doubt she's from here, or else she wouldn't be in this place." Ryan started the engine.

Wondering about the mysterious lady in the rain, Ryan and his grandfather arrived at their home some time later. It wasn't a nice ride, but their safety was all that mattered.

The lady was carefully placed into the bedroom, by Ryan himself, and asked the lady housekeeper to help on changing her and other details.

"Do you think she'll be fine?" Mr. Stevens asked as Ryan descended the stairs in his drenched clothes.

His dark brown hair was damp, his shirt half-buttoned, and the kind of look no woman would hesitate peeking a second glance at.

"She will be," he answered while drying his unruffled hair with a mini towel he was holding.

"Okay, go ahead and change before you catch a cold," Mr. Stevens said.

"You, too, you need to eat and take the medicine!" Ryan stipulated, making the old man with curly grey hair roll his eyes. "Grandfather!" he snapped.

"Yeah, yeah, I will." Mr. Stevens disappeared slowly, holding his button that aided his limping caused by a minor stroke.

"What a stubborn old man," Ryan mumbled.

"I heard that!" Stevens grunted.

Moments later, Ryan ventured back inside the guest's bedroom. He wanted to check on her before calling it a day. She was deeply lost in a slumber, her long, golden-brown hair tied up into a ponytail.

A soft, stirred sigh escaped Ryan, wondering all over again on what she was possibly doing in that rain. He simply huffed, arms folded across his chest, not knowing what to reckon on the matter. It was strange.

Sighing, he marched over and pulled the covers to her neck, his eyes taking in the proper sight of her. Well, she looked normal, he thought. And she was . . . pretty? He shrugged, for he'd seen way more pleasant women than she was.

And suddenly the sound of a phone call buzzing shot his eyebrow up. It was coming from that lady's bag, he comprehended.

Unhurriedly, Ryan grabbed the backpack and fished out the phone that was still in good shape, despite the odds. He checked the screen and it was someone named 'bestie'. He glowered a bit, before sliding the receiver.

"Finally you have decided to turn on your filthy phone, huh?" A female voice rose, making Ryan frown incredulously.

He'd even moved the phone away from his ear so as to recover from the sharp voice of that bestie. Women! He smirked.

Clearing his throat, Ryan started, "Um—"

"Hey, do you have any idea how worried we are? Where are you?" the lady kept shouting.

Sighing, Ryan uttered, "I'm sorry, but the owner of this phone had a minor accident, so—"

"What? An accident?" she snapped.

"Well—"

"What happened? Is she okay?" she interrupted him, and he frowned hard.

Damn it! Couldn't she let him finish? Ryan thought irritably.

"I'm not sure exactly," he articulated, annoyed, and explained how she'd found her. "Long story short, your *bestie* is fine." He shook his head, exhausted.

"But hey, how can I trust you, huh?" she asked, irritating him further.

Just how did he get himself into this? He nearly blurted out.

"Hellow?" she repeated.

"You have no other choice but to do it, that's all I can say," Ryan snorted. "Do you actually think I'd pick up your call if I had any intention of killing her?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah, or what else are you suggesting that I could possibly do to her?"

"Well . . ." She stammered, and within a second or two, another voice filled Ryan's ear.

"Excuse me." It was an old, male voice. Ryan's face twisted bemused as he made a small pace. "How is my Claire? Is she doing okay?"

"Yes, she will be fine when she wakes up in the morning," Ryan replied, trying hard to be polite.

"Thank you," the old man said. "Thank you very much for helping her."

"No problem," Ryan retorted. "In case you're worried, I'm calling from Kerensky Stevens' residence," he said reassuringly.

"Oh, I know the place," the old man replied and they talked for a while until they hung up.

Ryan placed the phone on the nightstand. A soft sigh escaped him as he contemplated the whole predicament. His gaze naturally found the sleeping beauty, making his lips part.

"Claire, huh?" Ryan muttered, his eyes watching the sleeping woman. "Interesting." His smile was sly.

The storm had finally passed. A beautiful morning came. Colorful flowers made the garden alive as the shining sun rays penetrated the windows, brightening every corner of that huge classic mansion.

Waking up with fatigue, Claire found herself in quite a strange place. Instinctively, her eyes faced the white ceiling above, the image coming out blurred, and her heart skipped a beat right away.

Was she dead? What was this place? She asked herself, panic pooled in her face.

The cemetery . . . Bruno . . . the rain . . . And . . . Oh, she was thirsty.

Clearing her dry throat, while attempting to get up, the memory of last night came back so vividly. It was all clear, except the part of her being rescued. However, she could also remember the feeling of being held into some strong arms amid the rainfall.

"Oh God," she breathed, struggling to stand up from the bed.

"Take it easy, miss," a soft voice muttered, surprising Claire. A woman walked in, holding a stack of towels or something before putting it down. "How are you feeling? You were burning with fever a while ago, and I had to sponge you a little."

"I'm fine, but my body aches all over." Claire was helped into a seat by the old lady. "What happened, and where am I?" she asked in a scratchy voice, looking around the Victorian style bedroom.

"You don't remember?" the old lady, who was the housekeeper, queried.

"Not much," said Claire.

"I think you had an accident and my boss helped you." The lady explained the situation, before introducing herself as Martha. "Here, drink this." She handed Claire a cup of ginger tea.

"Thank you, Martha," Claire said, smiling faintly. So they helped her? She muttered inside. "I'm sorry for the troubles I caused you all." She glanced at Martha apologetically.

"It's okay," Martha said softly, her smile warm. She was short and plump. "I've prepared you a warm bath and clothes; Mr. Stevens and his grandson are waiting downstairs."

Mr. Stevens? Grandson? They were all confusing Claire but she chose to keep calm.

"Um, thank you," she murmured, taking a small sip of her tea.

"Well then, call me if you need anything," Martha said, and with a nod from Claire, she disappeared.

Being left all alone now, Claire slowly abandoned the tea and paced towards the large window. She at least managed to smile at the sight of a green garden filled with flowers. However, the idea of meeting the Stevens made her a little nervous.



## FOUR

After a warm bath Claire slipped into an old, lavender dress she found laid down on the bed for her. It looked okay, she thought; after all she had no other option. And besides, it wasn't such a discomfort considering the posh design of the dress that had remarkable sewing.

The owner must've been fashionable.

Twirling, Claire watched the swirling umbrella skirt of the dress that made her look younger. It was short and stylish, exposing most of her glorious skin, from the long resplendent legs to her arms that were partially covered by its little sleeves.

"Not bad," she murmured while brushing her hair.

There was a knock at the door and Martha walked in upon Claire's assent. "It looks good on you. Are you ready?" she asked warmly with a small smile, relishing the sight of her.

"Mmm." Claire nodded. Somehow her heart was beating fast thinking of meeting the Stevens. She couldn't help the discomfort of knowing next to nothing about these people.

Well, they did save her life, and even sheltered her; so it was only polite and courteous to thank them.

"Okay, let's go," Martha instructed, and with one heavy sigh, Claire followed suit.

The house was grand and classic. Claire was awed as they passed through the dim lit corridor. The walls were coated in cream color, and a number of old paintings embellished their sight. They were definitely worth a fortune, she could easily tell as an art lover herself.

Martha led her towards the wooden staircase, and slowly they both descended down where Mr. Stevens and Ryan were having breakfast in the dining room. The gentlemen raised their eyes at her and fleetingly seemed transfixed by the sight of her.

What the heck!

Claire couldn't understand the look of remembrance they both pitched at her, but she could tell that the dress had some effect on them. Now she wondered who owned it. Could it be a dead person? Oh no, she had to stop overthinking about this.

However, she could feel her heart jumping at each step she took, watching the two gentlemen. The old man looked okay, friendly from the smile she gave her. But the young man . . . well, it was hard to fathom a thing about the handsome dude with deep brown eyes.

"Um, good morning," she greeted after getting closer, her breath nerved.

Her eyes glided between Mr. Stevens, who was now staring closely at her, and Ryan, who was holding a gigantic newspaper, peering at her through above it without much interest.

"Good morning, young lady," Mr. Stevens replied cheerily. "How are you feeling?"

Claire answered quickly, "I'm fine, sir. Thank you for letting me stay . . . And for saving my life." She focused on the old man.

"Forget about that. Why don't you take a seat and have breakfast with us?" Mr. Stevens suggested, and Martha was quick to second the idea by pulling a chair for Claire.

The table was utterly inviting. Fresh croissants, pancakes, scrambled eggs, and bacons made Claire's tummy grumble. Indeed, good food could be her death. She sat down with pleasure but it suddenly slowed down upon seeing Ryan's face closer.

His being like a Greek god was no longer in question, for the blue sweatshirt and jeans made him radiant despite the casualty. Claire somewhat remembered seeing his face before falling into darkness, last night. She wanted to say something to him but decided against it.

"Oh, you should try the pancakes and honey. It's Martha's specialty," Mr. Stevens said sassily, and Claire's smile was ingenuous.

"Okay," she muttered, taking one from the little mountain of pancakes. Oh, they looked yummy! She was so ready to give them her best tryout.

A short silence filled the atmosphere, with Claire trying hard to get comfortable around these beautiful strangers. Well, things could have gotten ugly if it weren't for them . . . or him. Her eyes diverted towards Ryan, who was overly concentrated on the business news, seated across from her.

"So, are you from here?" Mr. Stevens began and it was Claire's chance to explain her predicament.

After a few minutes of utter silence on his part, Ryan poured himself a glass of milk upon casting the newspaper aside. He briefly stared at Claire, as she was talking to his grandfather with shared laughter. Nothing was registered on his face. Ignoring the details, he downed the glass at once and rose up to his feet.

"Your friend called last night," he said curtly, facing Claire. "You should probably call her back."

"Thank you." Claire raised her gaze to find his towering height, and he was already leaving. Sighing, finding him unsettling, she returned the attention towards the grandfather.

Mr. Stevens was way better for a company, she thought, finding his eyes staring curiously at her.

"And why were you in the rain?" he asked over a sip of ginger tea.

*Oh no!* Claire took a deep breath.

"Well, I was going back home, and the rain suddenly started and I ended up slipping into that state." She found herself absurd to even tell the story. Everything was her own fault.

"No wonder," Mr. Stevens remarked, scratching his grey beard. "This place is terrible during rain, and that's the only horrible thing about it. Thank God we reached there in time."

They kept talking, and evidently they both enjoyed each other's company. Claire liked how funny the old man was, and Stevens saw her like the younger version of his late daughter who loved acting tough.

Soon after breakfast Claire called Gena and explained shortly what had happened. The call reassured her friend and grandfather who were worried sick about her safety. She promised them to be back soon, for she was waiting for her clothes to get dry.

She wandered outside and stopped at the swimming pool. It was a marvelous sight, the house in general, surrounded with green trees and garden. With the chilly weather after the rain, the beaming sun rays piercing through the clouds with great zeal, made the air breathtaking.

"Were you trying to commit suicide?" A strong, but familiar voice startled Claire.

Glancing up, Ryan was standing right beside her, his eyes focused on his phone, his frame blocking the sunlight.

"You startled me!" Claire said quietly and sat straight so as to catch a proper sight of him. "Suicide? You are crazy." She scowled.

"I am?" Ryan gazed at her fleetingly, a small and rare smile tugged on his lips. "So, what's your deal with the rain?" he asked casually, eyes back on the phone.

"Well, I was just—" Claire halted upon seeing his raised eyebrow towards her speech the second she'd opened her mouth. "I mean, it was just an accident."

"Yes, reschedule the meeting and let Doris and Harry know about it." Ryan was already on the phone, making her scoff incredulously. *What the fuck!* She glowered at him. "I'll be there first thing tomorrow morning, so get all the papers ready." His tone was imperial.

"Yeah, yeah!" Claire muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. Was it so hard to say 'excuse me, I'm taking the call?' What a jerk! She inwardly poured him all the detesting remarks she had.

"What did you say?" Ryan questioned while ending the call.

"Nothing. I was talking to myself," she replied.

"If you say so," Ryan uttered with an exhausted sigh. "If it wasn't a suicide, good, but be very careful next time. You may not be as lucky again." He walked away.

"Jerk!" Claire muttered, watching his frame moving gaily, and realized that he was indeed a work of art.

That height, that body . . . as sturdy as the gym trainer, and . . . Okay, she had to stop giving him credits because physical attributes are not the only thing making a man! She reminded herself.

*Zeus reincarnation?* She laughed at her own thoughts.

It was Ryan who gave her a ride back to the beach house. What a tough luck! He never said a word as they moved along the way, and she did exactly the same. As expected, the road was terribly awful; however, they were able to arrive safe and sound.

"I hope this is the house," said Ryan, once the car had pulled over.

"Yeah, thank you," Claire told him, and he made a curt nod. She began unbuckling her seatbelt.

Ryan's gaze was busy scanning the area, a bit dazzled by its calmness and possibly the vastness. "Whose land?" he queried with interest, glancing at her.

"I don't know," Claire lied, for she perfectly knew who the owner was. "Beautiful, isn't it?" She got lost into the sea streaming from a far.

"Aren't you getting off?" Ryan reminded her.

Claire exited the car and said, "Drive safe."

"I always do," Ryan quipped with a smile and drove off.

"Jerk!" was probably the only name Claire could give him.

Gena and Claire's grandfather were relieved to finally have her back.

"You gave me a scare, you idiot!" Gena swapped her into a bear hug, her voice emotional.

"I'm sorry." Claire smiled, happy to be home. "Grandpa, I'm really sorry." She turned to the Old man and hugged him, too.

"What's important is that you are fine." He sounded gentle and fond, patting her back. "Go and take some rest; I'll prepare you a very delicious lunch before you go."

That was settled. Gena pulled Claire unceremoniously into the bedroom, hungry for some gossip. up to know she was only told Bruno and the fact that another man saved her.

"So who stole your heart? Is it the charming guy or the cold dark knight?" Gena asked excitedly as they sat down on the bed.

"Oh please, Gena, no one did." Claire lied back gingerly, chuckling.

"Oh, really?" Gena was dubious, eyes squinted. "Not even a slight crush over any of them? Just nothing?"

*Oh God, this Japanese chick wasn't going to give up anytime soon.* Claire knew as much.

"Well, I did like Bruno, and I'm just grateful to Ryan for saving my life. That's all," she replied, but Gena's stare remained unmoved. "I mean, Ryan is kind of rude and I just couldn't stand him."

"Oh?" Gena murmured.

"Yeah. And besides, I may not see them again, so why bother thinking about it?" Claire sighed.

"Okay, what can I say?" Gena shrugged her shoulders, and both laughed. "I'm glad somebody has experienced a little of a romantic drama in her life at least for a day.

"You're crazy." Claire laughed, and dropped herself heavily on the bed.

Two weeks went by since Claire's trip to Montesby, something she could not easily forget. It was Saturday morning; her stepmother and her son, Jorge, were all at home.

Claire and Jorge were not as close as how a brother and sister should be, but she had no problem with him either.

"Hey, morning." Jorge smiled at her as she took a seat, ready for that family meeting.

"Morning," Claire returned. "I barely see you, Jorge, how are you?"

"Fine, I'm just a bit occupied with work lately." He beamed, his smooth features of a reserved guy patent through his sweet smile.

"I see."

"Why don't you come and work in the company?" Jorge suggested, trying his best to make a meaningful exchange.

"No, I'm starting to work at Starlight, next week. But thanks for the offer," Claire answered truthfully.

"Okay, enough of this chit chats." Selma, Claire's stepmother, appeared. "I only called you to ask you this," She paused, and they all stared at her, waiting to hear what she had to say. "I met your father's attorney, and I discovered there might be other properties somewhere that weren't mentioned in the will."

"And so?" Claire asked, enraged at the mere sight of her dark hair, fair skin, a perfect reminder of an old witch if adding her rotten attitude.

"Do you know anything about it?" Selma shot straight.

"I know nothing," Claire returned dryly.

"What?" Selma glared at her, her eyes ablaze.

"And even if I did," said Claire while getting up, "do you actually think I'd tell you?" Their eyes locked in a challenging manner.

"You're really looking for trouble, huh?" Selma uttered furiously, her fists clenched. "Do you want me to drag you out of this house?"

"Mother, please--" Jorge butted in, but Claire took over right away.

"I wonder what took you so long to bring it up," she said, for it wasn't a surprise at all. "But guess what, this is my parents' house, so I'll only leave when I want to."

"You—" Selma wanted to lurch towards her, but Jorge grabbed her tightly. "What are—"

"Stop this nonsense! Please!" His voice was mild, but fury couldn't betray his eyes.

Feeling irritated with the drama, Claire stormed out of that meeting or whatever, and headed straight to her room.

She locked the door while at it. Sighing heavily with anger, she couldn't help but wonder how far that greedy woman was willing to go.

She'd taken nearly everything her father had left; the company, the cars, the house, and now she's still looking for whatever was left.

What a joke!

"It's okay, Claire. She's just a witch in need of a new victim. Don't let her get to you." She exhaled a deep breath.



## FIVE

"Have you talked to any of the Stevens?" Gena asked Claire when she dropped by at her place.

It's been a few days since their weekend trip.

"No, and I really don't wanna get entangled with that family, Gena. I've decided to forget it all," Claire said, her eyes busy on the phone as she was lying on her friend's bed.

Gena's apartment was small, femininely furnished in purple and cream, a sleek modern touch of an interior designer graduate on its contents. She and Claire did the job.

"As you wish, ma'am!" Gena sighed, pushing herself towards the plush coach beside her bed. "Hey, why don't we go shopping? I think you need to stop thinking about the witch you call stepmom." She slumped down heavily, tugging her feet onto the couch.

"You're right." Claire loved shopping. Let it be grocery, shoes, clothes . . . as long as she'd get to stroll around the shops, seeing new arrivals, old displays, she'd automatically feel alive.

It was her best hobby.

The next stop was at the mall and both seemed enthralled at the idea of spending half of the day roaming around without a clear quest. It was their norm doing that together, laughing from time to time like giddy school kids.

"Darling, red is your color not mine," Gena rebuked when Claire showed her a tight, crimson evening dress for the upcoming wedding of her cousin or something.

"Really now? I thought you wanted something different." Claire returned it on the rack and began checking another. "Well, as much as I love red, I don't think I need one right now. My mood is black recently so I'm going black the whole week."

Gena laughed heartily. "That's why you need a good hunk, my love. We really should work on those untouched hormones so that all the tension gets out of your system." She was checking the shoes now.

A hunk? Well, maybe. Claire pondered.

It's been ages since she last felt a man's touch, let alone a good touch. Well, apart from her rescuer that night that left a confusing impact. She strangely kept reliving the memory of her head resting on his stout chest, his strong arms holding her firmly.

"Oh no, Claire Levy!" She shook off her mind, doing away all the lewd thoughts.

Gena raised an eyebrow at that, holding a pair of cream pumps. "Fantasizing about someone?" she teased.

"No!" Claire slid into the fitting room. Fantasizing? *Hell no!* She whipped her little dress off so as to try the new one. "Well, I'd love to see Bruno once again. He was so cool," she blurted loudly enough for Gena to hear.

"Bruno? Oh, the restaurant guy?" Gena was excited already, her voice teasing even from afar. "That's good. I'd love to meet him, too, because you're totally blushing right now. I can tell."

"Blushing? Don't be ridiculous." Claire huffed, laughing softly while unzipping a baby pink jumpsuit that had caught her uttermost attention.

It took a good while until several shopping bags were filled in their hands. Done with that, they decided to grab something to eat before thinking of their next move.

Landing a job was probably going to take a while, Claire thought, so why not enjoy the free time after a long hassle with school? They both had a consensus on this, taking advantage of the freedom.

The escalator slid smoothly as Claire kept thinking of her nearest future without a definitive color as of yet. It was going to be fine, she believed. She was going to get a job and move out of the house immediately.

With eyes stuck towards the other escalator that's heading down, Claire's gaze faltered at the sight of a very familiar guy that she probably knew by heart at this point. Navy blue suit filled some doubts, but his unique gaiety cleared them all.

It was Ryan.

"Do you know them?" Gena was looking at the exact same spot, intrigued by Claire's reaction.

"It's Ryan," Claire enunciated, her breath taken away. How unexpected! Indeed Lisbay was a small place.

"Oh really? Wow, he is hotter than I thought." Gena grinned, her eyes profuse towards him . . . Or them; for he wasn't alone. "Won't you go after him?"

"Why would I?" Claire snorted. "Let's just get the food and get out of this place."

"And who is that woman?" Gena asked, staring at the gorgeous brunette beside him, both smiling over something the lady had shown him.

"His girlfriend perhaps?" Claire quipped heedlessly. Gena eyed her more dubiously, inquiringly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Trying to read you, maybe? I just don't get it." Gena squinted her dark eyes, bemused. "Do you like that guy, my love? Even a tad bit?" Her grin was hopeful.

"Of course not!" Claire denied briskly. "I don't like him, Gena. I mean, I've only met him once, so how could I possibly like him? Don't be silly."

Gena shrugged. "Okay, if you say so."

Lying in her bed, later at night, Claire revisited her memory from the afternoon. So she met Ryan once again, she thought with a smirk. What a small world! And he had a beautiful girlfriend . . . Or whatever that woman was.

"Well, good for him." She successfully forsaken her thoughts with a deep sigh.

At the same moment the idea of opening that envelope she had received from her grandfather popped up. She stood gingerly and entered her walk-in closet. She pressed

the combinations of her little secret chest and flew it open. The envelope was safely secured.

Holding it in her hands, Claire returned to her bedroom and plucked its contents. What lay inside were a few documents: the land deed, some bank papers, and a letter. Claire wasn't surprised at all, for she had known all along that it was monetary stuff.

Peeking through the papers, she couldn't help but fly back in time. She loved her father the most in the world. He was the best friend and the only thing she had, especially after the death of her mother when she was only six due to birth complications.

Claire hardly remembered her face.

But years later, her father turned into a workaholic. He would leave home early, and return very late. Providing material things for her was all that he could do best, but Claire needed more than that.

She needed his attention.

Tears threatened to fall but Claire snuff them away instantly while unfolding the letter. She sat down and finally began reading:

*Dear Claire,*

*If you're reading this it means my time in this world has come into expiration. Don't cry, please. I'm terrible with words, right? No wonder I chose to be an architect and not a poet. My daughter, I know I'm not the best father in the world as you used to call me when you were little, and even saying sorry won't make up for it. But I am sorry. You are, and you've always been the best daughter to me and . . .*

Tears rolled endlessly as Claire kept reading the letter. He was sorry for all the times he couldn't be there for her, that he was focused on preparing the bright future for her. Working was the only assurance he could think of so that she wouldn't have to go through the same struggles he had gone through

Claire had no idea what exactly she was feeling, but tears wouldn't stop cascading down and her sobs got severe. Her future. She eyed the other papers smiling fortune.

She spent almost ten minutes wondering what she was going to do with all that money when her heart was all empty.

The next day Claire dropped by the attorney's office for documentation. She had to protect herself from that vile woman and the first stage was notarizing everything as her father suggested through the letter. She just couldn't gather why he didn't suggest their family attorney.

Maybe her father couldn't trust him at the last minute.

"Claire Levy?" A lovely woman in her mid-fifties regarded her as she walked in.

"Um, yes. I called yesterday and—" Claire paused, seeing a picture of her father, the attorney, and another man. She looked stoutly at her. "You . . . knew my father?" she asked, surprised at the time frame portrayed by the vintage color of the photo.

They were in graduation gowns.

The woman smiled. "Yes, Claire. Your father, my husband, and I were high school alumni. Oh, we were inseparable! They called us a notorious trio! Well, we came from the same village so . . ." Her voice trailed off despondently. "I'm sorry about his death."

"It's okay," Claire breathed, holding the photo frame with a smile. She then put it back on the table. "How come I haven't seen you before?"

"You did, but you were too young," she said, "So, shall we begin? Unfortunately I have a hearing to attend but I'd really love to keep this sweet chat."

"Um, sure." Claire unzipped her handbag and fished the documents.

The meeting with Attorney Myers was somewhat emotional. Claire stopped by the coffee shop to invigorate herself. It was time to accept reality, she decided. Sipping her cold latte, the weather hot and bugging, Claire's mind was thoughtless for a change. Her eyes were outside through the window.

The street seemed busted, people moving on and about; a typical city life.

Claire sighed deeply, returning her eyes inside the coffee shop as a certain trio walked in and she wasn't far from the entrance. Startled, her eyes met someone unexpected . . . yet again. No, how can the world be this small? Claire muttered inwardly, wondering why she had to see him everywhere.

Feeling like she was getting overwhelmed with the odds, Claire sent Gena a text about it. Apparently it's what they usually did when something exciting took place even from a mile. She was also trying to distract herself while at it. Her phone buzzed a minute later and it was Gena's call.

"Hey, are you sure it's him?" Gena asked urgently.

"Of course it's him! With that woman and another guy. I'm leaving right now," Claire replied and stood up, grabbing her purse unceremoniously.

"Don't be stupid, just go and say hello," Gena suggested, laughing.

"Are you crazy, Gena Montero?" Claire was already at the exit, jostling her way past them, playing incognito.

"You are the crazy one," Gena retorted. "I'm hanging up," she said, sounding disappointed, and really hung up.

"Traitor!" Claire snorted.

Once outside, and far from his sight, Claire took a deep breath. It was as though she'd dodged a bullet. She had no idea why she was hiding from him, though, and it felt stupid for some untold reasons. Was she scared of him? She laughed maniacally.

But not for long did her game work, because she suddenly heard a voice calling after her, "Claire?"

Oh fuck!

She stood still, contemplating the sound of it. It was a masculine voice and freshly familiar. Her breathing went off when she turned behind slowly, only to see Ryan approaching her way, a smile on his face while whispering something on the phone.

"I'll call you later." Claire managed to grasp his speech that ended right away.

"Ryan," it was the only way she could prompt, watching him.

"So it's really you." Ryan smiled. "How are you?" he asked and stood right in front of her.

Was he really smiling? Claire wondered, finding it odd in comparison to the jerk he was in Montesby.

"Um, good. What are you doing here?" she asked.

What a stupid question, she thought.

"Grabbing coffee?" He eyed the shop instinctively. "I was actually taking a call and saw you here."

"Oh, I see. Well, how is your grandfather?" Oh, please let this get over and she can leave! Claire growled inwardly.

Why was he intimidating?

"He is fine, and I'm going there tomorrow. He would be glad if you'd visit him. I think he likes you," Ryan said suggestively.

"Can I?" she queried, astounded.

It almost sounded like an invitation of a kind.

"Sure." Ryan smiled again. "Here is my card, you can call me if you decide to go." He retrieved a business card from his wallet and gave it to her.

Call him? Claire gawped.

Ryan's attitude was strange that day. He was cool, different from the arrogant guy Claire met in Montesby.

For a moment she wondered if he wasn't suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, or perhaps it was just that his acting skills were of premium level.

The idea made her giggle while hopping into a taxi home.

Instead of going to Montesby with Ryan, as he'd suggested, Claire decided to go on her own. She wasn't feeling great, at all, after another fighting evening she had with her stepmother and perhaps an escape was what she preferred.

She pondered for a while, roaming around her bedroom while wearing a towel ready to shower, before giving Ryan a call. It was eight thirty in the evening. He was probably at home, right? She wondered as the rings proceeded.

And suddenly she heard. "Yes?" The voice was raw and majestic.

*Jeez, was he in a bad mood?* Claire took a deep breath, shuddering.

"Hello," she uttered carefully. "It's Claire. Remember me?" She rolled her eyes.

"Why not? How are you?" His voice turned cooler, and she could clearly imagine his smirk.

She sat on the bed. "I'm good. You? I feel like I've called in a bad moment," she said.

"A little, but it's not your fault."

"At work?" she inquired.

"Yeah. Home?"

"Yeah," she breathed, biting her thumbnail as she couldn't think on what to say next. Oh, the trip! "Um, I'm going to Montesby early tomorrow so I'll probably leave before you do."

"Okay," Ryan said flatly.

"Oh." It was a bit disappointing, hearing him saying okay so blatantly.

But then again, what was she expecting? "Alright, have a good evening."

"You, too." They hung up.

"What the fuck," Claire muttered; not knowing what was the matter with her sudden distaste over his indifferent answers.



The trip to her beach house was only two hours long. She took the bus to fully enjoy herself while gathering her thoughts over several matters. As always her grandfather was at home tending his garden of cherry tomatoes and carrots, among other things.

"Should I get ready to eat the harvest?" she teased, heading towards him.

He grinned joyously upon beholding her sight. "It will be good for your health, my child."

They both laughed.

"I'm glad you're here. I suppose you've opened that envelope and you're here for—"

"Grandpa! Can't I at least have a rest before we go into that stuff? We can do that later. Let me help you." She loved gardening with him, and she wasn't bad at it.

"They've grown quickly. Are you sure they're organic?" she teased.

"Of course. You can try them and see," he retorted. Without waiting Claire plucked a tomato and threw it into her mouth.

Smiling, she realized it was wise of her to be here today. She was happy. And suddenly she remembered Bruno. Maybe she should pay him a visit, she thought, and it was immediately decided. She left in the early evening and headed straight to the restaurant.

## SIX

Bruno was awestruck to see Claire. He couldn't hesitate swooping her for a tight hug, ignoring his staff and whoever was present in the restaurant. Moreover, some kind of respite was evident on his face upon beholding her healthy look, indicating safety.

"I was worried about you? Did you manage to get home without any trouble that day?" he asked, making Claire sigh at the memory. He frowned. "Why? Did something happen?" His voice was gentle and apprehensive.

"Well, it's a long story," Claire told him while taking a seat. "Are you going somewhere?" she asked, realizing that he was carrying a backpack as though ready for some trip.

"Um, not quite. I was about to go home when you arrived." Bruno slid the strap of his backpack off his shoulder.

"Oh, in that case, I can just drop some other time. I've come unannounced anyway," Claire said.

"Some other time, when? Don't be silly." Bruno took a seat, his grin impish. He was in khaki shorts and a white button-up shirt. Simple and handsome. "In fact, I have a better plan." His grin widened.

"Which is?" Claire's reaction was wary, and Bruno laughed heartily at it.

However, she wasn't afraid of anything he was going to propose, but rather unready to be dismayed by his expected spontaneity.

"Let's go home," he said, and her eyes widened. "Chill out, Claire. I mean, my real home where my family stays—not here." He was amused.

"Oh?" Claire chuckled at herself. "I'm sorry, I don't know what I was imagining," she breathed.

Bruno shook his head to the sides, utterly entertained. "At least you're admitting that you were imagining something. Did you think I was taking you to my layer? But even if I was, what's wrong with that?"

*Everything.* How could she end up in a single man's home—a total stranger—and just the two of them? Wasn't this an attraction for disaster? Claire could never trust these handsome creatures called men. Not even their charm.

"Um, forget about that. I don't think I can go to your home, Bruno. I only wanted to say hi before I go back to the city," she told him honestly. "I have a job interview tomorrow."

"Oh, is that so?" Bruno was thoughtful, scratching his chin. And suddenly his eyes gleamed up. "Just one hour." He flashed a bright smile.

"Huh?" Claire glanced up at him as he rose up to his feet.

"Just one hour and you'll go back. My house is not far from here, and the food will be great. I know you love eating." He winked, and Claire flushed immediately, feeling coy. "Come on, let's go!" He held her hand, urging her to stand up.

"Okay, Bruno." Claire couldn't hold her laughter, for he wasn't the type to be rejected easily. "Just one hour," she articulated.

"Yes, ma'am." Bruno grinned.

Jeez! Claire couldn't understand where he got the energy to be playful and care-free at all times. He was a happy person, clearly it showed, but she couldn't trust his constant smile.

Everyone has a dark something, she always believed.

They slipped into a red Audi and buckled up. Pulling the car with ease, Bruno was soon on the road and their ride commenced. He put on some music as they slid away.

"Why do I feel like you need me for this visit to your house?" Claire muttered, gazing at him. His smile faltered a bit. "Am I right? Is there anything I should be aware of?"

He laughed indulgently. "What makes you think that way?" he asked casually.

Because she could recognize his hesitation at the mention of family. The same kind she'd personally show whenever speaking of hers to anyone but Gena.

"Nothing. I can be pretty judgmental sometimes," she said, taking an easy sigh.

"I haven't been home for more than two years," Bruno said, his voice laced with rue. Claire didn't say a thing; she only stared at him. "The day I met you was the day I returned from Barcelona where I've been staying." He glanced at her.

"Oh, I see," Claire uttered softly. She just couldn't understand something; hence she asked, "And why does it scare you to be back? Are you afraid of something?"

His jaw ticked, and his hands tightened around the steering. He was tense, Claire could feel it, and even see it, at the whiteness in his knuckles and the slim sweat in his temples.

"I'd rather not talk about it," he said evasively, and then smiled tightly at her.

"Okay." Claire nodded, smiling back.

Their ride was taciturn from this point. Claire was lost into landscapes sliding along, quite a marvel, the heels and green grass staying in harmony. She smiled, recalling how she hated them during that rainy evening.

And while doing so, the car had turned into a dusty road amid the splendid fields of orange trees. Her eyes awoke, fully bright and wider. She knew this way, she thought, and the memory flashed back without a fog.

"Wait," she uttered, glancing at Bruno briskly. "Is this the way to your house?" she asked urgently.

"Yes," Bruno answered. "Why? You look like you've seen a ghost." His lips curled into a small grin.

Indeed, Claire mumbled in her head. It's the same road heading to the Stevens' mansion. Ryan drove her that afternoon through these same orange fields and her eyes couldn't stop admiring the tranquility.

"Are you related to the Stevens? I mean, Mr. Stevens and his grandson, Ryan?" Claire asked.

"Um, yeah," Bruno affirmed. "Mr. Stevens, as you call him, is my grandfather . . . and Ryan is my brother. How do you know them?" He was stunned, smiling bemusedly as the car neared the large gates of the house.

Holy shit! How was this possible? Claire's eyes were broader and rattled. Brothers? *Oh God.*

"Well, it's a bit of a long story," she replied vaguely, finding it disturbing.

"I have enough time to listen," Bruno said with a bashful smile that lightened his deep brown eyes.

"Okay, I almost had an accident that evening after leaving your restaurant," she told him flatly, and shock was plastered on his face in milliseconds. "Your grandfather . . . I mean, your brother, Ryan, was the one who helped me. Well, both of them. So I spent the night at your house and—"

"Hold on," Bruno cut her off, halting the car stoutly in front of the gate, waiting for someone to open. "You had an accident? How?" He looked worried.

Another sigh escaped Claire. "It was raining, right? I couldn't get a taxi or anything so I walked my way through it," she said and explained the rest of her tale.

"Shit! I'm so sorry, Claire. I shouldn't have let you leave like that," Bruno said, remorse filled in his voice. His face turned pale at the thought of anything horrible happening to her while he could've easily prevented it. "I'm really sorry."

"Hey, it's alright." Claire cackled up. "I'm in one piece, as you can see, and it's not your fault that nature decided to punish me for my stubbornness."

Bruno smiled lightly. "I'm glad you're fine." He sounded sincere.

The metal gates slid apart and the doorman walked out to regard them. Scrolling the window down, Bruno's sight was indeed a surprise to the rugged man in jeans and polo shirt, wearing a hat that he quickly took off.

"Bruno?" he gasped, eyes bigger.

Claire smiled at the dramatic shrug of the shoulders Bruno made. He was a clown, she thought to herself.

"Long time no see, German. Hope you're good, man," he replied, fist bumping with the gateman whose name appeared to be German.

"Yes. Wow! Welcome back! Um, hi, ma'am." German was immediately comprehensive of Claire's presence. His gaze wavered as though trying to recollect something.

"Hi." Claire smiled.

They wandered inside. The house was as beautiful as Claire remembered. Martha was the first person they came across, and she almost dropped the tray carrying a glass of juice.

"Yes, it's me, Nanny. I'm not dead yet," Bruno said, and the old lady casted the tray aside on the console table, her eyes wet. "Oh, not the tearworks, please." He pulled for a warm hug.

Wow! What was happening? Claire was in the dark, standing at the corner. It seemed like they were dying to see Bruno, and yet he was so afraid to see them. What a mystery.

"Martha, when will I get that juice, woman? Is it arriving from America or something?" Mr. Steven's grumpy voice echoed, nearing them, and they all stayed attentive. "Can't you see this heat—" He was approaching slowly when his speech paused.

His gaze held Bruno's, stupefied.

"Grandpa," Bruno breathed, tears brimming in his eyes.

Claire's eyes shifted between the old man and his protégée grandson. Silence blanketed the atmosphere; a pin drop would make noise.

*Why was she here again?* Clearly she could've chosen a better moment to visit than this one. It looked emotional, intimate even, and much to her dismay another person joined in.

"I'll be back this evening, we'll talk then," Ryan uttered, frowning, his cellphone on the ear.

Claire beheld his terrific features instantly, holding her breath.

"What's going on here?" Ryan asked calmly, unable to understand the ruckus. He was confused. "Later, please." He hung up, the call seemingly annoying for his taste.

However, his eyes turned beautifully wild at the sight of his brother.

"Hi, Bro." Bruno grinned.

"You bastard," Ryan muttered, his tone indescribable.

Bruno looked sadly at him, the young boy in him manifested through the twinkle in his eyes. It was emotional, but Claire couldn't understand a thing until the two men grabbed each other for a tight hug.

"Um, I need to use the restroom," Claire told Martha in a low voice.

"Okay, Claire." The old lady smiled, hardly paying attention to her as the joyous smile accompanied her faint tears. She looks very happy.

When Claire returned everyone was in the living room. She couldn't stop wondering about Bruno and his situation, but Ryan's intense gaze deranged her from the thought.

"Hey, Claire, come in," Bruno urged, and both Ryan and Mr. Stevens were stunned.

"Do you know each other?" Mr. Stevens asked, smiling softly at Claire

"Yeah, we met recently," Bruno replied.

"On the same day I met you," Claire explained, and other details followed.

"What a coincidence," remarked Mr. Stevens, his voice teasing. He drank a bit of his juice. "How are you, Claire? I'm so happy you came to visit."

"I'm fine, Mr. Stevens. What about you?" Claire sat next to Bruno and across from Ryan.

He wasn't uttering a syllable.

Claire spent the whole afternoon with them. They talked, they laughed, and she was able to learn that their mother died about two years ago.

Around six it was time to go. As much as she loved their company, she had a bus to catch and an interview for tomorrow; even though it was a mere formality.

"Thank you once again, Mrs. Stevens," Claire said as they all headed out.

"No problem. Consider this your home, okay? Now I'm sure you can make good friends with these two," Mr. Stevens remarked, and Claire smiled faintly.

With Bruno, yes. She was already friends with him.

But with Ryan, she could never see herself as his friend.

Even right now, Ryan was already indulging into his cell phone, a little frown of concentration between his eyebrows.

"Going to the city?" he finally asked her, abandoning the phone. Claire nodded affirmatively. "I'll give you a ride," he told her, his voice dry.

Did someone piss him off? Claire wondered.

"Um, sure," she agreed. "Mr. Stevens, it was a pleasure. Thank you so much," she told the old man over a quick hug.

"It was me who had a pleasure, this house is always boring," he remarked, and a little laughter followed.

She then turned to Bruno, who was staring expectantly at him, his smile on the face, beaming.



"So, Mr. Photographer," she muttered, and could feel Ryan's subtle gaze towards them. He was talking with Mr. Stevens. "I'm going now." She sighed.

"Don't be a stranger," Bruno breathed, holding her hand.

She blushed. "I won't. And you gotta get out of this place once in a while, huh. Call me if you drop by in the city."

"Okay, beautiful," Bruno uttered while pulling her closer. His smile was bright. "Be good, huh? And thanks for coming." He kissed her on the cheek.

"You, too." She grinned and turned her toes.

"Done?" Ryan inquired.

"Mmm." Claire bobbed her head.

He walked past Bruno. "We'll talk later," he muttered and the young brother nodded his head reverently.

Claire and Ryan slipped into a black Vogue and the ride commenced. Now that they were alone, Claire had no idea on how to go on about it. She was to be stuck with him for at least two hours, and they hadn't spoken a word up to now.

"Do you come here often?" Ryan broke the silence.

What a miracle!

"No, this is the second time in years," she answered. "And you?" Her eyes were on his face.

"Maybe once or twice a month." He eyed her this time, only fleetingly, before fixing his eyes back on the road.

"I see," Claire uttered, feeling like she was getting dumb unable to think of any topic to broach.

He was so hard to talk to, quite different from his brother.

They hardly spoke from this point. Claire took a nap throughout the way, only to realize they were already in the city—and it was dark. Flashing her eyes open, she discerned that the car had stopped, and Ryan was on the phone once again.

Damn, did he ever take a break from his beloved phone? She scowled while rubbing her tired eyes.

"Okay, tomorrow at eight sharp," Ryan said and hung up. "Are you up?" he asked Claire, his voice cooler, eyes fixed on his phone.

"Yeah, I—" Claire yawned audibly, stretching.

Ryan creased his eyebrow, a lingering smile on his face. "Where do you live?" he asked and stared at her after shoving his phone away.

"I'll just grab a taxi, thanks," she said crisply.

"A taxi?" He squinted his eyes. "Why? I can just drive you."

"No!" she answered stoutly. He gaped. *Damn!* "Well, I—" She stammered.

Why was she taking a taxi? She asked herself.

"You don't want me to know your home, right?" Ryan uttered, mocking her. "It's okay, you can go."

"But, I didn't say that," Claire argued, and he lifted his eyebrow as he always did. "Okay, I'll get going. Thanks for the ride," she said while grabbing her handbag, flustered.

"Okay," Ryan said. "But if I want to know where you live, I can find out in a second, just so you know." He was smiling.

"What?" Claire snorted. "I'll report you as a stalker if you try. Besides, why would you do that? Are you attracted to me, Ryan?"

*How bold, Claire.* She firmed her eyes, nevertheless.

"Have a goodnight, Claire," Ryan said, her question ignored.

"Jerk." She slipped away from his car.

"What did you call me?" Ryan queried, laughing.

"Handsome." She grinned, sarcasm evident on her face. "Bye." She slammed the door.

Smiling, Ryan replied, "Bye."

He watched after her until the taxi pulled over and she slid in.

Claire frowned as it moved past his car, and their eyes collided. "What's his deal?" she muttered, and wondered why it was important thinking of him.

## SEVEN

Just as Claire had anticipated, the job was finally hers. She started working for the construction company she'd once interned at. With that her life got somewhat busy and three weeks went by. All of her emotional baggage regarding her father was already water under the bridge.

At least she hardly thought of the past since that trip, and it was good.

Recalling that she'd missed a call from Bruno due to a tight deadline, which had everyone in the office going nuts, Claire returned his call as soon as she arrived home. They were keeping in touch from time to time, apparently, and she was happy whenever they talked.

"Hi, beautiful," Bruno uttered sassily upon her simple hello.

"Hi, how are you?" Claire replied while dropping her bag on the bed, feeling beat.

"I'm good, I just miss you," he remarked coolly, his breath sound.

"Me, too." Claire flushed.

"Actually, I'll be over there tomorrow. Can we meet, just to see your face?" Bruno's voice was teasing as always, making her giggle like a teenager.

He was a comic, and Claire enjoyed the sound of his sweet talk.

"Um, sure," she relented, for she had no reason to object anyway. "I'll be free around lunch time, so just call me." She stepped out of her one heel . . . and then the other.

"Right on time, beautiful," Bruno answered, pleased. "And thanks for calling, huh? I hope everything is going well with your new job." They continued talking over ordinary stuff.

At the end of the call, Claire made a decision to go out for some air. She would constantly feel overwhelmed being inside the house, but after a little walk and alone time she'd always feel better. Evenings felt more appealing than the daylight.

Outside she met her step brother, who was just returning from work.

"Hi, Jorge. Everything okay?" asked Claire, smiling softly at him.

"Yeah, just tired and my car had some issues," Jorge prompted calmly as his personality strongly suggested. He was a cool guy, a man of few words. "Where to?" he asked.

"Around." Claire shrugged. "I need a breather, I guess."

Jorge nodded. "Well, I'm gonna get some rest. Take care," he said and advanced inside.

Sullenly, Claire strolled around the calm neighborhood, coming across a few residents and cars passing by. It was a normal distraction she needed. She stopped by the park and took a seat at the wooden bench. Her mind was free for a while, and only focused on the twinkling stars smiling down at her.

It was peaceful.

A sigh coupled with a faint smile escaped her lips, and only the sound of her phone buzzing was able to bring her back to Earth. She fetched it out from the pocket of her slacks and looked at the screen. She was utterly puzzled to see the name 'RYAN THE JERK' beaming brightly.

*What the hell?* She scowled, for he was the last person she was expecting to call her. Definitely not today.

She stared at the screen for a few seconds and swiped hesitantly. "Hello?" Her voice was careful.

"Hello, how are you?" Ryan replied.

Claire was a little wary. "I'm good. Is everything alright?" she queried, squinting her eyes. "I mean, this is all too strange . . . you calling me."

"Why? Can't I call you?" Ryan remarked after a brief pause, his voice too calm as though he was having a so not good day.

Or was it just her imagination? Claire couldn't trust herself on this.

"No, it's not that." She took a sigh, combing her hair with her fingers. "Okay, never mind." She almost rolled her eyes. "Where are you?" It just slipped and regret pooled in her.

Why would she want to know of his whereabouts? What for?

"Still in the office. You suddenly came to my mind so I gave you a call," Ryan answered in what sounded like gallant.

Claire rolled her eyes. "Really? I'm honored! Getting a call from the big shot Mr. Ryan Stevens? I should probably put a reminder," she teased him, her voice laced with sarcasm, and they all laughed.

"Are you at home?" Ryan asked upon some seriousness.

"At the park, in our neighborhood, trying to clear up my head." Claire's eyes wandered around, regaled by the sight of people walking tiredly to their homes.

"Okay," Ryan breathed feebly. "Would you mind having dinner with me?" he asked her straightaway.

Dinner? His sudden invite left Claire rather surprised. It was almost impossible to fathom what to be expected from Ryan. How was he so unpredictable? She wondered.

Calling her out of nowhere and giving out a dinner invitation? Was it normal coming from Ryan the jerk? She just had to stop thinking or else she was only going to lose her mind.

"Um . . . I'm not properly dressed and I don't want to go home right now," she answered, staring at her office attire: A white chiffon blouse tucked into brown slacks. Her flip-flops had just replaced the black pumps she had the whole day.

"What is properly dressed? Are you naked by any chance?" Ryan asked.

"Hell no!" Claire said stoutly and she could hear his amused laughter "Okay, fine! Don't say I didn't warn you when you find out tomorrow in the newspaper that The mighty president of SK was spotted with a shabby girl across the street."

"No, that can't happen. I'm not a celebrity, Claire." Ryan didn't seem to mind at all.

"Alright, prepare a taxi fare because I'm penniless right now." Claire stood up, grinning at this suddenly easy conversation between them.

How unexpected!

"Any more excuses?" Ryan queried.

"None?" She frowned, then smiled.

The taxi pulled over in front of Ryan's office building. She was already familiar with the place even though she had never stepped inside. Ryan's arrival took only a minute. She smiled at him at the memory of their conversation some moment ago.

What was happening? It's only a week ago that they couldn't even talk during that two-hours ride and now she was going to have dinner with him? Ryan smiled back at her, dazzling, and her trance shattered as he moved over, looking dashing in business casual.

Claire gulped, his sight arresting.

Smirking, Ryan walked over toward the driver and handed him a single bill for the fare. "Keep the change," he muttered, eyes devouring Claire without subtlety.

"Thank you, sir!" The driver smiled in awe, heading back into his taxi, probably feeling lucky.

"That was so generous, boss," Claire teased as they remained alone.

"You must be in a good mood today and I think you look okay." Ryan smiled, ignoring the sarcasm, focused on her outfit.

"Of course," Claire remarked, "only if you want people to think we're heading for a business dinner."

"It's chilly. Let's go. My car is over there," Ryan urged, grinning at her remark.

The restaurant Ryan took her was cozy yet posh. The ambience was private, golden-yellow lights and soft piano music accenting the atmosphere. They took a table-for-two with candlelight in the middle. It was . . . exotic.

Claire dared not make a comment on that. Ryan had been taking several business calls while handling the steering wheel earlier, and yet another one came while they were checking the menu; but he ignored it this time.

"Maybe it's important?" Claire muttered.

"I hardly believe it can beat this moment," Ryan replied gently, his eyes smiling down at her with an alluring gleam.

She shouldn't let his charms bewitch her, Claire thought, for he was nearing an aphrodisiac attraction now that he looked at her—something intense.

"I wonder how burdensome it is to be the center of attention like in your position," Claire said casually, averting her thoughts.

She was able to learn that Ryan was the president of SK through Gena, who dug up the information online and took no time to fill her in.

"Hard at times," Ryan answered with a pause, sitting straight. "Carrying responsibilities over a thousand employees on your shoulders, fulfilling clients' demands, tight deadlines and stuff; I can't say it's simple. But I've got a reliable team so it's been moving regardless. I can't complain." He sounded passionate about what he did.

"I can only imagine," Claire remarked softly. "I'll have salad, please," she told the maître d' when he approached to take their order.

"A steak for me, medium rare," Ryan said, his tone sublime. "Wine?" He asked Claire.

"Um, sure," she replied haphazardly.

"And one of your finest bottles. No, *Cabernet* will do," Ryan said.

"Yes, sir." The maître d' nodded and left.



Once in privacy, Ryan returned his full attention back to Claire. "And you? How's work? You told me you got a job?" He placed his palms on the table, facing her.

"It's great," she prompted with a sigh, fixing her pose into more comfort. "I'm still learning. Well, I'm done doing what I truly love but . . . Maybe in time?" She wasn't as happy with the job.

Ryan squinted his eyes, a little bemused. "Interior designing?" he quizzed and Claire affirmed.

"Yes, I want some field work. Not sitting in the office making tea and handling copies!" she lamented. "I mean, I'm an interior designer, right? Not a secretary."

Ryan was looking intently at her, taking in all the complaints she had without feeling bored. He was in fact enjoying listening to her.

"That's how the large companies work," he seriously retorted, tapping his strong fingers on the table. "Unless, you can try small firms with little bureaucracy." He shrugged, the idea so not in his tasteful list.

"I know, but I need to learn some things first, I guess. And I don't have a contracting license yet, so maybe when I get it I won't stand making coffee for them," Claire stated seriously.

Ryan smiled at how determined she sounded. They continued talking about this and that for a long time. They laughed, they got serious, and kept talking, but mainly about work and career they've chosen.

"You can start your own company later on once you've proven to be the best in the field or to yourself," Ryan told Claire at some point while sipping his red wine.

"You think? Can I really do it?" Claire needed to hear his opinion for some reason.

"That depends on you, and what you can offer." He smiled, and the talk kept flowing flawlessly.

They left the restaurant about an hour or so later. Ryan offered Claire a ride home, and this time she relented without thinking twice. It was around nine-thirty when they hit the road.

"Why don't you have a driver or those macho guys stalking your back like a tale? Like other big bosses in the movies," Claire suddenly asked as the silence stretched for a short while, and he laughed hard at it.

"Maybe you should stop watching those movies, filling your head with fantasies," he said. "I love my privacy and I only trust my driving skills, so I don't need a driver or a bodyguard."

His glance towards her was wild, a mixture of amusement and something else Claire could never put her finger on. It was not a particular one a guy gives a woman he's interested in, and it wasn't the indifferent one either.

"Sure!" Claire shot him a stop-bragging look, and almost rolled her eyes.

But then again, she realized Jorge was also the same on the privacy agenda. He had relocated their father's driver as soon as he took the presidency. He wasn't a fan of VIP life and all the flash and it seemed like Ryan was the same.

However, it was so evident that Ryan was someone who liked power and exercising authority. He looked so; the way he talked, handled things, and even the aura he exuded. Well, maybe there was more to learn about him.

"Do you live with your family?" Ryan asked after a long silence, disrupting Claire and her overthinking.

"Um, kind of. My step mom and his son," she answered.

"Your parents?" he queried, even though he didn't look as curious.

"In heaven maybe, if they lived well enough during their time on Earth." She smiled, and looked away.

"I see," said Ryan and didn't want to ask more. As much as Claire seemed like talking to him, she didn't want to say more, either.

"Thanks for today, Ryan. I had a great time, and the dinner was awesome," she breathed, meaning it.

Ryan's lips tugged into a warm smile, glancing at her. "I'm glad. I thought I was totally boring."

Him boring? No, it wasn't even close to being the case. Well, he wasn't as charming as his young brother, but there was something about him that wouldn't bore her even if they stayed locked up in a room.

What? Claire cleared her head quickly, scowling mentally. Why was she giving him too much credit lately? He was just an arrogant rich dude with a clear mission to impress the ladies he took out, she reminded herself.

"Oh, so you are modest, too?" she muttered, resuming the conversation.

"Maybe," Ryan replied with a soft chuckle, and it took her breath away.

They finally arrived at Claire's and she bid him goodnight right away. Opening the door to leave, Claire felt this strange urge, or some kind of sensation she never felt before. It was almost nostalgic, and she wished she would never leave the car.

What was this, though? She wondered, her body hot and cold at once. She glanced at him, and his eyes were shimmering down at her, his lips parting slightly as though he wanted to say something.

"Um—" Claire started but nothing more could fly out. She

"Everything okay?" Ryan asked upon her hesitation, frowning a bit. "Claire, what—" He was about to ask if she had forgotten anything when she suddenly hurled back towards him and planted her lips onto his, startling him.

Claire didn't want to end here. She wanted to kiss him, suddenly, and she did it without thinking. Was it an impulse? She had no idea, she was simply kissing him, and he didn't object. But it didn't take long as she immediately pulled back, flushing.

"I . . . I don't know what came into me, I'm sorry!" she said remorsefully, back into her senses.

Ryan smirked, his breath stirred. Saying no word, he also took her in the same manners, grabbing her waist swiftly, holding her tight. She gasped, their gaze locked

up salaciously. His eyes flew down on her lips in flames, and she was completely stunned without knowing what to expect.

"Next time," he said haltingly, his eyes twinkling down mockingly, "don't steal a kiss like that." He pressed her harder onto his chest. "Especially to another guy." His words were almost threatening, and then exciting.

Giving Claire no time to react, he quickly invaded her lips, kissing her ferociously, wanting, desire filled in the force of his tongue, and power of mouth to dominate hers. Fuck, he was a terrific kisser, so hot, and Claire felt the heat, her body responding easily.

*On no!* Did she want more of him?

## EIGHT

The kiss refused to leave Claire's lips. Amatory blushes kept flushing on her cheeks at the mere remembrance of Ryan's mouth taking charge of destroying her any possible resolution to keep herself sexually uninvolved as she'd been for the past few years.

Oh no, this wasn't healthy! Claire shook her head to do these thoughts away.

"Ryan is just an alluring little beast who's nothing but one hell terrific kisser who wants you to fall for his stupid charms that's not going to work," she was mumbling to herself, her thoughts over Ryan restless.

"What's not going to work?" A voice snapped her from her trance. She nearly jumped from her seat, feeling busted.

"Bruno!" she scolded and his playful grin was what regarded her bewilderment.

He took a seat. "Well, I heard you talking to yourself about something that's not going to work and I got curious. Having problems?" he quizzed, a slight concern on his face.

A problem? No. It was more of a situation where she had to immediately snap out of it. Claire smiled softly at him.

"It's nothing, and you're late," she said casually, changing the subject.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, beautiful. The traffic was so bad and I still couldn't miss the chance of seeing you. Did you wait long?" Bruno asked.

"Not long. How are you?" Claire sipped her juice once again, nearly downing the glass as the heat was a bit higher.

"Great." Bruno smiled sweetly, staring at her closely. He then frowned, as though recalling something. "I have to meet Ryan in a few minutes and I can't stand him," he finally said.

"Oh?" Claire uttered, the mention of *his* name hitching her breath. She gulped the rest of her juice instantly. "Well, okay. What's important is that you're fine and I've seen you." She forced a smile.

"Yeah but I wanted to hang out with you," Bruno said regretfully. "So, how about we go together if you don't have plans? I mean, we can just have lunch and talk and I'll be more than pleased." He grinned, hopeful.

"No, I can't." Claire was skeptical about it. Ryan was going to be there and recalling how she eased herself in his arms last night and gave her chills.

He probably thought she was slutty, she pondered and remorse spiked.

"Oh, come on!" Bruno was insistent. "Just one hour and we'll be done. No, just thirty minutes! I just want to—" He ran a hand through his hair, suddenly perplexed.

Claire scowled at that, unable to fully understand him in general.

"Bruno, are you scared of your brother?" she uttered her exact thoughts, staring at him inquisitively as he tapped his fingers restlessly on the table. "This is exactly what happened the last time you took me to your house. You wanted a side kick when meeting your family. What's going on with you? Why are you afraid of them?"

Bruno gulped, his eyes filled with an indescribable feeling of something heavy he was holding inside.

"Because . . . because I'm the reason why our mother died!" Bruno snapped, his eyes darker, guilty registered throughout his face.

"What?" Claire was totally lost.

Bruno took a nervous sigh, shutting his eyes at the painful memory that seemed to be haunting him. When he flashed them open, they were glowing with distant tears. It was weird.

"I had a fight with my mother the day she died," he started, his gaze on his fingers that interlaced on the table until he shifted onto Claire's face. "I was just a foolish college guy who thought I had it all together. I wanted to live as I pleased and she was constantly on my back asking me to join the company and help Ryan," he continued.

Claire couldn't say a thing as her heart was already beating faster.

"Again we had an argument that evening over the same thing. But it was different this time because for once she gave in. She told me to pursue anything I wanted." He smiled bittersweetly, wiping his eyes subtly while at it. "I was so happy that we somehow spoke the same language, and so was she. What I didn't know was that it was going to be the last conversation I was ever going to have with her."

"How did she die? And why do you think it's your fault?" Claire inquired softly, sadness engulfing her being.

"She'd bought me a new camera and she wanted to give it to me," Bruno uttered, his voice laced with thick melancholy and pain. "I left her bedroom and suddenly heard her calling. I was downstairs and she was approaching with a big smile, holding the camera box while rushing through the stairs. She tripped and fell." Tears fell in his eye and he huffed painfully.

"Oh my God!" Claire placed her palm on the mouth, shocked. "Did she die from the fall?" She was horrified.

"Yeah. In my arms while telling me to live my dream and take many pictures. She fell but she couldn't let the camera fall," Bruno breathed and Claire squeezed his hand softly.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Really I'm sorry but it's not your fault, Bruno. It was an accident and I'm sure your grandfather . . . Your brother, too . . . They all think so. They love you. I can tell from the way they received you that day," she uttered sincerely, smiling softly at him.

"I feel like I took something precious from them, Claire. I can't even look them in the eyes without feeling guilty." He sniffed.

"That's why you ran away? You told me you've been around Europe for two years, roaming from place to place."

"Yeah. I needed to find the courage."

"Well then, the fact that you're back means you did find that courage," Claire said placidly. "Use it. Forgive yourself because they don't hold anything against you and

"I'm sure you can feel it. You want me to go with you, fine. I can do it one last time." She grinned.

"Really?" Bruno chuckled, somehow back to his normal equilibrium.

"Totally. As long as you're buying the food," Claire teased.

"No, we'll make my brother buy it. He's rich," Bruno muttered and they both laughed.

Moments later they were at SK lobby, waiting for Ryan. It took only two minutes for him to show up. Claire held her breath as he appeared from the elevator in the company of a gorgeous woman. She was familiar, Claire's mind was photographic.

The mall. She was the woman from the mall, Claire reckoned while studying her.

She was dressed in a black office dress, coated with a pale-pink blazer. Around her long neck was a cream pearl necklace that matched perfectly with her long pumps with similar color. Her hair, shiny and raven, was splendid.

As for Ryan, he was in a black custom suit which defined his position flawlessly. They were, without a doubt, a perfect match in everyone's eyes. Well everyone, except Claire's upon recalling the kiss last night.

How pathetic of her to have kissed him like that! Anger filled her heart.

"Claire?" Ryan regarded her in such style, astounded to see her. "Where did you get her?" he asked Bruno, a bit surprised to see them together.

"She was my date today," Bruno yanked a playful hand around Claire's shoulder.

"Claire?" Ryan's gorgeous companion uttered, her eyes thoughtful. "Claire. Oh, it's that girl, right?" She faced Ryan stoutly. "The one you saved that night?" she added, smiling broadly as though it was something pleasant.

Claire firmed her eyes at both Ryan and 'his woman' without a word. So he had told her about the rescue? She was somewhat begrudging about it, and Ryan's eyes couldn't leave hers.



"Hi, Claire. I heard a lot about you from Ryan," the other woman said, smiling "I'm Doris, Ryan's girlfriend. And to this stupid punk . . . I'm a big sister who's about to slap his face hard!" She moved towards Bruno but he slipped away laughingly.

"Stop it, Doris!" he begged, both loitering around Ryan like kids.

"Seriously! You've been here without even calling me? That's very rude and I won't forgive you!" Doris snarled, but much to Claire's discomfiture she was hardly paying attention to those two.

Her eyes were on Ryan, who was staring back at her blankly, his face like a desert.

"Okay, okay. You can also me later but not in front of everyone," Bruno said and Doris' face suddenly softened. "What? Are you going to cry now?" he breathed, nearing her.

"I missed you," Doris said and pulled him into a hug. This time both Claire and Ryan faced the two. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me, too," Bruno muttered and Claire smiled at the scene.

They all cared about him, and she was happy to prove him wrong.

Ignoring the sentiments resembling a scene from the movie, Ryan asked, "How about we go to that lunch now that you've all hugged enough?" His voice was monotone and cool.

"Great! Shall we, Claire?" Bruno offered his full attention back to Claire.

No, she wasn't going to spend another minute with the guy who kissed her knowing he had a girlfriend. What a jerk! Claire thought.

"I'm sorry, Bruno, but I'm afraid I have to go," she said urgently. "I forgot something important and I think you're in safe hands now."

"What?" Bruno frowned, foiled.

"I'm sorry," Claire mouthed at him, beseechingly.

"What a shame, huh?" Doris remarked. "We'd have loved to have lunch together . . . that way he can tell us about his intention toward you." She provokingly eyed Bruno.

"Stop your crookedness, Doris!" Bruno hissed, and it was so evident that the two seemed to love bickering.

However, Ryan's disposition wasn't as sassy as theirs, upon Doris's insinuation. His lips twitched.

"Seriously, can't you stay, Claire?" Doris insisted.

"Maybe some other time." Claire smiled tightly.

Doris seemed persistent. "Are you sure? It won't—"

"She said she has things to do!" Ryan snorted. "Are we going to spend the rest of our lives discussing this? Because I only have ten minutes left." He now checked his watch.

Fucker! Claire cursed inwardly.

"He's right," she uttered, glaring at him gravely. "Enjoy your meal, and it was a pleasure meeting you," she told Doris and turned around. "Jerk," muttered as she walked past Ryan.

And he heard it clearly enough.

"Claire, wait!" Bruno followed her. "Hey, I'm sorry if we've imposed too much," he said wittingly.

Claire smiled. "Don't be silly, you've nothing to apologize for." She knew it was the truth.

"Really? Because you seem upset, and I feel like I'm responsible for that."

Responsible? He had no idea who was responsible for her being upset.

"I'm okay, I just remembered several issues to resolve and they kinda drive me crazy," she lied.

"I get it. Next time, maybe?" He smiled sheepishly.

"Sure, next time," she answered. "Bye." She smooched him on the cheek and turned her toes.

"Just call me then, okay?" he casually added.

It was pouring heavily later at night. Unable to get a sleep, Claire walked out of bed and dropped on the comfy couch near the window. Sighing, her mind went back to that afternoon when Doris introduced herself as Ryan's girlfriend. She couldn't let it go.

"Cut it out, Claire! It's not like you love him or something," she breathed, wondering why she was getting invested into that jerk.

Could it be due to his rude manners? Or his personality changes; sometimes warm, sometimes cold? She couldn't quite understand a thing, but it was a clear fact that she was affected by him.

Ryan had a girlfriend, she made a mental reminder, and it only drove her crazy. Why did she have to kiss him that night? It all started with that stupid kiss, she snapped inwardly.

Thinking of him, she stretched her hand and unplugged her cell phone from its charger. She stared at it thoughtfully for a while, pondering. What was she doing? Her heart pounded fast.

"No, Claire. You'll only get hurt." She could hear the voice telling her but her body had a mind of its own. He sent Ryan a text.

**TO: RYAN THE JERK**

You sleeping?

**[Sent:23:17]**

She placed the phone aside, for she wasn't really expecting any reply. However, she was surprised to hear the beep a few seconds later. She grabbed the phone quickly and his reply was 'Not yet'.

Claire smiled. Wasn't this crazy yet exciting? Was the hell was she looking for? Trouble? She paused, thinking, pondering hard, and suddenly there was an incoming call . . . From him.

"Ryan?" she muttered, eyes on the screen, and carefully picked up. "Hello," she breathed.

"Were you waiting for my call?" Ryan asked, his voice calm.

"Why would I? I just happened to have my phone close, that's why," Claire argued, sitting straight.

Ryan chuckled. "Why are you still awake?" he quizzed.

"I think I'm developing insomnia." Claire rolled her eyes.

"Really? I'm also a victim so maybe I should recommend you to my therapist." His tone was provoking, his words smooth. "Shall I send you her address?"

"Her? No thank you!" Claire scoffed.

"But why? I promise she is the best." Ryan was definitely smiling right now, she could imagine, and the sight was still arresting.

Fuck, couldn't she throw him out of her mind! Claire sighed frustrated.

"I bet she is," she mocked, "or else why would you meet her if you're still awake by now?" Her voice was rather accusing.

"Why did you leave in such a hurry earlier?" Ignoring her sarcasm, Ryan changed the subject.

He just had to ask! The audacity he had! Claire smirked.

"Did you want to enjoy seeing the girl you just kissed the other night making a friendly chat with your girlfriend?" she snapped, her wound reopened.

"Oh, so you left because of Doris?" Again, Ryan's voice was mocking.

"No, I left because of me," Claire recoiled, and it was her stupidity sending him a text.

"And what about you and Bruno? The girl who just kissed me the other night hanging around with my brother as his date? What do I make out of that?" Ryan sounded different, odd even.

It was Claire's turn to laugh. "Are you jealous, by any chance?" She even got the energy to get up and move toward her bed.

"Jealous? You can wish all day long, Claire. I'm just asking," Ryan said wickedly, and it was annoying.

"Well, fine! If you say so," Claire retorted. "Are you in the bathroom hiding from your girlfriend right now?" She lied down.

"Huh?"

"Oh, could it be that you're bold enough to even talk in her presence?"

Were they living together? Claire wished to ask him.

"I'm all alone, Claire. And I don't have any reason hiding in the bathroom," said Ryan flatly.

"I see. And I guess you find me so absurd right now," Claire muttered.

"Why?"

"The fact that I'm talking to you right now, it's absurd. At least after what I learned today, I should stay away from you, right?"

"Why would you do that?" Ryan queried.

Fuck! Was he serious?

"Because I'm being a bitch right now. Calling and texting a guy with a girlfriend in the middle of the night is nothing but stupidity. I'm sorry, have a goodnight." She was mad, at herself mostly.

"Wait," Ryan said briskly and she obliged. "I like talking to you, Claire. I'm not sure if there's any problem with us talking, though. Is there?"

Fuck him!

"Ryan, goodnight." She hung up, feeling so frustrated. "Nothing wrong? Is he serious?"

## NINE

Work became Claire's great companion. Slowly she was getting a hang of it despite doing some sleazy tasks for her taste. Designing was her dream, her passion, and she couldn't wait to live it to the fullest. But for now preparing for an important presentation was the only thing on her plate.

On Saturday afternoon, however, she dropped by at Gena's for an escape. Gena wasn't happy, for her foster parents wanted her back home as they were on a vacation. She loved freedom and the city; going to their country house served a great deal of torture.

"So, what are you going to do?" Claire asked worriedly, staring compassionately at her.

Gena sighed heavily. "I'll just have to seriously find a job! If I have something to do they don't bug me," she said.

"Great idea. If you want I can ask Jorge if there's an opening in the company," Claire suggested, ready to help in any way she can. Her life without Gena would be a terrible disaster.

No, she needed her best friend.

"Oh, Claire, you're a saint. I'll be more than grateful if you do that." Gena was excited.

"Anything for you, Gena," Claire replied, and meant every word.

The rest of the day was filled with nothing but an exchange of some cheesy gossip; mainly about Claire's work and her grand involvement with Ryan Stevens to the point of certain intimacy she couldn't forget.

"So you kissed him?" Gena was in awe. Claire nodded. "Fuck, you're something else, Saint Claire! Who are you?"

They both laughed.

"I don't know what I was thinking, honestly," Claire remarked absentmindedly, revisiting the evening; from dinner to the ride home. "But it won't happen again." She shook her head to dissolve the thoughts.

"Are you sure?" Gena's stare was filled with doubts.

"Yes. Very sure," Claire uttered.

Claire left Gena's place around six in the evening. She wanted a sleepover but her friend had a party to attend. This was one of the times she'd get lonely, despising the fact that she had no real family. Unlike Gena, who had plenty of other friends and acquaintances, Claire was a lone wolf.

With the evening air blowing softly, ruffling her hair in a soothing manner, Claire didn't know where to go or what to do right now, and her home was the last option. Momentarily she wished Bruno was around, but instead she could only see Ryan in her head.

"You're crazy, Claire. Definitely crazy!" she mumbled as she reached the bus stop. Taking a bus always helped clearing her head when things got too much to handle—and today was one of those days.

Seated quietly, Claire began thinking of how pathetic her life was. Her life had been an empty shell in need of something adventurous and spontaneous. But what was it? Traveling? Oh no, she hated travelling on her own and Gena wasn't ready for it.

And now she was thinking of nothing but someone else's boyfriend. She laughed incredulously while staring at her phone with Ryan's contact name displayed. What was she thinking now? Was she that desperate?

"What the fuck, Claire Levy?" she hummed.

She felt the urge to call him, talk to him, and provoke him even . . . Even though she knew that he wasn't the man for her. Without thinking further, she touched the dial pad and after a few beeps the call connected.

"Hello?" Ryan uttered.

"Um—" Claire stammered, a part of her mind thinking about what she really wanted from him.

Damn it! Who said they weren't going to talk to him again? She admonished herself.

"Claire, are you there?" Ryan asked, his voice cool.



"Yes, I am," she murmured huskily. "I miss you, Ryan. I really do."

What was she doing, damn it!

Ryan was silent for a while, but when he finally talked, he only asked, "Where are you?"

"At the bus stop?" she muttered.

"Where exactly?" he urged.

"Um, opposite to the Blue Pearl Hotel?" she answered.

She had no idea why he'd asked, though.

"I'm coming, don't move a muscle," said Ryan, and his line went dead.

"Oh God! What's the matter with you, Claire? Have you gone crazy?" She now scratched her hair like a maniac.

Ryan found Claire sitting there like a lost puppy. He parked the car in front of the bus stop and walked towards where she was sitting.

"Have you decided to make me worry about you like a little girl? Why did you sound like you were about to die?" Ryan asked, his voice a mixture of anger and concern.

"You . . . you really came?" Claire said with disbelief. She stood up.

He was casual. Jet black jeans and grey body fit t-shirt was a sight to behold on his resplendent body. The kind of sight that no woman would have resisted to look twice.

Ryan's lips curled into a hard line at the sight of her. He looked a bit . . . angry? Claire couldn't tell. But he was definitely displeased to see her in the bus stop like a homeless person.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, his eyes unusually soft.

"Yeah, I'm okay now." Claire nodded with a faint smile.

"Now?" He raised a single eyebrow at that, at last some glow on his face.

"Yeah. Now that—" Claire stammered.

What did he want to hear? She debated inside.

Ryan smiled gently. "Okay, let's go." He stretched his hand out for her.

She obliged without thinking twice, his warm palm clutching hers as they scurry toward the Vogue.

"Where are we going?" Claire asked after buckling up.

"Would you like a ride?" Ryan quizzed while pulling into the road.

"A joyride?" Claire grinned. Ryan scowled, amused. "Er . . . I meant okay, I'm fine with the ride," she murmured, flushing with embarrassment.

"You always sleep during a long drive, don't you?" Ryan eyed her with a mocking smile.

"Oh really, now?" Claire prompted, sarcasm lacing her voice as she inspected the dashboard of his car like a little girl. "But we only had one long drive, in case you've forgotten." She turned the stereo on.

"Fair point," Ryan said. "But first impressions tell a lot of a person, in most cases." His attention was half on the road and the rest on her.

"Okay, I won't argue," Claire uttered as she reclined back. "I do love sleeping during long rides." She decided to drop the matter, and Ryan looked happy to win the round.

It took almost an hour with the two riding on the road while talking of anything that came to mind. In the end it was enjoyable, and as expected by Ryan, Claire indeed fell asleep.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Ryan uttered. "We are back!"

"Hmm . . . already?" Claire snuggled, squinting her eyes at the blinding streetlights.

"Shall we go back then?" Ryan teased, his face closer to hers.

Claire managed to flash her eyes open and his smile took her breath away. God, why was he so beautiful? She could feel her body heat rising, her lips getting dry. She quickly averted her gaze, biting her lip.

"Um . . . why are we here?" she suddenly snapped in surprise, discerning the place they were at.

A flashy building, several flags of different states, and a big name of a famous . . . Hotel? Claire's eyes widened. She quickly faced Ryan.

"Stop having those wild fantasies, will you? Let's have dinner; there's a nice restaurant in this hotel," Ryan said wittingly, laughing at her.

"I'm not fantasizing about anything." Claire smiled pathetically and clutched the door handle. "Damn him," she mumbled under her breath while making an exit.

The food was splendid, much to Claire's content. The conversation took a different turn this time, from work to private life. Each of them was curious to know about the other and didn't hesitate to ask when due.

"Where were you?" asked Ryan, his eyes tentative on Claire's.

"To a friend's house," Claire answered curtly while chewing the grilled pork cutlets. Seeing Ryan frowning, she instantly cleared, "Her name is Gena, in case you are curious." Her smile was teasing.

"I'm not curious," Ryan said flatly.

"You're not?" Claire raised a mocking eyebrow, fully aware of his lie. "But your face says otherwise."

Smiling, Ryan shook his head to the sides, amused by all her insistence. He slowly sipped the wine without abandoning her fine eyes.

There was something mesmerizing about her, Ryan thought to himself, but he had no idea what it was. He just enjoyed looking at her.

"I'm really not curious, trust me." He narrowed his gaze, and his eyes glowed at the sparkling lights of the restaurant, gold and smooth.

"Fine." Claire sighed, taking another bite onto her mouth, devouring the succulent taste.

"You love arguing a lot, don't you?" Ryan muttered, his gaze on her moving lips.

Was she eating like a refugee from Somalia? Claire wondered as his eyes became too intense.

"I do, when I have a point to prove." She wiped her mouth softly with a napkin.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Ryan blurted suddenly.

Oh, so his guess was correct! Ryan's lips twitched into a smile, recalling the vague background check he'd done on her after the kiss. He had to know more about her, because she was a bit mysterious.

First she was in a life and death situation on their first meeting, and second she was his brother's 'friend' or whatever their relationship was, and then she was into this affair with him.

Not that she looked innocent. Hell no, she was far from an innocent Maria Clara from a parish neighborhood, who's afraid of men. Especially men of his kind . . . Rich and controlling.

She was definitely wild, and it drove him insane whenever he'd think of that bold kiss and the feel of her petite body in his arms. She would make a very good companion in his bed.

"Why? You're young, beautiful, and smart, I believe; so, it's only natural to have someone." He reclined back, staring deeply into her.

"Maybe I have a high standard," Claire muttered.

And yes her stakes were higher indeed. She wasn't some kind of Cinderella in need of his fortune to fulfill her fairytale . . . Like many bimbos he'd encountered throughout his career as a businessman. She had it all.

He laughed hard. "Really? That's a lot to take in," he remarked, and she only shrugged.

A short silence settled.

"What about you?" Claire asked a moment later. "Does your girlfriend know that you're here right now?" And counterattacked when Ryan least expected.

"She doesn't need to," Ryan quipped, "because we have a mutual understanding."

Claire bit her lip irritated. "Oh, like some kind of an open relationship?" she hardly asked.

She's a smart brat, too. Ryan smirked.

"Sure, we can go with that," he replied heedlessly and she scowled at him.

Annoyed with the subject, Claire downed her glass in one go. "I see," she uttered.

"Easy there!" Ryan gasped at the sight. "This Chardonnay is a little strong."

"I know. And I love the strong." She snorted.

"Oh, that's interesting." Ryan smiled.

Fuck, she was wild!

"Sure," Claire muttered and rolled her eyes at him.

It was the end of conversation, for which Ryan kept smiling at her sulking face. She was beguiling and he was barely holding it.

"Is something wrong? Why are you quiet?" Ryan asked.

Claire glared sternly at him. "No, everything is fine." She grinned while raising a glass to prove her statement, before mumbling, "What a moron!"

"What did you say?" Ryan chuckled.

That foul mouth needed to be fixed, he thought and imagined several ways to make it shut.

"Nothing, the weather is very nice."

"The weather?" He laughed hard, highly entertained.

"Yeah, the weather! Can we go now? I think I'm done," Claire said, tiredly, and, evidently pissed for some reason only she knew.

Ryan drove her back home in an awful silence that she herself instigated. He kept staring at her from time to time, however, with a smile that wasn't returned. Man, she was begrudging.

"Don't think twice to call me when you need another ride," he said seriously, the sight of her sullen face earlier in the bus stop haunting him.

He hated it.

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind," Claire retorted.

"And don't stick yourself at the bus stop as if you've lost your purpose to live," he scolded.

She scowled at him. "I don't do that every day, okay? Don't mistake me for a loner."

He just laughed. "Also, one more thing." He took a pause, and she eyed him curiously. "Don't you have a car?" His glance was earnest.

"I don't need one, I'm fine this way," Claire replied.

"Really? Why am I not comfortable with that?" Ryan uttered thoughtfully, more to himself.

"Because you're kind of nosy?"

"Me?"

"No, my imaginary friend."

"What?" He chuckled.

Ignoring his smiley face, Claire collected her bag. "Thank you for today, Ryan. I mean it," she whispered while unclosing the door.

"My pleasure," he muttered, and that heat of her sparkling eyes staring at him so tenderly began surging. How he wanted to grab her and kiss the hell out of her lips and every place that could possibly be kissed.

"Drive safe." She grinned at him, and he returned it with a soft nod, same as his smile.

"Easy, Ryan," he breathed, watching her waving goodbye as she neared the gate to her house.

TEN

"I heard you received a huge sum of money. Why wasn't I informed about it?" Selma snarled at Claire the second she walked home from the office. "I knew you're a selfish brat but I didn't expect you to be this conniving!"

"Am I?" Claire huffed, masking her anger with a laugh. "Look, I don't wanna argue with you tonight so please get out of my way."

Selma crunched her face menacingly, blocking Claire's path. "You think I'm an easy target . . . don't you, girl?" She was fastening her silky, floor length nightdress.

Claire took back her step down the stairs, sighing heavily. She was exhausted and the only thing she desired was getting some sleep. Just not under these circumstances where it's all noisy, however.

"Let's see," she uttered in a low voice, staring at the angry woman before her eyes. "What else do you want, huh? To take everything my father has left? To leave me with absolutely nothing after ripping off all of his properties? I know you married him for money but haven't you had enough already?"

Claire couldn't stop wondering how far this greedy woman was willing to go.

"How dare you?" Selma's voice reverberated through the thick walls of the grand foyer..

"Why? Does it hurt to hear the truth? That you are a damn gold-digger?" Claire snapped back, carrying the same menace.

"You insolent brat!" Lifting her hand, Selma was about to slap Claire, only to end in her tight grip. "Let go of me!" she barked while struggling to free her wrist.

"I'll never let you hit me again! Do you understand me?" Claire spat irritated, eyes dark and ablaze. "I'm no longer that little girl who begged for your attention. I'm past that stage . . . Mother! And it's the last time you'll hear this name from my mouth because you never deserved it!" Anger coursed through her trembling body, fed up with everything coming from her stepmom.



"Are you on drugs?" Selma asked, astonished.

Claire smirked.. "Could be. Sometimes it's better than being sober and living with horror." She finally freed her hand. "Anything else?"

Selma gasped even aloud. "You—"

"I think I could use some fresh air," said Claire, cutting her stepmother short. "This one is certainly polluted." She scurried off unceremoniously, murmuring some petulant words only herself could hear.

Outside the gush of fresh air took Claire's breath away. She could feel the tears coming speedily but she couldn't let them flow. It was enough feeling sorry for herself. She sighed boldly, pulling herself together.

"Claire . . ." A soft voice called.

"What?" she snapped stoutly and regretted a second later. "I'm sorry, Ana. I didn't know it was you."

An innocent-looking young lady was approaching her way from the gate. She was the house helper, holding something that seemed to be the reason behind her audience with Claire.

"It's your phone. A man brought it here and said you forgot it in his car." She smiled nervously at Claire while tugging her strawberry blonde bangs.

"Ryan," Claire muttered under her breath. "Was he inside here? Did you let him in?" Panic surged through her body at the idea of him knowing this side of her life.

Ana nodded affirmatively. "He said he's a friend and he had your phone so—"

"Alright." Claire took a deep breath. "Can you please take my things inside? I need to take a walk." She handed her bag and phone to Ana.

Staying by herself was all she had to do at the moment. She wasn't going to ruin her night any further, It was decided. As usual she stopped at the park, her most peaceful place. The air blew smoothly, swaying the waves of her hair in sync with the dancing trees.

"You can go back now, I don't need your pity," she said softly at the person who'd been following her from the moment she left the house.

"How long have you known I was behind you?" Ryan asked, amazed.

"From the very beginning?" she answered with a smirk, gazing up at him. "I saw your car and figured you were still around."

Ryan took a seat. A small smile kissed the corner of his lips as he uttered, "I brought your phone."

"I know. Thanks." Claire smiled back, tightly. "And since you are here, please forget whatever you heard today. Don't think that you know me now just because you happen to know my shady life."

"I have no idea of what you are saying." Ryan's gaze began wandering around the place, hardly his emotions readable. "So, is this the park that you often come to?"

"Hmm." Claire nodded softly, her mood calmer. Staring deeply into Ryan's eyes, as his gaze shifted back to her, she asked, "Why did you follow me?"

"I just couldn't ignore you," Ryan replied promptly. "You looked sad and . . ." He paused.

"And you felt sorry," Claire muttered, sighing.

She hated anyone's look of pity towards her. She despised the gesture.

"Sorry? Maybe yes. But it definitely wasn't pity," Ryan said, and her eyes widened somehow. He smiled at that. "I don't know you much, Claire. But I can tell what a tough cookie you are."

"A tough cookie?" Claire squinted her eyes, chuckling. Ryan's eyes glowed luminously at the sound she made. "You're weird," she breathed and she was quite tempted to lean onto his shoulder as each time their body made a subtle contact.

And she did it.

Ryan flexed a bit, startled somehow, but possibly by her boldness rather than the gesture. His lips stretched into a warm smile as he slid closer and allowed her to relax comfortably by his side. His arm yanked her shoulder, cooing her.

Claire felt safe and assured at this moment. Immersed into the feeling, she shut her eyes at the gentle nuzzle of Ryan's nose into her hair. She could feel him, his tense muscles, his heart beating a bit faster than usual, and it made her smile.

"I love your smell," she muttered out of the blue. "I mean, the perfume or whatever you're using; don't get the wrong ideas." She gazed up at him, blushing.

"Really now?" Ryan coaxed an eyebrow. "Maybe I could bring you the bottle of my cologne one of these days if you like it that much—that way you can smell me all day long," he teased.

Claire pulled back, scowling. "You're so creepy, you know? Who said I want to smell you all day long?" She giggled at the idea.

It was thrilling, actually.

"Don't you?" Ryan's eyes narrowed at her, a certain gleam pertained through them.

"No?" Claire huffed, averting her gaze.

Jeez, why was he so hot? She blew some air to stop devouring his lips that she so badly wanted to kiss.

"Are you sure?" Ryan smiled and slowly took a hold of her chin, drawing her face closer. She acquiesced, glancing back at him, and nodded. "You have the most beautiful lips," he breathed, stroking her cheek gently.

Oh, and his were just perfect! Claire breathed heavily inside.

"I bet it's what you tell every woman you hook up with," she murmured, hardly keeping her legs together.

Ryan smirked. "You won't believe it even if I deny your baseless accusations," he said. "But I mean it." His voice was gentle and the attraction stretched into Claire's groin was palpable. "I want to kiss you, deeply," he whispered.

Claire's breath ragged, her heart beating at a strange fast pace.

"Kiss me," she said, her voice barely audible. "Now." She wrapped Ryan's neck as his lips secured hers briskly, enticingly; dominating her mouth as though he hadn't kissed forever.

A soft moan leapt out of Claire as Ryan held the small of her back. He shifted a bit to clutch her steady, tightly, letting no distance fill between them. He was demanding, and his lips were relentless, driving her crazier.

Fuck, had anyone kissed her like this before? Claire was in awe, totally astounded at the expertise of his hands on her skin, caressing her soft thighs a bit intrusively, and they began parting willingly.

The skirt of her little flora dress was smoothly rising upward and the arousal was enough to shudder her skin. Oh no, she wasn't going to let him touch her there, was she? She quickly pulled back, breathless, and the effect was a copy of Ryan's.

"I think we should go now." She couldn't let his sexy moves intoxicate her. No, her mind was fortunately sober. "It's getting late." She took a breath, watching Ryan shyly through the moonlight.

"Can't you stay a little longer?" Ryan whispered, eyeing her so deeply with a faint smile.

"Um—" Damn if she stayed she'd end up fucked in the park! Thank God it was a bit secure that people hardly paid attention as they passed by.

"Stay for just a while and I'll escort you home," Ryan muttered. "It's only eight and it's relaxing here," he added with a peek on his cellphone that he tugged back instantly into his jeans' pocket.

"Oh God. You really know how to turn me shameless," Claire leaned back into his shoulder and tried to block any reminder of him being someone's boyfriend.

Someone named Doris.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, is there?" Ryan said casually, his voice filled with calmness despite the ruckus he'd just caused a moment ago.

Claire didn't want to respond to that. She'd become a bimbo by now and there was no reason to justify her not-so-cool actions. They both stayed silent for a while, meditating.

"I also have a dark side that I'd rather no one finds out. I think everyone else does . . . so you have no reason to feel alarmed or ashamed for whatever that's going on with your step mother," Ryan uttered gently.

Claire pulled herself back from his arms and looked up at him, shocked. He heard everything! She was undecided on what to feel about it.

"I heard almost everything, Claire. Is that how she always treats you?" Ryan's voice was suddenly low, apprehensive even.

Claire pulled a distance between the two, her mood altered. "Yeah, that's my life and you don't need to speak of it. Like I said before, just pretend you didn't hear a thing," she told him bluntly.

Ryan's jaw ticked but he didn't argue. He was displeased—it was quite clear from the look of his brown eyes. "Okay," he breathed.

After another moment of silence, Claire grinned up at him. "So does Mr. Perfect also have a dark side?" she quizzed, cajoling him.

Ryan huffed a small laugh. "I'm quite far from being perfect, Claire. Don't get confused," he said truthfully, and she only smiled, fully aware of his 'issues' "And also, I loved how you defended yourself. You're not weak, after all."

"Idiot!" Claire laughed hard, her good mood restored. "Do I look weak to you?"

"Not really," Ryan said truthfully. "Just . . . you're more fierce than I thought."

"Oh? Is that a compliment?" Claire flushed.

"It is." He nodded.

"You know what," Claire said with a pause while sitting cross-legged. "When I first saw you, I thought you were a rude jerk. No, you *were* a jerk, actually."

"Oh, is that so?" Ryan lifted his eyebrow questioningly, no offense taken. "And I thought you were an insolent little brat whose mouth needed to be fixed."

"What?" Claire gasped loudly, both laughing. "I was merely defending myself, sir!"

"From who? Me?" Ryan gaped.

"Of course from you," Claire prompted. "You were deliberately trying to intimidate me with your bad boy aura."

"Was I?" Ryan's laughter increased.

"Yes, you were."

"So you were intimidated, huh? What about now? Have you changed your mind?"

"A little," Claire confessed, mindful. "After spending some time with you, I realized that perhaps he isn't as bad as he pretends to be. Or maybe he is hiding his true self and wears a mask of a rude and manner less jerk."

"Really now?" Ryan was mirthful at each passing second, beholding her intensely.

"But all I'm sure of is that you are the man who saved my life." Claire's voice took a shift into smoothness without jokes. "I couldn't thank you properly the other day but I'm doing it now. Thank you, Ryan . . . for rescuing me from that terrible rain," she told him calmly, and his eyes were gleaming.

"Still I am a jerk, Claire." It sounded like a warning.

Yes, she wasn't a stranger to that fact. If he was kissing and cuddling her in the park while he had a gorgeous girlfriend waiting at home—or wherever she was—then he was a complete jerk.

But why was she getting too attached to this beautiful jerk, nonetheless? Claire could no longer understand this desire to be near him despite all the warnings the universe keeps sending to her.

"Why are you such a jerk again?" she curiously asked, her thoughts slowly wanton.

"Maybe because I don't know how to be sweet and nice." Ryan shrugged. "I'm not like those gentlemen all the girls dream of. The one you call prince charming?" He smiled feebly.

"Prince charming?" Claire frowned.

"On a white horse or something." He shrugged again.

Of course he wasn't! Claire laughed. But perhaps he was her knight in shining armor and that's what she needed the most. She was already the queen of her own castle after all.

"Don't worry, Ryan Stevens. I'm not one of those beautiful princesses waiting for their prince charming either," she said, and he stared at her for a very long moment, amused. "Maybe I dreamed once for a dark knight in shining armor to come and rescue me, but not anymore." She smiled, even though deep down she was weeping when recalling the times she wanted to just be swallowed beneath the Earth's surface.

"You're really looking for trouble, Claire." Ryan licked his bottom lip with narrowed eyes.

"I've lived in trouble my entire life, Ryan. You don't scare me at all. Find another strategy, because that one doesn't work with me," Claire said confidently, and Ryan couldn't stop laughing at the sound of it. "Take me home. You promised." She stood up.

"As you wish, gorgeous." Ryan grinned.

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Ryan's Vogue was sliding mildly on the asphalt. He couldn't stop thinking of this little missy who stumbled into his life so unexpectedly. And what did he want from her? The kisses? Some good sex? Because he'd imagined it so many times since he first held her in his arms.

*Fuck, Ryan, you can have any chick you want! Leave the poor Cinderella alone!* His inner voice rebuked.

Ryan sighed heavily after pulling over into the traffic lights. And just as he was about to do away any thought regarding Claire, his phone flashed with a message from her. He pondered for a few seconds and immediately opened it.

**FROM: Lady in rain**

**Thanks for being there. Maybe I needed a shoulder to lean on and yours was spectacular.**

**[Received: 21:00]**

A big grin spread across his face as he read the text. She was something else, he admitted, and it was refreshing. He didn't think twice to text her back.

**I'll remember to add one shoulder day in my workout routine. Didn't know they would come handy one eventful evening. Think of good things and get some sleep.**

**[Sent: 21:01]**

He smiled widely and continued driving upon the green light. This woman was going to bring him some trouble; he could feel with all his guts. But the more the challenge, the more he liked it.



## ELEVEN

A call from Bruno managed to pull Claire out of her office desk for lunch. The two met at their usual restaurant, two blocks away from Claire's workplace. Bruno was beaming as he spotted her on the table.

"Hey, beautiful. What's up?" He pecked her on the cheek before pulling a seat across from hers.

"Good. What are you doing in the city, and what's with the rush?" Claire urged, her smile bright.

"I had some work to do and I couldn't leave without seeing your pretty face. I need to get back to Montesby before dark actually," he answered fast while peeking on his watch.

"Oh, I see." Claire sipped her iced tea.

"Um, do you have any plans this Saturday?" Bruno asked, staring expectantly at her.

Saturday? Claire pondered inside and the answer was no. But why was he asking? She was curious.

"No, I don't," she replied. "Why? What are you up to?" She scowled at his mirthful face.

"There is a 50th Anniversary party for our company. I was hoping you could come with me this Saturday," Bruno said hesitantly. He was probably afraid to be too imposing. "I mean, only if you can. Everyone will be like . . . I'm the director of what, if not the CEO of whatever . . . And I don't want to feel lost engaging in boring conversation. So I need a company of my own because my brother will surely be busy."

Oh, his brother. Claire took another sip at the thought of him. Wasn't it better to not see Ryan? She wondered, but Bruno's hopeful gaze was something else. Boy, this was a pure mess.

"Where will the party be?" she asked, deep inside trying hard to make the decision.

"Wait," uttered Bruno and scurried his hands towards his backpack. He produced a well-designed invitation card after a short moment. "It's all written here." He gladly handed it to her.

"Okay." Claire silently went through it.

"So do I have myself a date?" Bruno grinned.

Claire smiled as she finished reading, and then glanced up at him. "Well, you certainly do. But can I bring a friend? It's just . . . I hate going places without her and she loves big parties. She won't forgive me if she learns I had fun on my own."

And she needed a wing-woman to go through that coming evening in which, by all means, was going to have Ryan in the picture.

"Of course, beautiful. Although that's a single person invite," Bruno muttered thoughtfully. "Well, you can have another one. As for me, I'll have to figure out my entrance." He went through the bag and got her another one.

"But it's your party. Why would you need an entrance?" Claire chuckled.

"Oh well . . ." Bruno grinned charmingly. "No one will recognize me even if I cry that I'm the owner's grandson."

Claire laughed heartily. "You're such a troublemaker, aren't you?"

"A family black sheep." He laughed. "And I love playing incognito, trust me, and I'm not bothered."

**When Claire told Gena about** it, the latter was enthralled and immediately started planning for what to wear and other details. It's her best friend's contagious enthusiasm that Claire liked the most about her; she needed Gena as much as she needed her.

"Will Ryan be there?" Gena asked over the phone.

"Certainly," Claire breathed while climbing into her bed to call it a day.

"Now that is more interesting! Finally I'll get to see the man behind my friend's insanity up close. I can't wait!" Gena's cheeriness made Claire scowl.

"I'm not insane!" she admonished.

"Oh, yes, you're not. You're perfectly sane, my friend." Gena was sarcastic and it made Claire laugh a bit.

Maybe it was true. Around Ryan her sanity would strangely disappear.

Saturday came in a whiff. The two best friends were ready for the party. Gena was in a red cocktail dress, the same color as her bright lipstick, her straight Asian hair parted to the sides. She looked heavenly and her smile was brighter.

"Oh, I'm excited!" she murmured for the umpteenth time, teasing Claire who was a bit anxious about this evening.

Ryan was going to be there, she thought, and this detail was a bit eerie as anything was to be expected.

"Oh please. We're here—let's go," Claire uttered with a sigh, as the Uber pulled over in front of a luxurious hotel where a red carpet staircase adorned the front entrance.

She was wearing a black glittered dress, floor length, backless, with a plunge V-neck and a thigh length slit. She was sexy and fashionable, and she was utterly aware. Holding the skirt of her dress, she exited the Uber.

They walked nonchalantly to where Bruno was standing, waiting for them as agreed, right at the entrance while fixing his bowtie with a frown.

"Okay, if the younger one looks like this, then how does the older one look like? Oh girl, you're in really big trouble!" Gena murmured.

"Shut up, Gena. I already know what I signed up for, so you don't need to remind me," Claire said with a big smile, that's directed to Bruno.

He was grinning incredulously as though his heart had skipped a beat, with his eyes glistening with pleasure as the ladies took a few wide stairs to where he was standing. Evidently he was captivated.

"My God, you look gorgeous!" Bruno exclaimed. Claire smiled humbly, flushing. "Are you ladies trying to steal the spotlight tonight?" He was now staring at Gena next.

She flushed, too.

"You look stunning yourself, black sheep. Seems like the Tux really treats you good. You should wear more often," Claire teased.

Bruno waved his hand as though she was spitting nonsense. "Me and tux? Nah, it's cramping my style."

The three of them shared a carefree laughter.

"Um, this is my best friend . . . Gena," Claire said pointedly. "Gena, meet Bruno, my newest friend." She gave them a quick introduction.

"Hi, Bruno. Heard a lot about you?" Gena uttered.

"Good stuff, I hope?" He replied with a friendly kiss and partial hug.

They walked inside the grand ballroom. With Bruno playing photographer from whatever magazine he mentioned to the security team, they both laughed upon getting a go-ahead pass. He was quite a charmer.

The venue was beautiful and exorbitant. A golden chandelier was hanging high above the ceiling. People inside looked as radiant as the place itself. It had three open floors arranged like side balconies, in which other guests were chatting over drinks.

Bruno led them to a big well-decorated round table, where they all settled. Sooner he excused himself for a minute for an untold reason. Gena busied herself with her phone, and Claire was getting familiar with the party by wandering her gaze around.

That's when she spotted someone, who as always, managed to take her breath away. He was dressed casually in cream cropped pants and aqua marine stylish coat; the shirt beneath was half buttoned. She could clearly see it even from a distance.

"Ryan." The name slipped out of her lips in a sweet whisper, her heart beating fast.

Ryan was smiling forcefully at some couple while sipping the drink he was holding, his free hand dug into his pants' pocket. Indeed he was breathtakingly handsome, and his smile . . . No, his smirk was one hell of a temptation.

"ATTENTION EVERYONE!" A mirthful female voice commenced the event.

Claire knew right away that it was Doris. She looked up at her. Just as she always was, so classy, so fine, so elegant; she wore a suit, slim-fit, and the same color as Ryan's jacket.

"Yeah, right." She glowered, unable to help the disdain.

The party began and at last it was Ryan's time to take the spotlight as the President of SK. His exhibition at the front was welcomed with a warm round of applause, ogling eyes from ladies, and slight envy from some of his gender. He smiled warmly.

"Thanks everyone for being here tonight," he said. "It's our great pleasure to celebrate the fifty . . ." he continued with his celebratory speech, amidst which his confident gaze collided with Claire's from somewhere among the guests.

He went on with his speech, with a perfect indifference, before announcing the presence of the SK chairman, Mr. Stevens himself, who appeared like a youngster in his black suit. The applause was exceedingly high towards him.

Bruno finally returned to the ladies. "Are you girls comfortable?" he asked.

"Yeah, we are good," Gena replied, and Claire seconded. "Oh, your grandfather looks handsome. Now I know where you all get your great looks from."

"Yeah, and he looks very energetic today," Claire said with a warm smile.

"I'm just glad there's no part of introducing family members, because I hate the charade," Bruno said, and they all looked at him. "What? I'm just being honest here! Can you imagine meeting someone who asks what accomplishments you have in life? I mean, what is that? It's totally obnoxious to me."

"Oh, he's so damn right," Gena agreed wholeheartedly. "I hate that myself. It's so hard being with people who measure a person's value with the kind of job and accomplishments they have, like my parent's snobbish friends." She grimaced.

Claire sighed. "That's the harsh reality we live in. If we're all the same then what's the color of life? Let them be, and let us be, and cheers!" She raised her glass, and the two joined in.

Frankly, Claire was far away from their conversation. She only eyed one person who eyed her back with gallant. She was angry at him, and yet kept wondering why she was.

Minutes later, a handsome young man with dark skin appeared out of the blue at their table. He casually placed a hand on Bruno's shoulder as a way to announce his presence. He was smiling handsomely.

"Such a great company you have here, Bruno," he let out a flattering remark that made the ladies in question smile.

"Hey, dude. What's up?" Bruno greeted him. "Oh, these are my friends. She is Claire, and that's Gena," he introduced them.

"Harry Rys." Harry gave them a handshake in turns while having a seat. "Claire? I think I've heard quite a lot about you," he said softly.

"Oh?" Claire uttered.

Seeing her expression, Harry immediately added, "Oh, forgive me for being brutally honest. It's just, keeping secrets between the four of us has become almost impossible, so try to understand. And trust me, I'd really love to change that."

He tried to flat the tension and it really worked. He appeared to be good with words and even in settling moods. He was black, not bulky but fit, and had very nice teeth and eyes. He was a type that one wouldn't stop staring at, if he's given a chance to talk.

"It's okay," said Claire truthfully. "It wasn't a secret anyway." She smiled, then felt a pinch on her thigh that nearly made her squirm.

Gena! She mentally snarled.

"Okay, who is this one again?" Gena whispered when the guys engaged into their own conversation.

"You just heard him. Harry Rys," Claire replied. "And I know that look and the pinch, and the fact that you have a thing for black guys. All the best, girlfriend." She smiled over a bite of some unknown appetizer, the taste exquisite.

"Hey, shut up! I'm only checking possibilities here." Gena nudged her, and both shared a stupid laugh.

After some minutes of conversing delightfully, they suddenly had the pleasure of having Doris approaching their way while holding Ryan's hand.

She was congratulating him for the nice speech, and for the perfect party she had turned into as promised.

So, they worked together? Claire couldn't fathom what this new discovery meant to her?

They were dating and stuck to each other the whole day long, probably everyday, and here she was sneaking around with this bastard . . . Kissing him in the park like a sleazy woman.

The table was enough for six people. The two sat down and greeted the others. Claire stared at them blankly, hiding the fury consuming her inside. Doris rested her gaze straight on *her*, and their eyes collided.

"Hello, Claire," Doris muttered with a slightly startled look. "I almost couldn't recognize you tonight."

"Oh really?" Claire smiled.

Well, she should've stuck to that instead, Claire thought.

"Yeah, you look stunning tonight," Doris said. "I should've guessed it was you Bruno was dying to invite." She threw him a mischievous grin, and he only nodded his head.

"Well, thank you. And you look beautiful, too. In fact . . . you always do," Claire said. Doris smiled proudly. "And I'm glad Bruno was kind enough to invite me. He's such a gentleman." She now faced Bruno, smiling fondly.

"Thank you, beautiful. It's my great pleasure," Bruno uttered, and the rest had a lingering smile.

Gena eyed her best friend suspiciously, as she shifted her eyes towards Ryan. It seemed like she understood perfectly the irony behind Claire's words, and most especially what she was about to say right now.

"Hi, Ryan. I've quite enjoyed your speech. Congratulations for the big day," Claire said curtly.

"Thanks, Claire. I'm glad you enjoyed it," Ryan returned, similar in manners, and the two stared at one another in a language only their minds knew.

*Jerk!* Claire felt like plucking his cynic eyes right here and then. She clenched her fists under the table and swallowed the fury away. She then took a very deep breath of composure.

"I'm going to the restroom," she told Gena.

"Okay." Gena was occupied with her own adventure over the smiling Harry who was now talking.

Claire smiled knowingly. She could tell the Asian was smitten.

"And you should put your Asian charms into use if you want to capture the black chocolate," she whispered to Gena, teasing her. "Well, that is if he's available . . . unlike some manwhore I know." Now she glared gravely at Ryan, who was smiling at something Doris had just said.

"Um, okay?" Gena grinned, for she knew her best friend's temper and at the moment it was piling up in her throat like a fishbone.

Claire could feel Ryan's eyes stalking her as she headed to the restroom.



## TWELVE

"That jerk!" Claire was standing in front of the vanity mirror in the ladies' room, breathing capriciously.

The sight of Ryan arriving with his awfully beautiful girlfriend kept reminding her on how stupid she'd been by far. What the hell was she thinking getting too comfortable with him? She admonished herself.

The reflection of herself slowly began to calm her, and eventually drew a small and confident smile. She was beautiful, too, and didn't need anyone's approval to believe that. With her looks; tall, long golden hair, tanned skin and proportionate figure that fitted any type of clothes she wore; she could have had any man she desired.

"But why Ryan Stevens, huh?" she thought out loud, agitated. Sighing, she opened her silver clutch and obtained her powder kit.

It didn't take long until she exited the bathroom, all refreshed. She had to stop thinking of Ryan! It was a stern mental reminder as she made her way through the small hall leading to the ballroom, only to bump into the same person she's trying hard to avoid.

"Follow me," Ryan uttered gently, holding her arm.

"What the fuck, Ryan!" she snapped, unable to understand how and when he was stalking her into the bathroom.

"Stop making a scene, Claire. We need to talk." He was leading her toward the elevator, paying no attention to whoever could possibly see them.

"You're the one who's looking for a scandal, Ryan! Are you out of your mind? Let me go." Claire tried to pull herself out, but his grip tightened around her wrist. "Ryan!" She glowered at him.

"Gosh, she's so stubborn," Ryan muttered. Luckily someone was stepping out of the elevator, hence they just walked in without any delay.

Once inside the elevator cabin, closed and alone, Claire detached herself forcefully from him. "You're such a brute!" she barked angrily.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, his face suddenly serious and calm.

"Sorry? Oh please!" Claire rolled her eyes, catching a breath. "And what do you want now? Tired of playing the perfect boyfriend and in need of a new toy? Ryan, I don't know what you want from me but I got to be back there. My friend is waiting."

"Well, I think your friend is in better hands as we are speaking," Ryan said matter-of-factly. "I doubt that she's even thinking of you at the moment, and I don't need a new toy."

"Nonsense!" Claire retorted, crossing her arms on the chest.

"You look so beautiful tonight," Ryan said with a smile, devouring her with his eyes. "I couldn't stop staring at you."

*Yeah right!* But he couldn't even say it when his girlfriend was around and now he wanted her to believe him? Claire scoffed while rolling her eyes at him.

"I'm not falling for your sleazy lines, Ryan. And I don't have anything to discuss with you." She strode forward and reached for the keypad displayed with floor numbers.

"What are you doing?" Ryan scowled.

"I'm leaving," she said dryly. Her finger was almost touching the lobby button but failed upon Ryan's hold of her hand. "Damn it! What do you—"

"I won't let you go until we talk," Ryan breathed into her ear, trapping her body onto the golden wall of the elevator, eyeing her mouth lasciviously.

"I swear, Ryan, if you try to k—"

"What will you do if I try to kiss you?" He grinned down at her, stroking her inviting lips painted in hot pink. "Tell me, Claire." He then brushed her cheek with the back of his hand, sending shivers down her spine.

"Don't touch me!" Claire moved her face, deep inside stirred by his sultry advancement.

At the same moment, the ping of the elevator pause was heard, and the doors parted. An old couple walked in, urging the two to keep a safe distance. They all nodded to one another, a soft greeting.

"You haven't seen the crazy yet, Claire," Ryan whispered, standing at the back with her.

"Shut up!" Claire hissed and he chuckled. He was still holding her hand and she couldn't retaliate with the audience. "Don't touch me," she mouthed.

Ryan grinned. "What can I do?" he breathed softly into her ear. "I love touching you." His hand was now onto her naked back, caressing the softness of her skin.

Holy fuck! Claire didn't hate it, on the contrary, but she couldn't allow it either.

"Stop, Ryan!" She tried to move but he held her firmly by the waist. The old woman turned around upon their movement.

They both smiled at her.

The elevator had another stop and it appeared to be the final destination for Ryan. He gently, like a real spouse does, pulled Claire out of the cabin after a small smile towards the old couple.

"Ryan, where is this place?" Claire's eyes widened frantically at the sight of a quiet hallway with dim golden-lights and a number of doors on its both sides.

"Somewhere private where we can talk without interference." He revealed a key card from his jacket as they approached one of the doors.

"No, Ryan. I'm not going in the hotel room with you!" Claire said as he swept the card. "I'm going back!"

"Of course you're coming," Ryan said softly, holding her hand. "Haven't you said I'm crazy? Well, this is what crazy means!" He sharply lifted her in his arms like a bride and pushed the door in.

"Ryan!" Claire wriggled her legs around. "You jerk, put me down!" she kept shouting. He laughed delightedly as they advanced inside. "Ryan!"

"Okay, there." Ryan dropped her off once they were inside. "Claire, can't you just calm down for a second so that we can talk?" he beseeched while shutting the door.

"No, I don't wanna talk to you!" she snarled. "Look, people are waiting for us outside, and especially you, Ryan. So please, let's get out of here, huh?" She pleaded.

"They can go to hell for all I care," Ryan said, no trace of mockery.

"Yeah, right," Claire mumbled while fixing her cramped dress, slightly defeated.

"What's your deal with Bruno?" Ryan asked out of the blue, gripping a remote controller after dropping his cell phone and wallet on the coffee table.

"What?" Claire frowned.

"I mean, are you two dating or something?" Ryan flicked the lights on with the remote.

Smirking, Claire replied, "And why would you care about that, huh?" She glared sternly at him.

Ryan charged closer and held her firmly. "No, I don't care. I just don't like the idea of you giving my brother the wrong impression just so that you can hurt me."

Hurt him? That never crossed her mind at all. However, it didn't sound like a bad idea if it meant that much.

She pulled herself out of his grip at last, and took a deep sigh. "I could never use your brother to hurt you," she told him. "I care for Bruno very much, and just so you know, not every relationship has to involve fake kisses and hugs."

"What do you mean by fake kisses and hugs?" Ryan snorted, his tone displeased.

"You know perfectly well, you asshole! Just like yours for instance," she snarled angrily and moved away from him. "And is this where you bring your conquests?" She scanned the sleek hotel room.

She had no idea why he had one in the first place.

"You're really testing my patience, Claire!" Ryan sighed.

"Think whatever you want." She snorted. "Besides, why does it even matter to you? Bruno was the one who invited me here, unlike you who had all the opportunities in the world but still didn't. Oh, I know! How could you, with your beautiful girlfriend involved?" Her voice was pure sarcasm.

"I wanted to invite you but I learned Bruno has done it already. I was slow I guess," Ryan muttered and he was now undoing his seemingly expensive Rolex watch.

"Stop your sleazy excuses, Ryan," Claire said. "You know, I should be with Bruno right now, and not inside this God-forsaken hotel room with you." She attempted to walk past him, but he stopped her briskly.

"Please don't go, Claire." He hugged her from behind. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Why would you make it up to me?" Claire smirked. "You and I have nothing together, Ryan."

"Really?" Ryan whispered to her ear, smiling. "Do you really think we have nothing, Claire? Are you absolutely sure?"

Her breath hitched and the sudden cold enveloped her skin at his salacious touch. And damn his voice . . . It was deep and hoarse, sexy even.

"Yes, and it's the truth," she uttered, eyes shut. It was undeniable that she felt something strong whenever they were together, and this closeness was even dangerous.

"Why are you trying to deny what you want, huh?" Ryan held her more tightly, caressing her side with one hand. "Or should I say, what your body wants?" he whispered as his hand rose upward, cupping her breast. "See? Your nipples are hard and I haven't even tasted them. Fuck, you're so beautiful."

Oh no! Clamming her eyes, Claire tried her best to regain control of her body and mind. She wasn't going to succumb to his fervency, was she? Swiftly, she spun around to face Ryan, without breaking his grip around her.

"Do you realize what a jerk you are?" she asked, catching a breath, her eyes on his.

"I am?" Ryan smirked, and there were a million fireworks when he did that.

The jerk was beautiful.

"Yes, you are," Claire returned with clenched teeth, ignoring her beguiled thoughts. "So you brought me here just to have my body? Is that what you want from me?" Her face turned serious.

"I never said that I only want your body, Claire. Perhaps I want all of you," Ryan muttered and deftly held her close to his chest, startling her. "Don't you want to know how it feels like having me deep inside you? How my real kisses taste, and all the things I could do to you?" he breathed into her hair, gripping her body possessively, desire filled in his voice.

Claire moaned softly at the gesture, her breast crushed by his hard chest. "No, I don't," she uttered, her voice hardly audible. Ryan kept teasing her, sliding the sleeves of her dress off her slender shoulders, kissing each shoulder blade in turn. "Ah . . ." She tipped her head back into the hollow of his neck.

"I want to see them without this," Ryan muttered as he cupped her barely covered teats, no bra securing them, just the soft fabric of her dress. "I'm taking this off," he said.

"Ryan, no." She held his hand to stop him from undressing her, undecided whether it's what she really wanted or not.

In response, Ryan whirled her swiftly so her back mingled with his chest. She moaned again, loudly, and his hand was once again squeezing her breasts, his lips on her neck, kissing and sucking her skin, hard, wanting.

"You want to go?" he whispered, his mouth ajar at the intoxicating feel written in his stormy eyes.

God, she wasn't going to make it safe and sound—Claire could feel it. Her hormones were clearly betraying her.

Ryan twirled her back to face him. She was panting heavily, hardly holding his gaze. Damn, she wanted him.

"You want this, don't you, Claire?" he asked boldly, staring deeply into her eyes. "Tell me to stop right here and I will. Tell me!" He was panting as well, holding her still.

Stop? Did she really want that?

"No," Claire uttered softly. "You already have me, you jerk!" She furiously wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his lips.

Ryan grunted, startled by the sudden turn of her mien. She was a wild cat, and he seemed to love her crawls. Her tongue was demanding and relentless in his, as she pushed him against the wall.

"Fuck, Claire!" Ryan grinned delightedly, taking her thigh up about his waist, caressing it roughly and possessively via the slit of her dress. She was still kissing him hard, stroking his furious length beneath the pants. "Oh!" he rasped, using the slit to slide his hand inside her.

"Ah!" Claire bawled when he suddenly tugged her tiny pantie, and swiftly slid his finger inside her. "Ry—" She hugged him, her lips on his neck as he began gliding her most sensitive female core.

"So wet, baby," Ryan uttered, his voice proud and enticed. "And so tight. When was the last time you were touched, huh?" he asked.

*Four years ago?* Claire muttered inwardly but scowled outwardly.

"None of your business," she breathed, rocking her waist smoothly at his sweet penetration, stroking her in and out.

"Hmm, that's fair," Ryan muttered and retreated his finger abruptly. "I'm peeling this off." He began undressing her.

Was she seriously doing this? Despite being drunk in lust, Claire couldn't stop taking a step back now that she was naked . . . Only a pair of black, lace panties covered half of her succulent bottom.

"Holy fuck!" Ryan gasped, deranging her from her trance. "You're so beautiful, Claire." He was staring at her anew, his gaze scorching with desire, lust, and something else that wasn't easy to fathom.

Claire couldn't help flushing. She slowly reached for his shirt, eyes on his, and held the remaining buttons that needed to be undone. She undid one after the other, watching his chest rising and falling. She was unhurried with her moves, and he was impatient.

"I shouldn't be here," she said to him wittingly. "I'm the other woman, right? Will you have another tomorrow?"

Ryan scowled. "Claire—"

"Don't bother answering. It's a one night stand, after all. I'll try it once." She peeled his shirt off and beheld the sight of his glorious chest. Holy cow! Her heart jumped at the workout zeal portrayed in each contour of his sculpted abs. "You're delicious." She kissed his pecks.

Unable to hold it, Ryan clutched her face and took her lips in his possession. He pushed his tongue deeply and relentlessly. He was hungry, and nothing could stop him this time. He flipped her to face the wall, briskly, and kneeled down to kiss her sex from behind, parting her legs.

"So fucking sexy," he muttered, and Claire cried feeling his tongue inside her.

This was new! She never felt this beautifully assaulted before, her face against the wall, paying no attention to this minor detail, just his rolling tongue inside her, and then his finger.

"Ah!" She shut her eyes, relishing the feel, and his speed was driving her crazy. "Ryan!" she moaned loudly, an overwhelming pleasure building in her stomach, threatening to burst out.

What the heck was this? She wanted to let it go, but Ryan pulled out suddenly. He twirled her back and reclaimed her lips. He was a sexy beast, Claire confessed while



kissing him back, more needy than before. Wordless, Ryan rushed her towards the bed and briskly stepped out of his pants.

"You are not the other woman!" he snapped, but Claire's eyes were on his fully loaded weapon, barely holding her legs together at the holy sight of it. "Loving it?" He smirked as he clambered into bed.

"No?" Claire returned dryly, lying.

"Really? Let's see!" Ryan pulled her down to his level and parted her legs. "Let's see how you feel when I fuck you slowly," he breathed and kissed her all over again, pushing himself deeper without haste.

"Oh!" Claire moaned at the feel, taking his length smoothly until it reached the end, filled. She hugged his neck, and he gently flexed back, then pushed in, and back . . . His eyes deeply into hers. "Ryan," she muttered, her voice soft, feeling everything to the core.

"Yes, baby," he replied, and again rested his lips on hers, shutting her moaning. He was gentle, taking her slowly, until she felt accustomed to his size, and that's when his pace increased.

"Oh God!" Claire moved in sync, mirroring his speed. And again she felt that strong current in her body, making her breath rag.

"Come with me, Claire! Fuck, let it go!" Ryan grunted, thrusting her mercilessly. He suddenly stilled, his body rigid as Claire hugged him tighter, trembling in his brace. "Argh!" he groaned, getting his ultimate release at the same time she did.

## THIRTEEN

An immaculate white sheet covered her perfectly nude body, Ryan's arms wrapped around her. The feel of his warmth was relaxing, she mentally admitted as her strength was almost drained after the unplanned sex she'd just had with him.

Did she really fuck him? She shut her eyes and quickly bolted from his cocoon. How could she allow it to happen? Remorse pooled in, but quickly got disrupted by the chirp of her phone inside the forsaken clutch on the floor.

"What?" Ryan frowned, sounding as though he wasn't ready to get up from this bed . . . And from this moment.

"I'm not sure what to think or feel. Should I thank you?" Claire muttered, sitting in bed while holding the sheet roughly to her chest, her back facing him.

"For what?" Ryan's voice was accompanied with a sigh as he moved closer. Claire could only hear him shifting. "Are you mad at me now?" He sounded sarcastic.

Claire had no answer. Perhaps she was mad at herself.

Without saying a word, she stood up and began gathering her stuff. The dress was just like all of her things, lying on the fluffy, seemingly expensive silver rug. She picked it, then the silver clutch.

"Claire?" Ryan called, but she responded with silence.

She was now opening her clutch in which her phone was secured. She frowned at the sight of several missed calls from Gena, and one from Bruno. Two texts were again from Gena, demanding about Claire's whereabouts.

"Shit," she muttered under her breath, fully aware of the mess she was probably in.

She grabbed her rolled pantie, a nasty reminder of the person who pulled it down her thighs some moments ago. Damn, she wasn't going to get rid of this night, was she? It drove her nuts as she made a call to Gena while slipping into the bathroom for a leak.

"What's wrong with you, Claire?" Gena snapped. "You are taking this tendency of making me worry too seriously, huh? I can't see you anywhere, you're not picking my calls, and Ryan is nowhere to be seen either. Where are you, girl?"

Claire clasped her lips into a fine line, sighing. "I'm fine, Gena. Don't worry. I'll be down in a few minutes." She shut the bathroom door.

"You'll be down? Where are you?" Gena was curious from her voice alone.

"I'll see you later," Claire said softly, facing herself in the bathroom mirror.

"Wait," Gena uttered. "Are you okay, though? You kind of sound strange."

Claire smiled fondly. "I'm okay, just wait for me." She hung up.

Alone at last, Claire's hand found her neck and softly rubbed it. She could still feel Ryan's kisses on her skin, the caresses, the biting of her flesh that left one red mark on her right breast. She had to stop thinking of him. No, she was going to stop it right now.

Returning to the main room, she found Ryan fully dressed already. He was shrugging into his jacket, oblivious of her presence. She watched him, his body moving splendidly, and he was a work of art. A masterpiece, that is.

*But he's a jerk, Claire!* She sternly reminded herself. *He'd found what he wanted from you and you willingly gave it to him. Now wait and see how he goes through the other door and erase this evening like many others he'd had in his bachelor life.*

Not once in her life had she imagined herself having random sex with anyone. Especially with someone she had no relationship of a sort, nor any type of arrangement with similar design. She was going insane.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Ryan asked, startling her. "Do you want to murder me? Or miss me already." He fastened his watch, matching towards her.

"Shut up, and get out of my sight!" Claire moved out of the bathroom door and headed further into the room.

Ryan caught her on the way. "Don't tell me you're regretting now." He tried to hold her hand.

"Don't touch me, Ryan!" Claire bellowed.

"Uh-oh, someone is mad, huh?" Ryan muttered, hardly affected by her outburst.

She should kick him and leave this place, but why was she still in his embrace whenever he'd touch her? Claire sighed. Was she this weak over men? Or just this man in particular?

"Shouldn't you be trying to win over the investors for your grand project you mentioned in your speech? Or with your girlfriend, maybe, instead of singing your victory song for getting under my panties?" Claire whined, gazing up at him.

Ryan's lips stretched into a smile, and then into a laughter. "Seems like you were listening to my speech so intently, huh?" he said amused, his arms hugging Claire from behind.

"Don't be cocky, Ryan!" She broke free from his embrace. "Everyone else heard the speech, so it wasn't that interesting."

"Well, I don't need to kiss their asses for them to open their wallets. The project itself is a goldmine, Claire, so they're probably fighting to pour their money as we're speaking," Ryan said, and meant all of it.

"So full of yourself." She rolled her eyes. "I need to shower. At least I shouldn't have this just-fucked-up look when I go down."

Ryan chuckled. "I think your just-fucked-up look suits you best. In fact, I feel like going another round with you."

"Asshole!" Claire spat.

Ryan was suddenly serious, his gaze intense toward her, looking thoughtful. "I've imagined fucking you so many times since you kissed me that night. You can't blame me for that, can you?" he asked simply, a playful twinkle in his eyes.

"So that's what I am to you? A sex object?" Claire thought aloud, displeased. Madly, she lunged towards him and muttered to his face, "Screw you, bastard!"

"I never thought of you that way, Claire. Don't put your words into my mouth." Ryan said, his tone accused and wounded.

"Just go away, Ryan. It doesn't matter what I or you think about the matter." She headed to the bathroom.

"Oh God," Ryan breathed heavily, running a hand through his hair. "Claire—"

"This night is over. You can go ahead and pop the champagne for hitting another climax with the dumb girl," Claire said, and disappeared into a shower room.

When she came out, some minutes later, Ryan was gone. She felt relieved and empty at the same time. She slipped into her dress and heels, before applying some powder and lipstick. She was good to go when she checked herself in the mirror.

The ride in the eleven was lonely. She smiled at the memory of Ryan and his games right inside this cabin. *Smiling?* Why the hell was she smiling at this stupidity? She chastised herself and pretended this evening didn't happen.

At the lobby the doors parted and she stepped out of the elevator. However, much to her horror, she pumped into Doris. Her heart skipped a beat. She felt startled but not guilty. No, that was the last feeling she was ready to succumb to, despite knowing she was wrong.

"Hey, Claire. Enjoying the party?" Doris asked with a big smile.

"Um, yeah it's cool," Claire replied, discomfort lacing her voice. She just slept with her boyfriend, dammit! "Well, I'll get back to it. Good evening." She smiled tightly at Doris.

"Good evening," Doris replied.

*Walk head high. What's done is done.* Claire did as her thoughts led her, ignoring Doris' gaze that was definitely stalking her. The brunette was clearly putting her on the tabs. She could feel the hypocrisy in *her* voice.

"Oh, you're back. And you look great. Mind telling me where you have been in the middle of the party?" Gena snarled as soon as Claire had grabbed a seat in silence.

Luckily, Gena was alone at the table.

"Nowhere, I was just getting some air," Claire replied, lying flatly. "I think I'm done with this party and I need to be in bed." She plucked champagne flutes from the passing waiter.

"Really? You were outside?" Gena asked, but Bruno appeared and her inquiries were cut short.

"Hey, beautiful," he uttered. "Playing hide and seek? Where have you been?" he asked, leaning over Claire's shoulder from the back of her seat.

Gena raised a knowing eyebrow at that. She wasn't easy to fool, especially after noticing that her best friend wasn't the only one gone.

Something was fishy.

Ryan was also gone, and around the same time. One plus one makes two, and she knew the two were together somewhere.

"I went out for some air, but I hope I didn't miss much." Claire forced a smile and stuck with the same story.

"Not really," Bruno replied, smiling back gently. "Let me just steal her for a while—do you mind?" He suddenly directed the request to Gena.

"Not at all," Gena returned with a big smile as Harry reappeared again with drinks. "Take your time," she told Claire in a whisper

Bruno led Claire towards the table where Mr. Stevens was seated. As always, the old man was extremely delighted to have her audience. He smiled brightly upon seeing Claire, and she saw him.

"I'm so happy you could make it, Claire, and you look very beautiful," said Mr. Stevens, and to Claire's horror, Ryan was seated just across from her.

Why was heaven so busy putting this man on her path whenever she'd go?

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Stevens." She smiled, trying to ignore the distraction. "Congratulations for this big day! I'm positive it means a lot to you."

"Oh thank you, my child. I'm just an old man now who takes pleasure in seeing my two grandsons continuing my legacy," Mr. Stevens remarked, and the two boys exchanged looks upon the comment.

They talked for a while, during which Claire and Ryan kept interacting subtly in a strange manner, as though they had a lot to throw at each other but they had no time and means to do it. She couldn't wait to leave the table just to stop his mocking eyes from eating her alive.

When someone came to speak with the old man, Claire used the opportunity to slip away by wishing them well for the rest of the night. She kindly thanked Bruno for the invitation, and asked Gena to leave, which the latter unwillingly obliged.

Harry offered to give them a ride. It seemed to have worked magic, the moment shared with Gena upon Claire's absence. They rode in silence, however; at least Claire did. As for Gena, she was busy making small talk.

"So, you also work as a private attorney even though you work for SK?" Gena asked, seemingly impressed by his being a lawyer.

"Yes, Gena. So, if you need a lawyer, just give me a call," Harry replied, teasing her. "Oh, but I have to warn you—I'm very expensive."

"Oh, don't you worry, I'll probably need a lawyer soon," said Gena, making Claire shake her head to the sides.

"You're so funny." He smiled and his dimples turned alight.

"Pleasure," Gena uttered.

Harry's car pulled over at Gena's apartment several minutes later.

"Thanks, Harry," Claire muttered as she exited.

"Anytime," Harry answered with a big smile, one reason to understand Gena's constant blushing this evening.

The Asian was definitely arrested by this charming black law enforcer. Claire smiled as she left them alone. She headed straight inside and whipped her clothes unceremoniously. The bed was the only thing she needed right now so that everything would go back to normal when the daylight oozed.

The following morning she woke up late from the fatigue. Luckily it was Sunday and she had no plan for the day. A sleazy breakfast of cereal and milk was the only thing available. Gena was grinning stupidly over the texts and *she* was busy with her own thoughts to pay any attention to the Asian.

"Hey? Having a silent oath? You're not even eating." Gena abandoned her phone and fixed her attention towards Claire.

"I had sex with Ryan," Claire muttered out of the blue, causing Gena to choke on her cereal as she had just taken a spoonful. "Right during the party," she added, glancing up at her.

"You did what? Oh my God! I knew something was up but I never imagined it could be this extreme." Gena tossed the food aside, enticed.

Claire let out a short sigh. "I don't know how to explain," she uttered.

"From the start, maybe?" Gena urged.

Claire chuckled lightly. "Well, I just ended up in his hotel room somehow, with him. We were arguing about stuff. And during the arguments we just . . . We just did it. We had sex." She bit her bottom lip coyly.

"Okay," Gena uttered. "How was it? Tell me! Tell me how the *sex* was, tell me!" she cried.

She was ever-curious.

"It was great?" Claire flushed at the memory of Ryan's control over her body, all flips and twirls . . . Boy, his kisses and touches. She felt the heat. "No, it's the best I've ever had." She eyed Gena, who was practically jumping with excitement.



"Wow! I mean wow!" Gena snapped gleefully. "And, what else?"

Claire shrugged her slender shoulders. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Gena pouted.

"I'm not sure." Claire laughed at the reaction given. "What else other than the fact that I fucked someone else's man, and I'm officially a home wrecker."

"Oh come on, Claire!" Gena argued. "It's not like they're married or something, right? Anyone could notice how Ryan kept staring at you as though you're the only woman in the ballroom."

"Oh please!" Claire rolled her eyes.

"I'm serious, Claire. I don't think you should feel bad about it," Gena insisted. "Like you said, it just happened." She reclaimed her bowl of cereal.

"I'm just glad you're not judging me, best friend," said Claire with a weak smile. "That's the last thing I'd want to hear after what happened last night." She reclined back in her seat, exhausted.

"Why would I judge you? I'm happy that you're finally out of your shell." Gena was excited actually, her grin bigger.

"I guess." Claire sighed. "And you? What's going on with the hot chocolate? I know you have been texting with him all morning."

It was Gena's turn on the hot seat, and she beamed like a flashlight.

"Oh girl, Harry is awesome!" She grinned dreamily, flushing crimson all over her face.

"Really now? What have I missed? Are you in love already?" Claire sat straight, a smile curved in her lips.

"Yeah, I think I like him, but I'm still getting to know him. I honestly don't have much to tell as we only met yesterday," Gena answered matter-of-factly.

"You? Getting to know someone? That's a first." Claire giggled.

"Hey, he is an interesting one," Gena argued. "I should try to act decent from now on. Besides, he's single, so at least I don't have to put up with the other woman drama."

"Oh thank you very much for the helpful reminder!" Claire snorted.

"Oops! That came out wrong. My bad!" Gena said teasingly, meaning so less of it.

## FORTEEN

The new project was coming handy, having everyone at their toes as it seemed to be a very important client. Claire was inside her Superior's office, handing over the presentation materials.

"I included the previous designs, as Lydia suggested," she told him without any enthusiasm. Handling paperwork was a bummer for her.

"This is good, Levy," said Nathan—a slender man, tall with low-cut hair. He was smiling, impressed. "But I have some bad news for you." His face suddenly turned mirthless.

Claire frowned. "What news? Don't tell me you're not taking me with you."

He'd promised to let her participate this time. What a fool she was to believe him!

"That's exactly it," he replied. "Someone else is taking this project, so you won't need to assist me anymore. Sorry, Levy."

"No, you can't be serious, Nathan," Claire snorted. "I worked my ass off for this presentation, just so I can finally get out of this boring office and do something real. Why are you doing this to me?"

Nathan was sitting at the edge of his office table. "Relax, Claire, it wasn't my decision to make," he said gently.

"Yeah, right." Claire nearly rolled her eyes. Nathan chuckled. "I knew it." She couldn't mask the disappointment.

"But on the bright side, you've been assigned to a bigger project." Nathan beamed.

"Really? What project?" Claire asked skeptically.

"I'm getting there," Nathan said while dropping off the table. "Normally we don't take newbies in these kinds of projects, but I think you've been exceptionally asked to be included in the preliminary planning." He strode towards his chair.

Claire scowled, bemused. "Okay, Nathan, now you're leaving me behind." She took a seat, as he did. "What's the project and who's the client?" she urged.

"The remodeling project of Maryrose street," he answered.

*Maryrose street?* The name did ring the bell. Where had she heard it again?

"Wait. Is it a project from SK group?" Claire asked with a surprised look.

"Exactly. But how do you know that? I just found out this morning myself," Nathan inquired, and Claire shrugged innocently.

*Boy, you don't want to know.* She thought.

"Well, it's not important, Nathan," she replied vaguely. "Just tell me more about the project, and who included me." She sat straight.

Nathan woke his computer. "I'm not exactly sure, but it was a direct order from above," he answered. "But maybe you can tell me, Levy." He glanced at Claire.

"Tell you what?" She was wary.

"Who has your back?" Nathan asked teasingly. He was very friendly, and to everyone.

*Ryan Stevens?* Claire questioned herself inwardly, and it was conclusive as to no one else came to mind.

"You're talking nonsense." She rose up her feet, evasively. "So, who do I ask about the details? It's obvious you won't be my teammate, right?"

"No, no, no, you're stuck with me again, I'm afraid. And just so you know, you'll only be an observer," Nathan said.

"I knew it was too good to be true," Claire murmured under her breath

Nathan laughed softly. "As you already know, SK group is the major shareholder of Starlight, which means only the best and experienced designers will work on this project."

"Wait, what? Starlight is a part of SK?" Claire was shocked.

"Oh, that wasn't necessary for you to know. It only slipped. Just get ready, tomorrow you and I will go to SK to do the presentation before we visit the site," Nathan stated.

"Me, too?" Claire's eyes widened.

"Yes. Nine o'clock," Nathan said.

What kind of game was Ryan playing now? Claire wondered. And he's technically her boss? Huh, what a joke! She laughed to herself as she exited Nathan's office.

The next day Claire woke up quite early and started rummaging through her closet in search for a perfect outfit to wear. She was always careful about her dressing, but for some reason, she wanted to look her best this morning.

After some time she decided to wear a white chiffon blouse, and a black umbrella skirt; professional and elegant. An hour passed and she was ready. Hurriedly, she snatched a handbag and some documents she'd been working on last night.

Outside she found Jorge climbing into his car and he kindly offered to give her a ride. She obliged without fretting; by now she and Jorge were really warming up to one another, so it wasn't as hard as before.

"Why don't you just use one of the cars? You always ride a cab," asked Jorge as they left the house.

"I don't know. Maybe I love the fact that I get time to relax while someone else drives, and I think my license has expired," she muttered truthfully.

"Well, I think having a car is a necessity," Jorge remarked, "especially now that you're working." He glanced at her, and she only smiled.

Between speaking of their work and a little bit of a favor Claire had to ask on behalf of Gena, the two found themselves into a conversation somehow. At last they arrived at Starlight where she got out of his car.

"Thanks, Jorge," she whispered.

"Don't mention. Have a nice day," he returned with a small smile.

Once in the office Claire headed immediately to see Nathan for their upcoming appointment at SK headquarters. The whole thing kept driving her nuts, but she knew she had to be brave and do her job.

Ryan or not, her professional life was all that mattered right now.

"Oh you look great, Levy." Nathan flushed upon seeing her approaching his office.

"Thanks, Nathan. I hope there's no last minute change," Claire teased, but meaning it.

He chuckled. "Not at all, ma'am, relax. We're leaving soon, and just a reminder, you're only going to observe." He was packing some files into the cabinet.

"I know, Nathan, you don't have to rub it to my face." Claire rolled her eyes.

By ten in the morning the two were already at SK headquarters, a long silver-grey skyscraper engraved with the bold SK sign. They approached the reception desk to confirm their appointment, which was only several minutes due.

"We're from Starlight," said Nathan to a pretty receptionist lady.

Claire was wandering her eyes around, admiring the huge and fancy lobby. A few busy figures with employee's badges kept walking in a hurry. The receptionist made a call and after a while she flashed a smile.

"Go ahead to the 24th floor, there's a hall on the left and you'll find a conference room," she politely told them, and Nathan thanked her with his best smile.

Inside the elevator is where Claire's heart began pounding heavily against her chest. Was she nervous? She had no idea on how this morning was going to end, in case Ryan was really behind her involvement in the project.

She braced the straps of her red handbag as though her life depended on it, while checking her black platforms that started to sting her feet—quite unusual. Perhaps from the anxiety . . . or not? She found herself blowing out some air.

"You okay, Levy?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah, I'm good," she answered.

Finally the elevator doors split open and revealed a very quiet floor with hallways on either side. They took a left one and immediately reached the large conference room that seemed totally unoccupied.

After a few minutes someone unexpected approached. It was Doris, and Claire couldn't contain the shock. What was she doing here? Was she working for Ryan as well? A million questions surged into Claire's brain.

"Sorry, did you wait long?" Doris asked while putting her things on a large table that contained bottles of drinking water on each seat.

"Not at all," Nathan replied, and she walked over towards him.

"Hi, I'm Doris Marcos. The Director of Public Relations." She shook Nathan's hand.

"Nathan Panther," he replied.

"Pleasure," she replied and then turned towards Claire. "I didn't know you work at Starlight. What a coincidence, huh?" she said, and there was a little bit of sarcasm in the sound of her final remark.

Claire couldn't care less. She was only surprised. So he worked with his girlfriend in the same office? It was a lot to take it in but she stayed poised.

"I know, right?" She forged a smile as her eyes met Doris'.

Recalling that she had slept with her boyfriend made her feel uncomfortable around—like a conscious hypocrite would.

"Need some coffee or tea?" Doris offered, but none of the two obliged.

The glass door swung open again. Ryan, Harry, and other three men entered the room. Claire's heart skipped a beat when she saw *him*. Harry looked a bit surprised to see her. He smiled subtly. As for Ryan, he was indifferent. He took a seat across from her, his eyes gleaming.

The presentation started upon Ryan's instructions. He didn't bother with introductions. Nathan began explaining the slides on the projector, during which Ryan's eyes were almost fixed on Claire, and she returned with a glare. He was distracting her, damn it! Always a jerk.

By the time Nathan was done with the presentation, everyone was nodding in agreement while exchanging murmurs. Everyone except Ryan who stared at the projector with an unimpressed look. He seemed to be thinking, and Claire couldn't leave his eyes.

"I don't like it," he said crisply.

All eyes in the room turned on him, surprised.

"Excuse me?" Nathan prompted.

"I thought it was great," said Doris, looking at Ryan. "I like the designs. They are trendy," she added.

"It's mundane. Not what I envisioned," Ryan said while tapping the table with his perfect fingers.

"What?" Doris huffed a laugh.

Why wasn't she surprised? Claire shifted her eyes towards the last slide on the projector. Begrudgingly, she couldn't disagree with Ryan despite his obtuseness.

"It's trendy, but not exactly what I would define fancy," Ryan said as he sat straight, his gaze condescending.

Swallowing hard, Nathan looked a bit taken aback, and Claire felt the need to intervene.

"What is it that you don't like, Mr. Stevens? You wanted the luxurious, modern, and fancy designs, and that's exactly what was prepared." She stood up, suddenly confident, and took small steps around the table.

"Is it?" Ryan tagged, serious in manners, but Claire wasn't going to let him intimidate her.



"Maybe not. We all have different perceptions after all." She decided to dance his tune while advancing to his vicinity quite nonchalantly. "So tell us, what is it that you have envisioned for the interiors of your grand condominiums?" She faced him.

Ryan smirked, amusement evident on his face. He was having fun.

"What does fancy mean to you, Ms. Levy? Or better yet, what do you term as fancy to your eyes?" he asked her with a smile while challenging her gaze.

There was a stiff tension in the room, and the rest of the others had no idea that it was beyond what met the eyes—but the two knew it so well.

"To me it means taste, uniqueness, and timeliness," Claire sternly answered, making Ryan lift an amused eyebrow. "Something I can easily consider paying a fortune for, not because I can, but rather because it completes me, and also compliments my taste," she added, without breaking eye contact.

"Well said, Ms. Levy." Ryan smiled sinisterly. "Now tell me, as a designer yourself, and not as an employee of Starlight, are you okay with the designs you've just suggested to us? Can you actually advise me to go on with it?"

Jerk! Claire cursed inwardly.

She knew almost perfectly where Ryan's concerns lied, despite the odds. She probably had the same thoughts as his, from the beginning of the presentation to the end.

However, she couldn't stop feeling like he was challenging her on purpose.

With a sigh, and a little thinking, Claire stared at the projector and its contents displayed, and then at Nathan who nodded at her to say whatever she had in her mind.

"Yes, I would advise you to go on," Claire said calmly. Her remark raised a few murmurs, and an indifferent look from Ryan, who eyed her fixedly. "But, I have a suggestion regarding what you may probably want." She smirked at him.

"Go ahead," Ryan affirmed.

Claire took a deep breath, wearing a professional look. "I'm sure what you've envisioned is something luxurious but capable of fitting everyone's taste, am I correct?" she asked while taking the remote from Nathan.

"Could be." Ryan shrugged, and squared his shoulder to sit more attentively as she rewind some slides.

"Just because it's expensive, doesn't mean everyone with money will buy, unless it fits their taste. In the end, fashion and style are two different things." Claire's sole focus was on Ryan, even though she couldn't stay at one place as she explained.

Ryan looked immersed, eyes gleaming and tentative on her.

"A young businessman may want to live in a modernly furnished penthouse, but a retired politician may probably want a classic mansion somewhere remote. That doesn't mean one lacks taste and another has plenty—it's only a matter of preference." Claire continued. "So then, we shouldn't focus on trends or anything of the sort, but rather on taste."

"What?" Doris muttered, glaring crossly at Claire.

Claire didn't fret, especially with Ryan's nod supporting her statement.

"Some rich people like classic houses, some modern, some prefer color splash, some prefer light or plain. So, why don't we incorporate them all?" Claire asked.

"How so?" Doris questioned, seemingly annoyed.

"Like a five-star hotel with different types of suites, it's possible to make homes feel like a slice of heaven for everyone." Claire continued talking while showing examples on the already-made designs on the slides, with the help of Nathan at times.

"And?" Ryan eyed her like a challenge, and she knew his intentions well enough.

She kept calm.

"The bottom line is, we can make designs based on what people want, and not from how expensive you want them to look," she said articulately.

"And what about class? Isn't that the whole point?" Doris asked, and what sounded like a mock. "In the end we want to be exclusive! We're SK, Ms. Levy. We provide the best." She was stern.

Claire smiled. "And of course without degrading class, Ms. Marcos."

"Director," Doris snapped. "Director Marcos."

*Whatever, bitch!*

"Sure, Director Marcos," Claire retorted, deadpan. "So are you agreeing with us, Mr. Stevens? In the end you're the one with the *vision*," she asked Ryan with sarcasm.

"Fine," Ryan told her, and she almost couldn't believe her ears. "We'll meet next time, when you have the new designs."

"Oh, sure." Claire smiled, relieved.

"I expect nothing less, Panther," Ryan told Nathan while extending his hand towards him.

"Yes, Mr. Stevens," Nathan said.

"Ms. Levy, I'm looking forward to it." Ryan's eyes were back to Claire, teasing her.

It was the end of the first round. Claire had clearly pissed Doris considering the way she walked past her during the farewells. Well, she wasn't expecting the Director to like her, was she? Again, Claire didn't care. While inside the elevator she stared at her boss, guilty.

"I'm sorry, Nathan, I know you told me to keep it low but—"

"Hey, what are you saying? You saved my ass out there," he replied, laughing. "I heard Ryan Stevens is no joke, but I never thought he's this intimidating. I nearly pissed in my pants."

They both laughed at that.

"So, what are you guys going to do? I might've ruined your work because of my foul mouth," Claire stated remorsefully.

"We'll have to revise the designs, no way out. Besides, we weren't expecting a go-ahead right away, everyone knows how demanding Ryan is," Nathan said.

On that notion Claire had nothing to argue. She'd already known Ryan well enough to understand this fact. They finally reached the lobby, and while heading out, her phone buzzed. She frowned at the sight of the caller's ID.

"What is it, sir?" she asked into the phone, and Nathan halted.

"I'm not your sir." Ryan's voice shot from the phone. "Don't go anywhere, wait for me."

"I have to go back to the office," Claire rebuked. "And if this isn't about work, then please stop wasting my—" She stopped her speech when she saw the approaching guy from the EXECUTIVE ONLY elevator.

"There you are," Ryan said, and she could clearly see his impudent smile.

"You—" She wanted to say something, but he'd already hung up.

Exasperated, Claire witnessed Ryan marching over. He moved boldly, surrounded with his authoritative aura that evidently proved him the boss among everyone else. He stopped right before Nathan, and eyed Claire momentarily.

"You can go ahead, Mr. Panther," he told Nathan. "I have somewhere to go with Ms. Levy."

"Oh, okay," Nathan replied with zero idea of what's going on.

What the fuck! Claire blushed, the highest degree of embarrassment kind of blush. This man was ruining her.

She glared at him upon Nathan's departure. "Seriously, how—"

"Not here, Claire," Ryan uttered softly. "Come on, let's go." He held her hand, but she pulled off savagely.

"Stop it, Ryan! I'm not going anywhere with you. Who do you think you are to order me around, huh?" she snapped, oblivious of the fact there were several SK employees at the lobby, who were currently taking notice of whatever their boss was doing.

Ryan didn't give a damn about them or anyone on the matter.

"Oh, do you prefer I drag you by force or carry you like a sack of rice?" he asked.  
"Because I can carry you with pleasure." He grinned.

Looking around the place, and all the eyes fixed on them, Claire breathed out heavily. Ryan's cynic smile was intact, and it was infuriating. What was he up to? It was another question when Claire finally relented to his demand.

## FIFTEEN

"Get in," Ryan ordered quietly, holding the car door open.

"And if I don't?" Claire retorted, glaring menacingly at him.

He smirked. "If you don't I'll kidnap you. And I'm not bluffing," he replied, his voice casual yet demanding.

"Oh? I'd love to see you try," Claire uttered, challenging him.

Ryan broke into giggles, certainly finding her amusing. "Claire, I'm not in the mood to play with you in the parking lot. Just get in the car and let's talk."

"We have nothing to talk about, though, do we?" Claire insisted, sounding serious.

Ryan leaned toward her, and in response she reclined back onto the car. "Just get inside the car, Claire. Unless you want me to shut your smart mouth right here in the daylight. Is that what you want?" he whispered into her ear, ignoring whoever was passing by.

Claire's breath hitched at the warmth of his breath in her ear. It was arousing and she wasn't ready to succumb to it.

"You're such a fuckwit!" she muttered, panting softly.

"A fuck what?" Pulling back, Ryan began laughing delightedly. "Oh, Claire." He was indeed entertained.

"I have to go back to work, Ryan. Unlike you, I have important things to do." Claire tried to move but he stopped her, his hand gripping hers. "Ryan—"

"You're not going back. Not today." He opened the door and he was no longer kidding. "Please get inside, Claire. Let's not argue because I'll never let you win."

"But I have to—"

"Oh, come on!" Deftly, Ryan sent her inside the car and the door shut heavily afterwards. "That will do," he uttered with a smile.

"Ryan!" Claire knocked on the window. "Open the door, you jerk!" Her eyes trailed him as he rushed towards the driver and slid in. "Ryan—"

"One hour," Ryan interrupted her, shutting his eyes as though he's overwhelmed with something. "Just one hour and I'll drive you back to wherever you want to go." He now glanced at her.

One hour? Claire huffed. What for?

"And why should I comply with your demand, huh? And where are you taking me in that one hour?" she snarled.

"You'll soon find out," Ryan answered gently and pulled the seatbelt.

"Fuck you! You're crazy in the head, that's what you are!" Claire said sternly.

Ryan paid no attention to her ranting, other than smiling. Before starting the car, he fished his cellphone from the suit jacket and made a call.

"Yes, it's me," he said bossily. "Claire Levy won't return to work today. I need her to do something important." It didn't take long until the call ended.

"What do you think you are doing? Are you crazy? What do you mean I'm not going back to work and that you need me? What for?" Claire whined, her eyes surprised and raw.

"Crazy again?" Ryan mocked, smiling wickedly. "I thought you already had an answer for my mental state by now. Just shut up, Claire, it will do you good." He ignited the engine.

"You're sick!" Claire grunted. "So very sick!"

"Yeah, seatbelt!" Ryan said.

"What?"

"Put on the damn seatbelt!" he repeated.

"Fucker!" With a heavy frustrated sigh, Claire complied.

They rode in that style until they arrived at their destination. The car entered into an underground parking lot of a gigantic building in a fancy neighborhood.

"Now what? Where are you taking me?" Claire asked as Ryan unlocked the doors.

"Just follow me," he said, making an exit.

"Can't you fucking tell me with words?" Claire demanded, glaring at him.

"I can't believe you're starting this again." Ignoring her useless resistance, Ryan pulled her out of the car.

Outside, he led her towards the private elevator that was somehow hidden. Claire didn't question despite frowning like a child. The door slid open and they both entered.

"Fine, you can kill me here and no one will know," Claire muttered.

Ryan couldn't contain his laughter. "You're so stubborn, I swear," he breathed while entering the passcode for the elevator to start.

Claire didn't respond. Crossing her arms on the chest, she waited impatiently until the elevator ascended up to the foyer of an exquisite penthouse. She sauntered in, her eyes darted outside through the wide ceiling-tall window.

She felt like she was in a tower, the blue sea streaming from a distance. Resuming her gaze back, she realized how big the place was. Quite modern and posh, furnished in silver-grey and white. It was luxurious and so Ryan-like, without a doubt.

Feigning indifference, Claire faced him. "And may I know what this place is?" she asked in a serious tone of voice.

"My home," Ryan answered while shrugging out of his jacket, followed by the neck tie, and threw them on the plush, white L-shaped couch.



"Your bachelor pad, you mean? I'm sure it's where you bring all your bimbos for a good fuck!" Claire snorted, rolling her eyes.

"What?" Ryan laughed heartily. "A good fuck?"

"Yes, I'll give you that, Ryan. You're good in that department. But do you want me to be a plus one? You already had me once, aren't you satisfied?"

"My goodness!" Ryan sighed. "For starters, Claire, I don't have a bachelor pad. This is where I sleep every night, and you can see every trace of me if you look carefully. Would you like a house tour?" He was serious.

"Ugh!" she grunted, dropping heavily on the couch.

"And second," said Ryan while unbuttoning his utterly white shirt. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of you, and that was never a one-night-stand for me."

"Yeah, right." Claire reclined back, rolling her eyes.

As if she believed the jerk.

Ryan smiled. "You're so pretty when you sulk. Want something to drink?" He was now heading towards the large open kitchen unraveled after the living room.

Nothing was mundane in this house.

"No. What if you drug me?" Claire said loudly. "Just tell me why you brought me to *your* home, as you claim, while I should be working like every other normal person out there." She couldn't stop appreciating the interior design of the place.

The paint job was splendid, the furniture quite on point, the arrangement simple yet elegant, it was just amazing. She loved it.

Ryan returned with a bottle of water in hand. He opened and gulped a half of it, seating himself down while watching her with interest.

"What?" She snorted.

"Why are you ignoring me?" Ryan asked. I've called you twice this weekend and you deliberately chose to ignore all of my calls, and even my texts."

"Oh, you mean your two missed calls and one message?" Claire replied sarcastically, and Ryan squinted his eyes. "You must have really tried your best to reach me with those sleazy attempts of yours, huh?"

"What do you mean?" Ryan huffed, sitting more comfortably.

"I mean three trials and you're here complaining?" Claire muttered under her breath, and he raised an amused eyebrow.

"So you think it wasn't enough? Do you prefer I called you nonstop and sent you a bundle of texts instead?" He smiled boyishly.

Claire got up, flustered. "No, I never said that," she replied stoutly.

"Oh, you didn't?" Ryan gazed up at her, grinning.

"Yes, I'm only saying that you could have—" She halted. "Wait, you're only trying to evade the main issue here, aren't you?" Her voice was accusing.

"Meaning?" Ryan was enjoying the show.

"Why are we even discussing this?" Claire demanded, stunned.

"Because you want to?" Ryan answered with a sweet smile, folding his arms across the chest.

"Of course not! Ryan, just tell me what's all this about so that we can get it over with. Because I'm not in the mood to play your games," Claire told him strictly.

"Nothing much, I just wanted to spend time with you."

"Huh?"

"Because I missed you," he said truthfully, his voice low and gentle.

A small silence stretched between them as they both eyed one another.

"Are you even listening to yourself?" Claire uttered, unable to fathom anything he was trying to pull. "Who do you think I am really? A slut with no dignity? A hooker you can have whenever you feel bored?"

"None of that," Ryan prompted coolly.

"Oh, I know." Claire laughed, biting her bottom lip. "A poor Cinderella who is mistreated by her evil stepmom, and one day she finds a hiding shelter in the arms of the Prince charming, is that it?"

Ryan's lips twisted at her final remark, displeased. "I haven't thought of you as any of that, Claire," he said softly.

He had a girlfriend. A reminder made Claire weak despite the strange sensation she'd entertain whenever she was alone with him.

"Please, Ryan, let me go," she begged softly.

"Claire," Ryan uttered, and that cynic air was all gone. "The truth is—"

"Let's finish the project peacefully and go to where we truly belong," Claire said. "Yes, I admit that you've managed to shake me up for a moment, and I forgot my place, my principles, and even my dignity. But you know what? That's as far as I'm willing to go, Ryan. It's difficult resisting you, that I admit, but don't make this even harder for me, please."

She wasn't going to win against him, Claire knew this for a fact. But she also knew he was capable of doing that for her. If he stopped seeing her, everything would be back to normal.

"Listen, Claire," said Ryan in a soft voice. He stood up so that they're closer. "I'm not playing—"

"I'm done with this!" Claire snapped. "I can't afford to be the other woman, and especially the evil one." She furiously grabbed her handbag and headed to the exit.

"So this is all about Doris?" Ryan snapped back, and she stared back at him, wondering what was really the matter with him.

"Yeah, it's all about her," she retorted. "So can I go now?" Her voice was harsher.

"Are you feeling guilty or something?" Ryan asked.

Was he serious? Claire let out a smirk and bit her lip savagely.

She'd started to think he was really out of his mind. Was it possible that she was dealing with a mental patient? Asylum mental? She asked herself inwardly, but couldn't bring herself to believe he was in need of a shrink.

"Do you even love her? You girlfriend?" Claire asked.

"Does it matter?" Ryan queried.

"It was a stupid question, wasn't it?" Claire laughed sinisterly. "Because I don't think people like you even know what love is, let alone how to love someone."

A heavy silence settled as Ryan's jaw tightened. He suddenly looked different, pained even, but none of his reactions impressed Claire. He slowly began undoing his shoes, and then his socks, wordless. He seemed thoughtful.

What was he thinking of? Claire wondered.

"Let's say you're right." Ryan sighed, his eyes dark. "But what if Doris wasn't my girlfriend? Would you have spared me the drama?" He stood up.

"The drama? You think this is a drama?" Unexpected pain shot in Claire's heart.

"Yes," Ryan replied crisply while marching closer, barefoot. "Women are so good in thinking they know what love is, but in reality, you're the first creatures who introduced betrayal in the world. In the name of love." He was disdainful.

"You're fucked up!" Claire gritted her teeth. "You bastard!" She began walking towards the exit.

"You haven't answered my question!" Ryan barked. "Would things be different if she weren't my girlfriend?"

Claire stopped, clenching her fists hard. Taking a deep breath, she slowly whirled back. "If I say yes, what will you do? Will you leave her for me?" she asked.

Ryan was silent, inexplicably silent, totally unable to tell what he was thinking.

"Claire . . ." He ran his palms on his face, perplexity laced in his voice.

"See? You can't even answer that," Claire muttered. "Just let me go, Ryan. And forget about me as I will you."

"Do you want me to leave her?" Ryan asked.

"Can you?" she retorted.

"Do you? Do you want me to do it, Claire?" He insisted.

Was that what she wanted? Another woman to be abandoned for her sake? Claire thought.

"No! Just do nothing, you asshole!" she barked to his face and reached for the door that couldn't open as she wanted it to.

"You won't be able to get out of here, unless I let you," Ryan said right behind her.

"Open the door, Ryan." She briskly turned around to confront him—only to bump into his chest.

"You'll never escape me no matter how hard you try, because you've walked into a place you shouldn't have the moment you kissed me that night," Ryan whispered, placing his forehead against hers, hauling her waist.

"Don't try any funny business with me, Ryan." Claire jerked away. "Open the damn door!"

"And what will you do if I don't? Tell me, what will you do?" he whispered into her ear, teasing her.

"Fuck, Ryan, open the door!" Claire snapped. "Let me—" Ryan's lips were on hers, shutting her up with a tight hold of her body, possessively as always. "Ry— She kissed him back.

The kiss was strong, wild, and she couldn't contain the urge it ignited in her. She slowly, and gradually, yielded to Ryan's sweet torture and sensual assault. Their lips mingled, tongue to tongue. God, he was a damn kisser!

"Can't you—" Ryan spoke amidst the kiss. "Just be as quiet—" he added. "Like this?" He lifted her briskly, and she encircled her legs about around his waist, lost in his kiss.

Fuck, why was she so weak over him? Claire cursed inwardly as he carried her back to the living room.

"I hate you, Ryan. You're the fucking beast and I shouldn't be here." She wrapped her arms around his neck, and continued having the taste of his lips as he heavily dropped her on the couch.

"I love being the beast," Ryan ripped off her blouse, making the buttons splatter helplessly. "And you don't need to love me, Claire, just don't walk away."

"Ryan, why?" she snapped.

"Because I can," he said, his eyes filled with desire to possess her as he stared at her perfect breasts hiding beneath the white bralette. "Jesus, you're going to kill me!" He peeled off his own shirt that was already unbuttoned.

No, he was going to be the death of her. Claire thought, staring at the sculpted abs of his manly torso that seemed to be accustomed into weight lifting and frequent sit-ups.

"Kiss me," she uttered, and Ryan's hungry mouth was once again on hers, taking her impatiently.

With her hips swaying beneath his weight, Claire felt his length growing. His lustful eyes kept mocking her while kissing and teasing every sensitive part of her body, without undressing. Well, except her ripped-blouse that was lying helplessly on the rug.

"Oh fuck it, Claire!" Ryan grunted. "You drive me nuts." He breathed out, feeling her fingers caressing his back restlessly, kissing his neck, his ears, her lips so demanding.

"You called for it," Claire said, and she was having the best moment of her sexual diary, once again.

She suddenly flipped him over, surprising him, and unbuckled his belt in a swift. She kissed his pecks, and began grinding on top of him, turning his predatory libido awake. Smiling, she tugged the tight waistband of his boxer and freed his length.

It was big, hard, and firm, and Claire's smile widened lustily. She wanted it all for herself. And man, he had it good. She leaned down to kiss his tight stomach, her hand stroking him softly and unhurriedly, feeling it throbbing.

"Oh, Claire," Ryan cried, shutting his eyes at the feel of her tongue on his skin. When he washed them open, her sight was mesmerizing. "Oh, I so want to fuck you in those heels." He was eyeing her pretty legs, caressing them.

"I still hate you," Claire muttered, raising up while tugging her massive hair to one side. Ryan stare was impatient, but soon began smiling when she shifted down, straddling him still, and then drew her head down.

"Jesus!" Ryan groaned, feeling her tongue touching the tip of his manhood, teasing him.

"Shut up," Claire ordered, fixing her hair once again to the side.

"Yes, ma'am!" Ryan chuckled, his hands unhooking the back of her bra so as to free the particulars. "Naughty little thing, huh? Oh damn it, Claire!" he moaned when her mouth filled him in with an up and down rhythm.

"Mmm." Claire hummed as she sucked him hard, deeper to her throat.

"Fuck!" Ryan flexed his hips, pushing up and down while holding her head to lead the movement, while clutching her hair at the same time. "Ah, you're going to make me . . . Oh God!" he groaned, her speed increasing, driving him nuts.

"Ahh!" Claire pulled out, gasping, chuckling at the face he was making.

"Oh, fuck, come here!" Ryan grabbed her and she laid on top of him, his arms gripping her waist and back. "You're so sexy." He pushed his tongue into her mouth,

kissing her deeply. His hands dropped down to her behind, tugging her skirt up, and then her pantie down, just enough to ease his naughty fingers.

"Ryan," Claire grunted into his mouth when he started rubbing her sex, smoothly entering her wet core.

"You're so ready." He grinned. "I want you on top. I want to see your face when you come with me." He made her sit on him, slowly until she fitted.

"Oh!" She bawled, then giggled at the fill of his erection inside her.

It was awesome.

"Good girl." Ryan smiled as he sat up with her, taking her with ease until he's seated in a normal seating posture and she was right on his lap, straddling him, her arms around his neck. "You're so perfect," he breathed, and she was slowly riding him.

"Ah," she murmured, her mouth agape, and he was on her chest, kissing her cleavage. Damn, he felt good. "Ryan," she cried, tossing her head back as he sucked her teats, hardening them in just a tiny tongue touch.

"Oh shit!" Ryan groaned, clutching her slender waist to support her move. She hugged him tighter, moving up and down, circular, over and over again. "Right there. Look what you're doing to me! Fuck!" He was going crazy, and she was speeding up, her moaning loud.

They kept kissing, deeply and harder each time, moving in synergy, holding onto each other tightly. How was she going to stop seeing him now? Claire wondered as her body yielded easily in his advancement. He was the end of her, she could feel it, and even more when she exploded in his arms.



## SIXTEEN

Claire's body was resting on Ryan's, both lying intimately on the couch. A huge flat screen was rambling on something none of the two paid attention at. Outside it was slightly raining, the water sliding smoothly on the glass of the great window.

It felt peaceful; Claire couldn't deny this feeling of such rarity in her heart.

"Why did you rip off my blouse? Now I don't have anything to wear," Claire lamented.

Ryan was smoothly toying with her hair, tangling and detangling the strands. "I was in a hurry to undress you, I guess," he answered flatly, grinning at her.

Claire sighed. "You're so crazy, Ryan." The back of her hand grazed his cleanly shaved face that made him look younger than his thirty-two years of age.

"You've said that over a million times already." Ryan's hands slid down to her waist, playfully reaching for the hem of his shirt.

It was the only thing Claire was wearing right now.

"Ryan!" She giggled as he squeezed her butt with both hands, knowing fully well that she had no pantie inside. "What are you doing?"

"Exactly what you love me doing, among other things." Ryan's face was relaxed, and his smile was so pure and genuine. "I love holding you in my arms," he muttered, his voice gentle, and kissed her lips slowly.

Claire could feel the butterflies in her stomach at the sight of him, even without paying attention to the profane things he was doing to her.

"Psycho! Well, I need to use the bathroom, where is it?" she asked while detaching herself from him, her emotions shifted from craziness to this foreign apprehension of something newly developed.

No, she wasn't falling for him. She shouldn't. By any means! She thought.

"Follow that door, and turn to your right," Ryan instructed while sitting up. "Or would you rather use the one in my bedroom?" he teased.

Not a bad idea. Claire chuckled.

"I'm not sure if I'm in the mood to be picky when my bladder is on the verge of bursting," she said. "Fuck, I'll pee in myself." She buttoned Ryan's shirt in a hurry.

"My shirt looks better on you. And those long legs are so sexy that I want you to just stay like that." Ryan rose up, his grin ever-playful.

"Keep wishing, Ryan!" Claire made her way to the living room.

"Always challenging." Ryan laughed heartily.

A few minutes later Claire was back from the bathroom, and to her surprise, Ryan was in the kitchen. He smiled haughtily at her as shock registered on her face.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to cook?" Claire laughed at the thought.

Ryan smirked. "Trying? I am cooking," He plucked a packet of pasta from the cabinet, with fresh vegetables lying on the countertop.

"Wow, you can cook?" Claire gasped, utterly surprised. She marched closer.

"I can do many things, Claire." Smiling, Ryan strode towards the sink and started washing the veggies.

"Okay, that's a lot to take in. I suck in the kitchen, and I don't know how to cook anything." She was now right behind him, her eyes on his bare back embellished with rippling muscles.

What a sexy jerk! It was impossible for her to not fall into the sphere of Ryan's awesomeness. And he could cook, too? Why was fate teasing her this much?

"Really?" Ryan looked at her archly. "You don't know how to cook?"

"At all," she confessed matter-of-factly.

"Well, at least you don't need to worry about meals because I can cook for you." Ryan winked.

Claire flushed. "And why would I even worry about that? It's not like I'm going to live with you someday." She rolled her eyes.

"Why not?" Ryan began chopping the veggies after putting the skillet on the glass stove.

His kitchen was a marvel: super clean, also in silver-grey and white, all the cabinets in a shiny marble.

"Because it's impossible?" Claire shifted onto the barstool so she could face him directly. "It'll never happen." She plucked a ruby apple from the fruit basket.

"Never say never, beautiful," Ryan said.

"Beautiful? That's Bruno's. You're being unoriginal, Mr. Stevens." She was having fun, and watching him chopping the onions with ease was so spectacular.

He poured them into the skillet, and the olive oil made its wonderful sound as he stirred them expertly. "What can I do? My little brother will have to forgive me for stealing what's his," he muttered, resuming the chopping of other ingredients.

Claire scowled. "What does that mean? Ryan, do you actually believe that you've stolen me from Bruno?"

"Maybe?" Ryan shrugged.

"That's ridiculous." She bit the apple, laughing.

"It's not. He's a man, too," Ryan remarked.

No, Bruno was not into her. The sweet guy was naturally nice to everyone. That's what Claire believed.

"He is, but not as psycho as someone I know," she replied. "And not every relationship has to involve romance; some are just pure friendship."

"Sure . . . If you say so." Ryan proceeded with the cooking.

"Of course, how can someone like you understand this?" Claire muttered under her breath.

Lunch was finally ready. It looked and smelled amazing, making Claire smile excitedly when Ryan placed a plate of pasta and red sauce. She wasted no time taking a fork and rolled a big one. She took the bite with pleasure.

"So, how is it?" Ryan asked, his face bright like a little boy waiting for his Mama's compliment.

"Um . . ." Claire hummed while chewing the pasta. Ryan creased an eyebrow, waiting. She swallowed, and broke into a big smile.

"Come on, tell me," Ryan urged, leaning over onto the table.

Claire grinned at him. "It's perfect! Man, you surely know your way in the kitchen. It's so yummy. . . just as it looks," she uttered, taking another roll.

"Of course, I'm the best." Ryan clasped his hands together with relief. "Some guava juice?"

"Yes, please. I love guava juice." She sounded childish. Smiling, Ryan poured her some from the box. "Modesty is never in your dictionary, is it?" she remarked.

"It's not," Ryan answered, and both shared a brief laugh. "Oh, by the way," he said while taking a seat, "you were awesome today during the presentation."

"Was I?" Claire blushed.

"Absolutely. It's like you took all the words from my mouth," Ryan said in awe. He started eating. "I mean, we had exactly the same idea, and I was so right to get you into the project."

Claire flushed. "I know, right? It's incredible how we had exactly the same thought about the designs and—" She paused. "Wait! So it was you?"

At last she grasped this little detail. Her involvement in the project was Ryan's doing.

"Me? What?" Ryan scowled.

She glared at him. "Oh I knew that it had to be you who pulled the strings!"

"Oh, that?" Ryan only shrugged, sipping his juice. "Well, you kept whining that you wanted to do some real job, so I did what I could. And believe me, it was the best decision," he said, playful.

"I wasn't whining! I was only venting!" Claire argued stoutly.

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"No, it's not!" she denied, and he laughed delightedly. "But well, not that I'm complaining that you did, I just hope you won't intervene with my work again."

"Oh really, now?" Ryan was hardly bothered.

"Yes, Ryan," Claire insisted. "I don't want anyone to think I'm getting special treatments or something, which is exactly what I got this time."

"Why would you care what other people think?" Ryan was unimpressed.

"I do care, because I want to be accredited fair and square, and not because I'm sleeping with my boss."

He rolled his eyes. "Sure. But I only did it because I wanted to give you an opportunity. And so far, you've proved to be worthy of it. I'm just waiting for our next meeting to finally see what you can do," he said.

Claire's eyes widened. To see what she could do? Did that mean she was taking part in the designing? She was tempted to ask but decided not to.

"I think I've got some explaining to do with Nathan," Claire muttered. "All thanks to your amazing indiscretion, Sir!" She changed the course of their conversation, and Ryan didn't seem to appreciate the turn.

"Don't call me Sir," he repeated his plea. "And why do you have to explain anything to Panther?" He frowned at the idea.

"Because he's my superior, and thanks to you he can now complete the puzzle on what's going on," Claire uttered and again their bickering started.

And neither of the two was ready to back out.

"I don't owe an explanation to anyone, Claire!" Ryan snapped blatantly. "And, what is this with Panther? Are you close to him now?"

"Yeah, I'm close to him." Claire snorted. "We are colleagues, we work together, and he's my boss." She slid the plate aside, annoyed.

Ryan frowned. "Finish your food," he demanded.

"Excuse me?" Claire prompted quickly.

"I said finish your food," he repeated, sternly. "I want to see that plate clean, Claire, and I'm not bluffing."

"Fuck! Why do you always treat me like a child, huh?" she snarled at him

"Because you're behaving like one, aren't you?" Ryan retorted, his eyes raw.

"I'm full! I've had my fill! Isn't that a reason enough?"

"Oh no, it's not! You're going to finish the food, and you're going to stop whining."

"Don't say I'm whining! I hate it!" Claire stood up stoutly.

"Then stop doing it! And sit down!"

"Are you my daddy or something?" She glowered.

"Oh, I can be one, Claire, trust me." Ryan smirked.

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck you, too, baby. Now sit down and finish your food. Some people are dying to have just a spoonful," he said and sounded earnest.

Tired of his tyranny, Claire decided to gobble the pasta as quickly as possible while looking sternly at him. He paid no attention to the angry look of her face; instead he stared intently at her as she kept eating like a marathon.

"I cleaned the plate, are you happy now, Hitler?" she snapped.

"Very happy." Ryan smiled, and before he could hear or add anything more, his cell phone buzzed.

"Maybe it's your precious girlfriend wondering where you are right now," Claire said, displeasure lacing her voice.

"You think?" Ryan mocked.

"Jerk!" she cursed.

"Yes, Harry, what is it?" Ryan spoke after picking up. "Are you sure about that?" He frowned, and Claire's face took a similar expression. "Alright, I'll be there soon." He rose up to his feet.

"What is it?" Claire asked urgently.

"I'm going back to the office," Ryan replied while gulping half of his juice.

"You're going? What about me?" She stood up.

"I won't take long," Ryan said hastily. "Stay here and I'll take you home later."

"Are you kidding me? Why do I have to stay here by myself? No, I'll just go home." Claire started clearing the table in a hurry.

"How? In my shirt?" Ryan smiled, and it's when she grasped his point.

Fucker! She took a deep breath.

"You ripped off my blouse on purpose, didn't you?" she asked, and he shrugged.

"Why, Ryan? Are you psycho?"

He chuckled. "I'll be back."

"What about Doris? What if she shows up here?" Claire asked.

"She won't," he replied.

"How do you know that?"

"I know her well enough to know."

"Oh God," she gasped, resigned in manners. "Fine, Ryan. I'll stay here like a prisoner until you decide to release me."

"Good. That's what I thought." Ryan kissed her on the lips, which she refused to cooperate. "Be good." He rushed upstairs to change. It didn't take long until he left the apartment some minutes later.

Once alone, Claire used the void to fill up the dishwasher and stayed beside it, sighing. At this moment she hadn't any idea on what she was doing with her life. She'd always been careful.

Not in her wildest dream had she ever thought of coveting someone else's man. And here she was, dressed up in Ryan's shirt as though he was her own husband, or boyfriend at the very least.

Claire hated the fact, but it wasn't enough to stop herself from falling into his scheme. She scratched her head thoughtfully, until she got an idea and went for her phone in the living room.

"Hi, Gena. Are you at home?" she uttered.

"Yes, I've just arrived," Gena replied. "Why? Is there any problem? You sound kind of edgy."

Edgy was an understatement, Claire thought.

"No problem. I was wondering if you could bring me some clothes. A casual dress, maybe?"

"Clothes? Why?" Gena asked, and she bit her lip. "Alright where should I bring you?"



That was another detail Claire had overlooked. Even if Gena had managed to bring her the clothes, there was no way she could get them since Ryan's apartment was encrypted. She was just going to return into square one, and it drove her insane.

"You know what . . . never mind. Thanks anyway," she muttered.

"Um, okay," said Gena. "But where are you? It doesn't sound like you're at work."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sure you don't want to know where I am right now."

"Try me," Gena said in her most excited tone of voice. "Are you with Ryan?" She kept digging, and Claire responded with a no. "Okay then, where are you?"

"At Ryan's penthouse?" She bit her bottom lip again.

"What?" Gena exclaimed aloud. "What are you doing there? Why are you saying you're not with him?" she asked, and Claire answered accordingly. "You little sly queen! What did you do to my Claire? Where is she?"

"I don't know, Gena." She sat down on the couch, sighing.

"Hey, stop eating yourself alive. You didn't kidnap the guy; he kidnapped you. Aw, how exciting! I'd love to be kidnapped with a hottie like him. I bet I'll cry very softly that I'm so scareeeeed!" Gena's voice was humorous.

"You're crazy." Claire managed to laugh. Gena gave her the pep talk and by the time they finished talking, her phone was boiling.

"Before I forget, your brother called me today," said Gena.

"Jorge?"

"Yes, I'm having a meeting with him tomorrow and I suppose you did talk to him, right?"

"Right, I forgot to let you know," she answered. "I talked to him this morning." They chatted over that until they hung up.

Slowly she made her way upstairs. It took a sharp luck for her to find Ryan's bedroom as the only place she was eager to see. As expected it wasn't disappointing. A smile stretched across her face as she slowly shut the door behind her.

Its theme was dark: black and a bit of grey, and it added warmth. Claire was in awe at the long curtains flailing, the rain slowly dissipating through the gigantic glass window. All the Lisbay prominent skyscrapers were visible.

"What are you getting yourself at, Claire?" she breathed, taking her feet towards the black-leathered sofa bed.

The wooden floor felt smooth against her bare feet, and even more the fluffy rug she'd stepped on as she reached the bed. She sat down, running a hand on the white duvet, inhaling Ryan's scent everywhere, and she loved it.

It was relaxing. So very relaxing compared to her own place. But was it okay feeling at home inside a man's house? The man she had nothing definitive with? She lied down, taking one of the pillows and hugged it tight.

## SEVENTEEN

Ryan took a seat behind his office desk and skimmed through some documents.

"This is good enough," he said pointedly, regarding the contract Harry had been working on. "And what's the emergency?" He turned towards Doris, who had been watching him taciturn.

She sighed audibly and said, "I'm afraid Clancy has got you this time." She sat straight.

"What?" Ryan frowned.

"Where did you go, and without telling anyone?" Doris snapped angrily. "I've tried to reach you, but it seems you were too busy to answer!" She frantically rolled her eyes.

"Tell me about Clancy, what happened?" Ignoring the lady, Ryan turned to Harry for information.

This was way more important for him.

"Well," Harry started, but when Doris got up stoutly like an angry wife, he had to stop his speech.

"Sit down, Doris!" Ryan demanded.

"I don't think you need me here, so why should I stay?" she replied harshly while reaching for the door handle.

"I said sit down, Director Marcos!" Ryan snapped aloud, his voice supreme. "I'm the CEO of this company, don't ever forget that!" he added, and the entire office went cold.

Doris clenched her fists tightly for a second or two. And then she walked back reluctantly after a deep sigh.

"Well, it seems like Clancy made a bigger offer, and they're selling him the land," Harry said, staring at Ryan whose face was now expressionless. He was thoughtful. "I snooped around and I learned they're sealing the deal tomorrow. So what do we do?"

"And it looks like someone is leaking our intelligence from the inside," Doris added, back to her composure.

Indeed. This had happened twice already. Ryan reclined back in his seat and silence filled the air. He seemed to be thinking hard, his jaw clenched.

"About the mole, I'm letting you deal with it, Doris," he said, and she nodded.

"Clancy—that scheming son of a bitch. We're not going to do anything," he finally stated.

"What?" Doris and Harry exclaimed in unison.

"I thought you wanted that land badly, and you promised the board that it's going to be our next project," Doris said, her voice apprehensive.

"I know. But I'm not doing it, period." Ryan stressed. None of the two could get him.

"But I want you to spread the news that we're raising the bid," he uttered.

Doris sat straight. "That way he'll also raise?" she asked, and Ryan nodded agreeably.

"Huh? You want him to pay more than necessary?" She frowned, trying to understand.

"And then you back out? But you'll also be on the losing end, don't you think?" Harry remarked.

"I'll take that," Ryan said with a wicked smile.

"But that's crazy, Ryan. You never let anyone screw your target, so then why?" Doris asked.

"Sometimes shit happens, I guess. I'll think of a contingency plan," Ryan said while shutting the papers.

"And the Havana deal?" Harry asked urgently.

"I'll review the contract at home," Ryan replied. "If there's nothing else, I'll get going now." He glanced at his watch.

"You're leaving? What about dinner? You promised we'd go out tonight," Doris asked, and Harry excused himself with a knowing grin.

Ryan fetched the documents and rose up his feet. "Something came up, Doris. Some other time, maybe." He moved out of his seat.

Doris scowled hard, displeased with his answer. "What's going on, Ryan? You've been acting really strange lately," she asked gently while heading to the exit.

"Nothing is going on, you're just being paranoid," Ryan replied coolly. "You should go home early today, and relax a bit. You're working too hard." He smiled at her.

Doris flushed.. "First you lash at me, and now you're being nice? How lovely!" She opened the door, followed by Ryan right behind her.

"Work is work," he said.

"Yes, Mr. President." Doris rolled her eyes. They walked past Ryan's secretary post. "Oh, so how much will you offer to beat Clancy? I bet you'll have to pay a fortune to get the land," she suddenly uttered loudly enough for the secretary to hear, and Ryan laughed.

"Whatever it takes," Ryan replied. "You're something else," he added, a few seconds later.

"What? I always find her suspicious," Doris remarked.

"Could be. That's why I let you handle it." Ryan pressed the elevator button, and they both walked in after a short moment.

"What plan do you have for the evening?" Doris quizzed, her eyes straight onto Ryan's.

"Important," he answered coolly while fishing for his phone.

Doris' face blanched. "Nameless?" she asked, staring into space.

"Yeah," Ryan murmured and silence scooped them until the ride ended.

"About this morning, did you know that Claire works for Starlight?" Doris asked out of the blue.

Ryan scowled, but showed no hint of being surprised. "I did know she works there, but I didn't know she would come." He dialed a number on his phone

"Is that so? Well, I—"

"I really need to leave, Doris, see you tomorrow," Ryan told her curtly. "And I expect you'll find the traitor soon." His phone was now on the ear.

"Okay, I will, but— " she started, but he was already leaving, making her sigh with a frustrated laugh. "What is it that you're hiding, Ryan?" she thought out loud.

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A feeling of being watched was what managed to wake Claire from her deep slumber. Yawning, she flashed her eyes open with difficulty. Surprise spiked as she found the duvet on her body, feeling warm. Ryan was here, she thought. He'd been here for too long maybe, for it was already dark outside.

Gingerly she sat up, desperately searching for him. He was on the loveseat couch near the main window, seated lazily, or exhaustedly, watching her with a faint smile. She pulled off the duvet and dropped her feet down on the carpeted floor. A scowl settled on her face at the sight of him.

"You said you won't take long and look what time it is," she complained when her eyes stuck on the alarm clock. It was seven, and the rain was making its slow entrance once again.

Sighing heavily, Ryan rubbed his eyes in a subdued manner. "I couldn't wake you," he said, his voice too calm. Claire narrowed her eyes at that. She couldn't understand his unusual mood.

Something was amiss.

She slowly held her horses and sat next to him. "Ryan, is everything okay?" she calmly asked.

"It's nice seeing you calm for a second." Ryan smiled indulgently, stroking the strands of her hair. "Can I hug you?" he asked, and it was quite surprising.

"Um, sure," Claire uttered, confused.

Ryan pulled her for a tight embrace which clearly defined that he wasn't okay. "I love your warmth," he breathed.

"Um, what's the matter, Ryan? Did something happen at work?" Claire pried, intending to understand the situation.

"Hmm?" he murmured, his eyes shut.

"Hey, talk to me, please. I'm really worried now."

"You are?" Ryan returned, and that mischievous gleam was back into his eyes.

"Yes, Ryan. Tell me what's wrong."

Smiling, Ryan said, "Okay, I'll tell you what's wrong."

"Good." Claire smiled back.

They both got comfortably settled in the bed, Ryan's head resting on Claire's lap.

"It's about work," he started. "Jeez, I don't usually discuss my problems with anyone, and here I am, ready to whine like you."

"I'll let you whine today, so tell me everything, and let it off your chest," Claire told him, her fingers delving through his hair in a soothing manner, and he quickly relaxed.

"Well, I've been looking into this land . . ." Ryan explained the facts and how he'd lost the deal that was so close to being signed.

"Gosh, what a bastard that Clancy is," Claire snapped, and he laughed at her mad tone of voice. "So, you already have another project in mind for Montesby?" she asked.

"Yeah, by next year Montesby will be a part of the Government's Redevelopment Plan. Starting with the construction of a subway." Again he got engrossed into details, and Claire loved listening to his plans and visions of grandeur.

"Wow. And how the hell will you finance and manage another one?" she queried.

"In this industry, Claire, you can't let your guards down. It's one late move and you're out. So timing is also a merit, plus, I'm not the one financing the project."

"Oh yeah? And who does?"

"Rule number one, never use your own money in Real Estate business," said Ryan, and Claire smiled with a raised eyebrow.

"What's rule number two?" she asked.

"Use only other people's money," he replied.

"That's the same thing." She laughed, her eyes staring down at him.

"That's the whole point." Ryan laughed as well. "If you snooze you lose, no one will sit around waiting for you to finish your damn project until they sell their land to you," he explained.

"Okay, but you can always find a replacement, no? Montesby is huge, with very good land."

"You're right, but it won't be the same. When I set my eyes onto something, I hardly change. So, having to let it go is kind of a blow to me."

"My father used to say that in any challenge lies a hidden opportunity," Claire said. "And it's not a defect by being flexible, you know. Losing is a part of any game."

Ryan smiled. "I know, I just hate losing."

"Who does?" Claire wiggled her brows laughingly. "But like you said, Real Estate is like gambling, so being careful isn't a weakness at all," she added, and Ryan looked amusedly at her.

"I think you're right," he said.

"Hey listen," muttered Claire. "Since people will be moving in, it means not all of them will move to stay; some will come to stay, some will only visit and leave."

"And?" Ryan got attentive.



"Montesby is like a historical town and a tropical paradise in the same place," she continued. "Do you know that there's an amazing spot for scuba diving over there?"

"No, I had no idea." Ryan rose up and sat straight, smiling. "You seem to know a lot more about the place than I do."

"A little. My parents lived by the beach as you've seen my house, They told me a lot of stories about the place. Also my grandfather used to be a fisherman, so I know a few spots for eco-tourism as I used to join him during holidays."

"Okay, Ms. Challenge, where are you heading? Because I know that twinkle in your eyes. Go on, tell me already," he cried.

"Oh, well, my point is, other than houses and apartments, I think Montesby needs a hotel," she blurted out. "Tourists come by so often, but do you know where they stay? In some low quality boutique hotels with less than a hundred rooms, or in some local inn's, and sometimes in a few boarding houses."

"Oh, really now?" Ryan was intrigued.

Damn, she was indeed getting into his head right now.

"The bottom line is, there's a need, a real need for great accommodation. A place they can call home far away from home, and I know it's people like you who can make it happen, Mr. Stevens."

"So you want me to build a hotel?" Ryan retorted.

"Yes. A fancy hotel with the best rooms, a nice resort and other stuff that I don't know." She laid down, placing her head on Ryan's lap. "My turn," she muttered.

"You're right, I guess," Ryan said, smiling at her last remark.

"Look, I'm just saying, okay? I know hotels haven't been your thing other than investing in a few, but it's good to be a game changer, I believe."

"A game changer." Ryan smiled fondly at her. "Well, that's genius, baby!" Excitement filled his gleaming eyes.

Claire blinked twice. "It is?"

"Of course it is. How could I not think about it? A grand hotel in Montesby," he muttered, thoughtful. "I can already picture where it will be, somewhere near the sea."

"Yeah, that sounds lovely."

Ryan started describing his visions and Claire enjoyed the sight of him in his element. He was like a young enthusiastic boy, full of passion and ambition.

"Fuck, you're so smart." He kissed her briefly. "I knew from the moment I saw you that you're fucking smart, aside from being sexy and beautiful."

"Thanks, I guess?" Claire uttered.

Everything was going well, until Ryan's phone buzzed and Claire learned it was a call from Doris. Ryan excused himself and walked out of the bedroom, leaving her right where she was.

That was her cue, back to reality, Claire thought while feeling the rage. She had to leave, and never return. Ryan got back about five minutes later, and found her already at her feet.

"What are you doing?" he asked while closing the door behind him.

"I'm dressing up. Are you blind or something?" she answered curtly while fixing the oversized shirt of his.

"I know you're dressing up, but why?" He walked in, frowning.

"So that I can go home? This is your house, remember?" Claire glanced at him scornfully.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Here we go again. So you want to go right now?" He sauntered toward her.

"Yes, right now." She had to fetch her skirt, her heels . . . her blouse? Damn, she had no blouse.

"Like that?" Ryan stared at the shirt she was wearing, amused.

"If possible, yes!" Claire snorted.

Ryan sighed heavily. "Is this about the call? Jeez, Claire. *We* were talking about office matters, so why are you behaving like this?" His voice was no longer teasing.

"I don't care," Claire said. "I'm not even sure what I'm doing here in the first place."

Ryan strode toward her. "You're here because we both want to be here. I don't want you gone, and I feel like I'll go nuts if you try to do it?" He hauled her body closer.

Sharply Claire inhaled some oxygen upon his embrace, her back against his hard chest. She stilled in his arms, feeling the warmth. "Is this how you deal with Doris and all other women you fuck around?" she asked.

"I don't fuck around with just anyone," Ryan whispered, and then kissed her neck. She tilted her head in response. "Believe me," he added.

Liar!

"Oh, so I should be grateful, right? That the mighty Ryan Stevens has his dick on me?" Claire

"Aren't you?" Ryan smiled, nuzzling her hair. "Just admit it, Claire, you don't want to go anywhere but here?" He gripped her softly across the chest with one arm, causing her to stay utterly put.

"I won't question your delirium, Ryan, so you can think however you want," Claire answered.

She was striving not to fall for this strong man who had her under his skin. It was an undeniable truth that Ryan unleashed several feelings in her at once. She was angry, then she was not. She wanted to move, then her body wouldn't let her.

How was she going to escape his web?

Resting his chin on Claire's shoulder, Ryan's free hand travelled down her bare thighs, playing with the hem of her shirt fabric, and slowly kissed her earlobe. She flexed, shutting her eyes instantly as her body reacted to his strong, expert fingers.

"I'm not being delirious. I know you want me, just as I want you, Claire," he told her.

"Ryan, please, just let me leave already," she moaned, her breath heavy.

Fuck, she had no pantie! How was she this slutty and reckless in the beast's cave?

"Really?" Ryan slid his indecent hand at the apex of her thighs. "Are you scared to give in?"

"I'm not scared of anything," Claire breathed, devouring the betrayal of her legs that parted subtly to give him the access to her precious reserve. "What makes you think I can't resist you, huh?" Her voice was barely a sound.

"You're trembling in my arms right now," Ryan whispered. "And I know you're so turned on as it shows right here between your beautiful legs. And damn, you're not wearing anything. Naughty girl." He gilded his finger inside her wet core, smiling proudly.

She'd been aroused way before his return from the office. Claire was sure of this upon the lewd thoughts she'd been having while lying in his bed.

"No, I'm not. Please, stop this game," she muttered.

"But you begged me not to stop earlier this afternoon, and you were so obedient," Ryan said, biting her neck sensually, kissing it, his finger rubbing her sex.

"Shut up." The heat was rising in her body and she refused to stay still.

"Don't you like it? Wanna make a bet that you'll soon want more?" Ryan continued stroking his finger inside her

"No, I won't," she uttered between her breaths, "because I won't play your game."

"But we're playing already," Ryan tantalized her with the kisses.

"Ryan, don't—" she breathed unevenly, and he sped up the pace. "Oh God!" She clung onto him, her hand yanking his neck backward.

"Don't what, Claire?" He tilted her face from behind. He kissed her lips harder, briefly, and then repeated, "Don't what? Tell me!"

"Don't stop," she cried, panting soundly, the pleasure immense. "You jerk! I want you. Right now!" Briskly, she spun around and pulled his face for a kiss . . . long and ferocious.

"Hungry little thing, huh?" Ryan grinned, accepting the war, squeezing her butt to his liking, and his mouth was once again dancing with hers. "Fuck, come here!" He deftly lifted her onto his shoulder, with one arm, and dropped her on the bed.

"Damn you, beast!" Claire screamed out gleefully, and he

"You fucking drive me crazy, Claire!" He pulled his polo shirt over the head, watching her.

"And you're fucking crazy already," Claire replied while peeling the shirt off, impatiently. "We're both crazy." On her knees, she moved toward him.

Ryan's lips twisted into a libidinous grin, pleased by the capriciousness of hers. "You're perfect," he muttered, appreciating her naked body, everything to his liking. "And foul-mouthed." He stepped out of his pants as he began kissing her all over again.

"Mmm," she hummed into his mouth, pressing harder onto him. She wasn't going to last longer, she wanted him, and she knew he wanted her, too. Her hand found his erection, already hard and firm.

"Oh shit!" Ryan groaned, and both pulled apart, watching one another with desire.

"This is the last one," Claire breathed, stroking his length. His hand was rubbing her hair, mouth ajar, eyes married, intoxicated. "You won't have me again, Ryan." She bends over to take him into her mouth.

"No, Claire. If you do that I'll come in your mouth," he groaned.

"I didn't stop you, did I?" Claire uttered defiantly, surprising herself.

What was happening with her? She mentally scolded.

"Fuck, Claire!" Ryan laughed nervously, his body trembling at her sensual assault. "I'm definitely fucking your mouth if you keep defying me like that, I'm warning you."

"I dare you." She kept stroking him, biting her bottom lip coquettishly . . . deliberately pushing him deeply into the ocean of lust and carnal.

"Damn you! Suck me, baby!" Ryan's eyes shone, and Claire's grin widened.

## EIGHTEEN

"Sleep here tonight," Ryan croaked.

"Huh?" Abandoning the warmth of his bare chest, Claire glanced up at him. "Sleep here?" Her eyes awoke.

"Yeah." Ryan kissed her hair. "It's getting late and it's raining."

Oh? But he could still drive her home, couldn't he? Claire blushed.

"Is that the only reason you want me to sleep here?" she asked, resuming her comfort in his arms, hugged possessively.

How she loved feeling his body so near hers, and his naughty hands toying with her hair smoothly, if not her skin every now and then.

"Maybe I don't want you away tonight." Ryan smiled, lying more comfortable in his king-size bed, his wide back against the pillows. "You can go to work from here."

How convincing! Claire was amused. Well, it was a tempting offer. It was undeniable that she felt different being here in his apartment, his bed, and in his arms. It felt serendipitous.

"I don't have clothes for tomorrow," she said softly. Her index finger was childishly trailing the contours of his sculpted chest, from the pecks to the abs, loving every detail. "How will I go to work?" She pursed her lips at him.

"I'll take care of that," Ryan uttered, his voice serious.

Claire scowled. "Really now? How? Will you lend me your girlfriend's clothes? Wait, does she have her clothes here? Do you fuck her in this very same bed?" She chuckled despite the intensity of the situation.

She'd succumbed to being a whore, so she might as well do it with a clean conscience. What was she doing with her life? She pitied her hormonal-driven self, and yet regret was not in her list.

"God. You're so stubborn," Ryan remarked with a big smile. "Alright, I bought you some clothes. Over there." He pointed at the shopping bags lying on the floor right near the couch.

"Seriously?" Claire's eyes widened, gleaming placidly. Ryan nodded. "When did you get them?" She lurched out of bed and quested for Ryan's polo shirt lying on the rug.

"Soon after the office," he answered coolly, crossing his hands behind his head.

"Wow!" Claire was in awe. Partially dressed, she tiptoed towards the bags and sat on the couch. "Let's see," she muttered, and Ryan's face was filled with mirth at her excitement.

She opened the first bag and revealed a blouse that's almost identical to the torn one. She creased an eyebrow, gazing at Ryan. He only shrugged. Laughing, she proceeded with the second bag and two pairs of expensive, sexy underwear lied inside.

"Really?" She lifted a white cotton lace thong, chuckling. It was tiny and hollow, utterly sexy and provoking. "This is so you." She grinned at him.

"Well, I figured you'd look great in it," Ryan replied, his voice teasing.

Claire flushed. "Did you shop yourself?" She reached for the last bag, in which was a black bodycon dress, short and elegant. "Wow, Ryan! This is gorgeous! How did you guess my size?" She stood up quickly to get a proper look.

"Must I go into details?" Ryan's smile was pure joy. He looked happy watching her reacting as though it was something big.

"Yes, please." Claire bobbed her head.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Alright? I took your torn blouse and asked the lady in the shop for clothes with similar size. And about shopping myself, it's a yes and no, but no more asking, please."

"How grumpy!" Claire smiled. "Okay. At least I'll have something to wear tomorrow."

"Does that mean you're sleeping here?" Ryan's eyes flashed expectantly.

Placing her bags properly, Claire muttered, "I am. Just for tonight."



"Good." Nothing but satisfaction was portrayed in Ryan's voice. "Hungry?"

"Famished." Claire returned to bed.

"There must be something edible in the fridge," Ryan muttered thoughtfully. "Let's go and check, unless you want something specific." He gazed at her.

"Um, no. Let's have whatever there is. I don't want to go out," said Claire as they got up.

"I can order for you. It won't take long," Ryan replied while picking his pants from the floor.

Grilled chicken, fruit salad, and yoghurt made their dinner. Claire's evening turned splendid, and so was her night as she slept with Ryan by her side. It was a brand new feeling she wasn't ready to give up, but the reality check was apparently cruel.

The alarm chirped in the morning as a reminder of midnight Cinderella back to the pumpkin that was mistaken for a royal carriage. She had to get real, she thought when her eyes met the dark knight in shining armor staring at her. He was already awake.

"Morning, beautiful," he muttered, smiling softly at her.

"Morning . . . handsome." She smiled back, and it suddenly hurt seeing him. Being in his bed this morning felt like a momentary sweetness of a chewing gum that was soon coming to an end.

Ryan frowned at the shift of her mood, holding closer. "What's wrong, Claire?" he quizzed.

What's wrong was that she was coveting the man who wasn't hers. She was in a place that wasn't rightful hers. She was just a replacement for one night, and probably the next won't be hers.

"Come on, Claire, talk to me!" Ryan became desperate, holding her face with an apprehensive look. "You didn't sleep—" He stopped when her lips met his.

She was kissing him, quite unexpected, and he didn't seem to mind as much as he was taken aback. If it's the last time having him to herself, then she wanted to feel him once again.

Just this once.

"Hold me," she breathed, and Ryan's arms gripped her body tightly as she sat on his lap.

"Claire," Ryan uttered, but he had nothing to say. He was stunned, seemingly in daze by everything she was doing to him, physically and emotionally. "What do you want?" He pulled up the T-shirt she was wearing.

"You. All of you." Claire removed it over her head, staying nude. "Kiss me, Ryan," she begged, panting heavily, her eyes filled with mixed emotions.

This was the only way to release herself from the anger and anxiety. It was crazy but it's the only thing she'd learned recently, thanks to him.

"Where?" Ryan murmured, smooching her neck, then down her earlobe, and slowly headed to her chest. Claire moaned, tossing her head aside, welcoming the arousal. "Tell me, baby. Where do you want me to kiss you?" he repeated, imperious.

"Wherever you want," Claire said softly, her voice intoxicated.

"No, I want you to say it. Should I kiss you here?" Ryan pecked her lips, teasing her. "Or here?" He trailed her neckline, the kiss wet.

"Ahh," Claire breathed heavily, eyes shut at his sweet torture.

"Or here?" Ryan's tongue was on her nipple, circling it gently, and then sucked it. She cried softly. "Oh down here?" He suddenly swooped her off and her back landed on the bed. He was on top of her, staring down at her. "Where should I kiss you, baby? Say it." His voice was deeper and hoarse, demanding.

"Everywhere," Claire muttered, biting her bottom lip.

"Good girl." Ryan's salacious grin appeared as he parted her legs impatiently. He leaned over, seizing her thighs deftly. "Beautiful." He panted soundly, grinning diabolically at her.

Claire could feel the chill, anticipation overwhelming. "Ryan . . ." she whispered, and his tongue inside her was the immediate response. "Oh fuck!" she bawled, clutching the sheets hard, tipping her head back.

It was swift, deep, his tongue unrelenting. Holding her legs still, strongly, Ryan began kissing her . . . down there, fast, hungrily, and she cried immensely, with pleasure. He was devouring her femininity, and she was hardly holding her legs.

"Oh . . . God . . . Ryan!" she cried, her mouth wide open, convulsing.

"You taste great, baby," Ryan muttered as he pulled back, still holding her trembling legs. "You can't come yet. I love doing it with you." He sprang his hard erection out of the briefs he was wearing.

"Please . . . Ryan." Claire couldn't hold it. She wanted him, she craved the release. She was breathing erratically. "Fuck me," she snapped, beseeching at him. "Please. Now. Deep."

Obedying her wish, Ryan kissed her swiftly on the lips, and quickly eased his length inside her. She screamed as he filled her, and her legs curled around him, her mouth searching for his.

"Oh, baby, you feel so good," Ryan muttered, pouncing gently as he fixed himself. She hugged him, and began kissing again, ferociously. "Oh!" he grunted and began pushing faster, harder and deeper.

Claire moaned loudly, his pace driving her nuts. It didn't take millennium to shatter in his arms, letting the tornado of pleasure take her away. She hugged him tight, and he held her firmly, both relishing the climax of their intense morning sex, oblivious of the time.

**At eight-thirty a black** Mercedes S-Class pulled over at Starlight. "We're having dinner tonight," Ryan said.

"Um, no." Claire clutched the door handle.

"What?" He frowned.

"Ryan, I have a lot to catch up on in the office after skipping yesterday," Claire said while holding the door open. "And . . . and I think it's better we keep our distance. Yesterday was fun, but let's get back to reality. Have a nice day." She slammed the door, leaving him glaring at her.

She had to forget him. But was it going to be easy? Claire sighed heavily, recalling the awesome moment she'd had with him yesterday, and the hot sex about an hour ago.

But no, there was another woman for Ryan. She was just a passing fling for him and she shouldn't forget it.

She arrived in the office around the same time Nathan did. He summoned her right away, and it seemed serious. Was she going to be in trouble? She couldn't help but wonder, considering how she left him yesterday and the events during the presentation.

"You'll join the designing team starting tomorrow," Nathan uttered.

"The designing team?" Claire asked, surprised. Was it Ryan again? She surely hoped not. "Why?" Her eyes were on her boss.

"Because I want you in, Levy," Nathan replied. "It was your idea, so it's only fair that you at least give us your full insight. Look, I know I'm breaking the rule here, but I can't let a chance to create something marvelous pass us by just because of a simple formality."

"Huh?" Claire was indeed surprised, stupefied even.

Was it her lucky day? She mentally grinned, screaming at the top of her lungs. It's almost her dream come true.

"Be ready, I'll want to see your ideas at our next meeting tomorrow." Nathan smiled at her.

Claire was at a loss for words. She'd been waiting so eagerly to have this opportunity and here it was, knocking on her door. She should embrace it, right? Her smile widened.

"Thank you so much, Nathan! I swear you won't regret it!" She almost jumped, on the verge to kiss him on the cheek, but decided against it. "I'll go finish the paperwork from my secretarial job."

"Oops!" Nathan grinned, comprehending her remark. "That's not my fault, you know. It's the rule and it wasn't personal."

Claire chuckled. "Just admit it, Nathan. You enjoyed my delicious coffee while it lasted."

Nathan grimaced. "Just between us, Levy. Your coffee tastes terrible!"

They both laughed.

As far as her work was concerned, Claire's day was proceeding splendidly. Evidently she couldn't stop trailing her mind off at the memory of Ryan and everything they'd been through up to this point. He was an enigma.

And suddenly a text from him pinged on her phone.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**  
**Dinner at 7. Will pick you up.**  
**[Received]**

"Hah! As if," Claire muttered. She quickly returned his text.

**Dinner? Not happening. It was nice meeting you, sir.**  
**[Sent]**

She continued with her work, tapping on the computer keyboard with a smile. Was he ever going to stop being bossy? It was still exciting. Another text chimed and she opened quickly.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**  
**I'm not a businessman by chance, Claire. I'm persuasive. It was nice meeting me? I bet it was, and it's going to stay that way. You can run but you won't hide. I'm still pleading . . . DINNER!!!**  
**[Sent]**

A laughter escaped Claire as he read the message. He was a psycho. But why was she mesmerized by all of him? Jeez, maybe she's the crazy one.

**Maybe we should start by reminding you that you're not in control of everything and everyone, Sir. Back to nice meeting you: It won't stay, I promise. Like I said, I'm busy with work. And about dinner, my decision still stands. No dinner.**  
**[Sent]**

Smiling, Claire placed her cellphone aside, and allowed her mind to drift a little by reclining back in her chair. Luckily it was lunch break, and the office was empty right now. However, it didn't take a minute to get the reply.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**I really want to have dinner with you tonight, so please bend your firm decision for once, huh? And remember that I can always transfer your office to SK and have all three meals with you. Everyday. And yes, I'm threatening you right now. AND DON'T CALL ME SIR!**

**[Received]**

"Crazy guy," Claire muttered, laughing loudly.

And just as she began to get serious with work, there was an incoming call from Ryan. She picked up.

"What now, Ryan? Are you tired of writing threats?" she uttered, smiling faintly.

"Are you really being adamant about dinner?" Ryan asked, her query ignored. "Come on, Claire, we'll just eat and I'll take you home afterwards, I promise." He had a calm tone of voice for a change.

So unlike.

"I'm not being adamant or anything, I just can't go out with you tonight," Claire replied.

"Why can't you?" Ryan asked, irritation lacing his voice.

"Because I have other plans," she lied.

"Other plans? With who? Panther?" His voice started to lose its tranquility.

Panther? Claire rolled her eyes, laughing.

"You don't think I'm a loner or something, do you?" she queried, her eyebrow raised. "I have other people to hang out with, so it doesn't have to be my boss."

"Okay. Who are you planning to meet then? Gena?" Ryan insisted on knowing.

Jeez! So persistent!

"I'm having dinner with my brother. Is that fine of an answer?" she uttered.

"Your stepbrother?"

"Yes, him. Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Nothing. Well, have a nice time with your stepbrother." He sounded sarcastic.

"You bet, I will." Claire grinned. "I'm busy, bye." She hung up.

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As the evening approached, Ryan was heading out of the SK building with Doris beside him. They had been quite busy with the last minute details about the remodeling project. It seemed to be coming along great, however. They both headed towards the parking lot.

"Today I heard a weird rumor when I was inspecting the lobby," Doris said with a pause, as though waiting for his reaction. He made none. "And now that I think of it, I can't conceal my curiosity any longer." She laughed nervously.

"What rumor?" Ryan glanced at her.

Doris sighed. "I heard you were arguing with a woman, and it looked like you two had something serious going on," she said, glancing at him inquisitively.

"You can't stop people from talking around, Doris, so just ignore them. It was nothing serious," Ryan answered casually.

"Was it her?" Doris prompted, her heels stuck to the ground, and Ryan had to do the same when he turned around. "Was it Claire—the woman you were arguing with?"

"What's the matter with you?" Ryan snapped.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Ryan?" she snapped back. "That I don't understand what's going on?"

Ryan moved closer and clearly told her in the eyes, "Don't do this, Doris. Please don't." And off he went for his car.

"Why?" Doris followed him. "Are you attracted to her? Tell me!" she screamed at him, and he stopped by the door, gripping its handle tight. "I simply don't—"

"You and I," Ryan said, turning around briskly, "don't have this kind of arrangement, Doris. And you've been forgetting your place a lot lately. You don't have any right to question my private life, and it's what you've been doing, and I don't appreciate you acting like a jealous wife."

Doris swallowed hard, her fists clenched to her sides. "Your private life?" She raised a mocking eyebrow. "Since when do you have your private life?"

"I'm not doing this bullshit!" Ryan snapped and swung the door open.

"Ryan!"

"Have a nice evening. That's a nice car, by the way. It really suits you," Ryan told her.

Doris reflexively looked at her brand new Mazda in red. "Bastard!" She cracked her long heels away from his sight.

Ryan slid into his car and drove away. In the middle of the road, his head could think of only one person. Claire Levy. It was something uncontrollable, and he never lost control.

Why couldn't he get her out of his head?

Unable to take it, he decided to check on her, and their call was immediately connected via the earpiece.

"You just can't let me breathe, can you?" Claire said, and his lips stretched into a smile.

"And you just can't be nice for even a second, can you?" he returned, eyes fixed on the mild traffic as his car took a halt.

"Trust me, Ryan, I'm really trying to be nice, but it's just so impossible when it comes to you. You're just—"

"I miss you," he uttered softly. Even without seeing her, he could tell how startled Claire was.

A short silence followed.

"Are you drunk, Ryan?" Claire remarked. "Because that sounds like drunk talk."



"I'm driving." Ryan smiled, his head shaken to the sides.

"Oh?"

"Are you on your dinner date with your stepbrother?"

"I never said it was a dinner date, I only said I had plans to meet him."

"So, are you with him?" Ryan asked, and his car started moving again.

"Yes, I am," she answered. "It's family time. And do you seriously have to know everything I do, when, where, and even with whom?"

"Yes, Claire, I want to know all of that," he answered with utmost seriousness.

"You're impossible. Fine, I'm with my brother right now, and we're about to have dinner at home. Of course, with my stepmother as well."

"I see," said Ryan with a sigh.

"Are you bored by any chance, and in need to find someone to mess around with?" Claire queried, and it made him smile at it.

What a foul mouth!

"I'm really bored, but not because of what you're imagining at the moment," he replied.

"Really now?"

"I just miss your presence, that's all."

"How corny!"

"It's not," he argued strenuously. "I'm not sure how my cold apartment is going to feel tonight," he added with an exhausted yawn. Claire went silent for a while, probably contemplating. "Are you there?" he asked.

"Just bear with it, Ryan, it's your house. And like you said, you can use the heater," she remarked.

"I prefer hugging you than the boring heater," he teased.

"You're crazy." She huffed a faint laugh.

"I'm serious, Claire." His lips quirked, eyes thoughtful.

"Well, I'm sorry. And if you're that bored, you can always call your girlfriend over. Be careful on the road, and have a good evening, Ryan," said Claire, and the line went dead.

Ryan stayed deadly silent inside his car, feeling a foreign type of emotion that he hadn't appreciated at all. What was this? Why was he getting too attached to this woman? He quickly shut away his thoughts by speeding up when he had finally pulled through the jam towards a free road.

## NINETEEN

Joining the designing team was the best thing that could happen to Claire, as far as her career was concerned. Her team members welcomed her fairly enough, too. She had been working with them for three days now, and things were proceeding well to say the least.

It was Friday when Jorge suddenly called her during lunch hours, and invited her out. She was skeptical at first, but when she thought about the favor he had done her by getting Gena a job, Claire realized she should at least be kind and accept his friendly gesture.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice. I was around the area and I thought we could have lunch together," Jorge said gently once they both settled inside the restaurant.

"It's okay," Claire replied with a small smile. "Actually, I should've invited you first. I wanted to thank you for hiring Gena; it means a lot to me."

"It was no big deal," Jorge remarked while grabbing the menu. "She has great credentials, and there was an open position, so I thought why not?" He gazed modestly at her.

"Either way, thank you," Claire insisted and a small silence stretched between them. The waiter took their order. "So how is work?" she finally asked.

"Good. Even though you refused to work in your own company, we are still managing," Jorge said, his tone a bit accusing and it strangely melted Claire's heart.

At least he was different from his mother, she thought. Her company? No, it no longer was. The witch had confiscated everything so she wasn't going to be a part of her scheme.

"I'm sure you can manage," she told Jorge. "I'm okay with my job so you have nothing to worry about." She meant it.

A simple conversation followed, accompanying their food. It was actually the first time for the two to hang out and share a meal outside the house. It felt strange somehow, but maybe this was how things should've been since many years back.

They're still siblings, right?

"I think I've eaten too much." Jorge stood up, ready to clear the cheque.

"Me, too," said Claire, chuckling at the memory of her last dinner with Ryan and the way he teased about her big appetite. "I didn't know there's such a nice restaurant around my workplace. It's officially my new spot."

"My pleasure." John grinned and walked away.

A deep breath escaped Claire as she sipped her chocolate milkshake. She was suddenly nostalgic. It had been three days and he hasn't heard a thing from Ryan. It's supposed to be a relief but why was it not the case? Was she missing him? She immediately snapped out of it, denying the possibility.

Idle and confused, she wandered her gaze around the place in quest for nothing in particular. It was just a plain restaurant but the food was amazing. Lost in that, her eyes suddenly met someone unexpected at the entrance.

It was Doris.

The tall brunette was in the company of two ladies with similar fashion sense as hers. Her smile was radiant as they made their way towards an empty table right across Claire's. Doris' gaze darkened fast when her eyes met Claire's, showing some hidden irritation.

However, she granted great civility to Claire by marching towards her. "Hello, there," she greeted with a smile.

It was impossible for Claire to determine whether that smile was real or plastic, but it didn't matter.

It's evident they each couldn't stand the other, and the reason was almost clear by now. At least for Claire it was.

"Oh, hi." She returned the smile, brightly. "Small world I see," she added, masking her similar distaste towards the brunette.

"I agree," remarked Doris. "Such a crazy coincidence that I keep running into you wherever I go. It seems like we share the same taste in everything." Her voice was sardonic.

"Perhaps," Claire uttered. "But it could be one or two—it can't be everything."

"I hope so." Doris smiled, creasing a sly eyebrow. "Because it so happens that I hate sharing," she said crossly, clearly sending a threat.

Or a warning? Claire couldn't tell.

"Well, good luck on that. At least we can still share the restaurant, no?" Claire graced her a shameless glance, caring so little that she fucked her man right in his ravish penthouse just two nights ago.

She was just going to kneel down and ask God for forgiveness for this. But not now, she thought inwardly.

"The restaurant?" Doris muttered, smirking. "Oh, yes, it's a great place."

"And I work around here," Claire reminded her, "so it's not really a coincidence now, is it?" She shrugged.

"Right, I forgot that you work at Starlight. Obviously you must come here a lot," said Doris and at the same time Jorge found his way back, cutting their banter. "I see you have company." She glances at Jorge.

"Indeed I have," Claire replied coolly.

"Am I interrupting?" Jorge asked, standing behind Claire, and across from Doris, who looked a little amused at the sight of the two together.

"Not at all. I was only saying hi to Claire," Doris said, her smile barely touching her lips. "It's me who seems to be interrupting here, I guess." Her eyes shone.

Frowning, Jorge stared quizzically between the two ladies. Something wasn't right, he probably thought. However, he seemed to have absolutely no idea on what was going on.

"Well, too bad. I'd love to continue chatting but we need to go home." Claire stood up, fixing her black bodycon dress, the same one Ryan bought her.

Man, she loved how it hugged her succulent body, exposing a bit of her fine cleavage, and her beautiful legs were out on the display, the dress length only reaching her lower thighs.

"Home?" Doris flushed.

"Yeah, that's what I said." Claire huffed a small laugh, imagining the ideas lurching in Doris 'mind as though she lived in it.

Perhaps Jorge had become her lover in the Director's psyche. How silly!

"Sure, that's no problem with me." Doris smiled. "We can always finish where we stopped, Claire. Good evening to you both."

Where they stopped? What was the meaning of that? Claire was alerted.

"Good evening to you, too," she replied and Doris left with a curt nod.

"Let's go?" Jorge asked softly. Claire nodded and both made an exit.

Outside Claire exhaled heavily as though she'd been holding her breath forever. Her heart was racing in her chest, guilt-charged. How could she talk to Doris like that? She walked pensively towards Jorge's car, pondering. Really she had turned into a bitch.

But was she going to give up on Ryan? No, she was supposed to have forgotten him by now! Chaos invaded her heart and brain, waging war. Doris's tone of voice was full of sarcasm earlier. She was being nasty without being vulgar. Could it be that she knew about Ryan and her?

"Is everything okay?" Jorge asked, derailing her training of thoughts.

"Huh?" she gasped.

Jorge narrowed his eyes. "I'm asking if you're okay, because you look like you've seen a ghost," he repeated, laughing indulgently.

God! Now she was being obvious, wasn't she?

"Oh, yeah, I am okay." Her smile was elusive. "Are you going home early today? Because I am."

"Yeah, I'm done for the day," Jorge answered.

"Okay, let's go." They both hopped in and the ride commenced.

"Who was that lady earlier? You two seemed to know each other, but then you looked like enemies," Jorge, who had been silent the entire time in contemplation, finally spoke.

Claire giggled at that, amused despite the trouble she was in. "Why would you think we're enemies?" she asked, glancing at him.

Jorge shrugged, his expression soft. "I don't know. I just sensed some kind of . . . tension?" he remarked, and Claire winced. He chuckled. "Well, I feel like I've seen her before. Who is she?"

"Maybe you have," Claire answered, reclining back in her seat with a sigh. "Her name is Doris. She works at SK—PR Director or something? I don't know."

"Oh, at SK," Jorge muttered thoughtfully.

"Yeah, but I've only met her recently," Claire said vaguely.

"And yet you two looked like rivals?" John grinned.

"Oh please," said Claire, flushing. "I'm not sure what you saw to think that way, but I assure you it's not. Why would we be?"

Because she was sleeping with *her* man? Her subconscious wasn't dumb not to remind her.

"Okay." Jorge called it off and another moment of silence took place until they pulled into a traffic jam.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Jorge?" Claire suddenly asked him.

He looked startled. "Um, no. I had one but we broke up not long ago. What about you?" he asked with a smile.

"Me?" Claire chuckled ridiculously. "I don't think I have one. I mean, I don't have one," she said.

What a complex life she had! She mentally laughed at herself.

"I don't get it." Jorge laughed briefly. "You sound like you're not sure or something. Is it a complicated kind of relationship? Because I know such things exist." He was ingenuous about it.

Perhaps a sex partner, Claire thought, and his name was Ryan Stevens.

"It's not complicated, I just don't have one." She decided to be subtle.

"That's odd," Jorge murmured under his breath. "Are all the guys in your office blind or something?"

"Jorge!" Claire exclaimed, and he laughed hard. "What are you insinuating now, huh?" She was coy.

"Nothing, Claire, don't get me wrong," he told her. "We're siblings, blood related or not. I just think it's odd that you're single." His voice was serious.

"Why?" Claire scowled, bemused.

"Because you're smart, you're beautiful and most of all . . . you're kind. So those dudes should definitely check their eyesight." He smiled softly.

"I'm flattered, I guess," Claire uttered, recalling similar words coming from Ryan. She was definitely missing him.



Unbidden, the day she kissed Ryan for the first time flashed in her mind. Would things be different if she'd controlled her hormones that evening? She wondered, imagining her previous life before meeting him.

At last they arrived home. Claire rushed into her room for a warm and relaxing bath. It'd been one hell of a mental exhaustion for a day, especially after seeing Doris at the restaurant. Closing her eyes, she let the warm water take her anxiety away.

*"You look more beautiful this way," he said gently, caressing her breasts with his naughty, expert hands. "So beautiful." His thumb rubbed her nipple, arousing it.*

*Claire threw her head on his shoulder, moaning. His breath on her skin was shuddering. She could feel his erection poking her butt, throbbing readily as he's seated behind her, possessing her body as his. Oh she loved his presence—all of him.*

*"Have you been fucked in the tub before?" he asked, his voice hoarse, kissing her neck sensually.*

*"No," Claire breathed, her breath ragged.*

*"Good. I'm going to fuck you in here. But first let's see what we can do with this." His finger suddenly eased in her sex, deeply.*

*"Ah!" Claire snapped abruptly out of this lascivious fantasy, panting softly, her face sweaty.*

What the fuck! Claire snapped abruptly while panting heavily. She was still in the bathroom.

"Fuck, Claire! Stop thinking of him!" she groaned and rose up to finally leave the tub.

An hour later she was in bed, lying on her tummy, rechecking all of Ryan's messages and their many exchanges. A smile escaped her lips, and realized she was extremely missing him. Calling him became her temptation. But no, she wasn't going to give in to her desires.

A call from Gena saved her from herself. It was already dark and the series she was watching had begun tiring her. She hardly paid attention to it anyway, for her mind was already occupied by something else. Stretching and yawning, she picked the call.

"Hi, sweetie," Gena uttered.

"Hey. You good?" Claire asked with a faint smile. She sat up, combing her messed up hair with her fingers.

"I'm fine. Actually I'm hyped!" Gena screamed on the other end, urging Claire's eyebrow to rise heavenward. "I'm super hyped!" she added gleefully.

"Okay, at least some good news for a change." Claire grinned, her mood lifted. "Shoot. What happened?" she demanded.

"Harry invited me over to his place tomorrow, and I'm so freaking out. I mean, both good and freaking out!" Gena said, her voice high pitched.

"Alright, let's start with the bad freak." Claire shifted slowly towards her bedroom couch. "Why are you freaking out? It's not like you've regained your virginity or something, that you're scared it might hurt in case the hot chocolate makes an indecent move."

She could imagine the Asian eyes rolling at the remark.

"I know," said Gena. "It's just . . . I don't know, Claire. I'm suddenly nervous."

"Of what?" The swimming pool and garden caught Claire's eyes through the window, relaxing her capricious mind for a change.

"What if I'm moving too fast? I think I'm getting too involved with him. He's nice, really, very nice that I feel like he's too good for me," Gena said, and it was so unusual of her.

"Stop!" Claire snapped, sitting straight. "You're the most self-confident girl I know. You never had this insecurity thing before, so what's the matter now? And what do you mean he's too good for you, huh? You're the most gorgeous woman I know, in and out, so no man is too good for you, you get it?"

"I don't know." Gena chuckled, a small relief reflected in her voice.

"You're incredible, Gena Montero. And I'm sure Harry knows that, too." Claire smiled fondly.

"You think so?" Gena whispered.

"I know so. Because you're my best friend . . . the greatest one I've ever had, and you're amazing as a woman. Don't ever doubt yourself." Claire was genuine with her words.

"Oh, sweetie. I'm already feeling the overflowing confidence," Gena muttered.

Was she crying? Claire grinned.

"Good. Now stop talking shit," she snapped.

"Okay," Gena said, her sass restored to its usual glory. "I knew I should talk to you, because between us, you have turned to be a real expert recently."

They shared a long and rib-cracking laughter.

"Okay, guess what," Claire uttered.

"Should I get the popcorn?" Gena teased.

"Shut up." Claire laughed even harder.

"Okay, tell me."

"Well, I met Doris today." Claire began to narrate her horror story. "Girl, I think she knows."

"What? Do you think she has snooped?" Gena gasped.

"I'm positive!" Claire said. "She was definitely sending me a message during her speech. Like she really hates my guts."

"Oh girl, what will you do?"

Was there anything to be done?

"Nothing." Claire shrugged. "I guess she won't need to worry anymore, because I'm back to my senses now."

"Meaning?"

"I'm done with Ryan."

"Are you? Are you really?" Gena prompted.

"Yes, Gena. I'm certain this time," Claire said. "And may God help me." She laughed at her own statement.

## TWENTY

Sunday turned too boring for Claire. Decidedly, she and Gena met in the afternoon for a little shopping to clear her head—the distraction she needed to forget him.

"How was your date with Harry last night? He took you to his place, didn't he?" asked Claire while going through some handbags beautifully displayed in her regular boutique.

"Ugh, don't even remind me," Gena replied with rolled eyes. She was having the best champagne glass provided by the boutique as a token. "It was horrible," she added, sitting cross-legged after a long sip.

Claire scowled, staring at Gena over her shoulder. "Horrible? Why?" She returned the first handbag and grabbed another one.

"You wouldn't guess, my friend. That guy took me to his parent's house, can you imagine? Not his place! His parent's!"

"Oh wow!" Claire was baffled, her mouth hanging open.

"You have no idea how rattled I felt when I stood before his perfect family," Gena said. "His mom was something else, Claire. She ate me alive with just a single glance."

"Oh boy!" Claire halted her quest for a handbag and gave Gena her full attention. The boutique was silent as they were currently the only customers. "Was she evil? Like . . . Ursula type of evil?"

"Um, not really. She was just a bit . . . I don't know how to put it. Like she didn't approve of me, but yet she had no heart to say it out loud," Gena said, unsure. "I mean, she was scary: the way she talked, scrutinized me and stuff? I felt like I lost my way home."

"Jeez! That's Terrible. But they weren't nasty, were they? What about his dad? And siblings? Does he have siblings?" Claire proceeded with her handbags as Gena took another sip of champagne.

"Well, his dad was cool. I liked him. He does have a sister, a little brat kind of sister, but she's not a threat," Gena said, and they both laughed at the last remark.

"Shouldn't you be happy, though? At least he's decent enough to introduce you to his family, right?" Claire asked.

"I was not ready for that, Claire," Gena argued strenuously. "You should've seen how his obnoxious mother scowled at me from head to toe, as if I'm from the Amazon! I think she never liked me one bit."

"Oh please!" Claire laughed, fully aware of Gena's exaggeration at times. "You're just scared of how she thinks of you and it's only natural."

"Maybe." Gena sighed. "And may you please stop laughing already? You just don't know how terrible my night was, do you? Meeting the parents can definitely become a trauma."

"Well . . . I can't imagine your face when you found out it was actually your in-laws' place. But then again, I think they were just as startled as you are. I'm pretty sure Harry didn't tell them beforehand."

"You think? Because I didn't even have the chance to ask him. I left immediately after dinner." Gena sat straight.

"Well, maybe they had no idea either," Claire probed. "Sounds to me like Harry surprised you all, so maybe you should give them a chance"

"Oh, I don't know," Gena uttered. "Found anything? How about the black bag over there?" They went on with the shopping.

"No, I don't like it. Let me check the dresses. I need more office clothes," Claire replied. "Hmm, this is yummy." She plucked a carrot one, not her usual type of color.

"Yummy indeed. Go try it while I check these boots I definitely won't be able to afford unless my super rich best friend buys me as she'd promised when she pushed me into this so-not exciting shopping of my life," Gena muttered, sighing. Claire bursted into giggles. "I'm serious, Claire. I'm broke and I shouldn't be here."

"Well, this super rich friend of yours will definitely pay for you while we find a way to get you a job. And don't worry, because Jorge said there's an opening."

"I hope with all my heart." Gena smiled faintly.

They were grabbing a bite when Gena inquired about Ryan. As always, Claire's heart flipped at the name.

"I haven't talked to him since that day," she answered ruefully.

"I see. No wonder you're so . . . that!" Gena pointed at her dull face. "Maybe because he's out of the country. He didn't tell you?" she asked.

"No, he didn't. And he had no reason to," Claire answered pensively.

The following week went uneventfully, except for one time, on Wednesday, when Bruno dropped by and Claire had lunch with him. Despite being busy with work, under a tight deadline, she still found time going way slower than she preferred.

Again she heard nothing from Ryan, and it somehow bothered her immensely without admitting it to herself. However, she kept believing it was better this way, that it's exactly the change she needed for her life to get back to normal.

Friday arrived and Claire's mood kept being bizarre . She couldn't stand the void inside her. Something was definitely not alright no matter how hard she tried to ignore it. But suddenly the idea popped into her head while at home in the evening.

"Are you free tonight?" she asked Gena on the phone.

"Why? Wanna come over?" Gena sounded as bored as she was.

While pacing around her room, Claire replied, "I wanna go out."

"Huh?"

"Let's go to a club. Or . . . anywhere is fine," said Claire, desperate to get out of the four walls.

"What? You want to go to a club? You?" Gena exclaimed loudly.

Claire rolled her eyes. "I'm coming to your place. Wait for me." She hung up.

An hour later she was at Gena's. The Asian was totally amazed by this unusual proposition. Claire and Clubs without any conviction? Ryan was definitely driving her nuts.

"So, let me get this straight," Gena uttered, laughing. "Are you being serious about this clubbing thing?"

"Of course I am," Claire said. "I mean, it's Friday, right? Shouldn't we get off some steam or something? I'm getting depressed sitting around waiting for Monday to arrive," she added while rummaging through Gena's dresser for something to wear.

"Depressed over some Ryan?" Gena said with a provoking smile.

Ryan? Was he the only reason for her moods lately?

"I don't know, Gena, but I don't want to entertain the idea at all. All I want is something flashy and sexy to wear. Any suggestions?"

"This ought to be good," Gena murmured excitedly.

"Yeah, make fun of me!" Claire returned.

Picking and tossing, at last they found what to wear. It felt like their college life was back, and found themselves laughing until an hour or two later when they finally got ready to go.

"Wow, you're looking smoking hot, girlfriend," Gena said when Claire finished putting on a little red dress that cramped her curves into place.

"You look great yourself, Gigi," Claire returned.

"Gigi? It's been a while since I heard that name." Gena laughed.

Heavy music regarded them at the hottest club in the city. Gena was a regular—so many smiles were thrown their way. A Few shots of tequila were what forced Gena onto the dance floor that was already on fire.



Maybe this was going to keep her mind off things for a while, Claire thought as she took a seat at the bar. Smiling, she focused her attention on the bartender, who finally granted his utmost attention to her.

"Have you made up your mind? Because I'm not giving you a cherry soda with how steamy you look," the curly-haired guy behind the counter said.

"What makes you think that I want cherry soda, huh?" Claire asked smilingly. "And even if I did, what's the problem with that?" She already had a simple cocktail but she needed more.

"Everything is wrong with that. It goes against the Friday night rule," he shouted back.

"Oh, really now? Friday night rule?" Claire stared intently at him, and he was easily dragged into the sphere of her terrific eyes. "He blushed. Are you sure you haven't made it up?" she asked.

The bartender laughed aloud. "Okay, you got me there. So, what will you have?" He drew himself back, getting his working mode active.

"Surprise me," Claire said playfully, resting her head on her elbows.

The guy's eyes shone. "As you wish," he said gently and then moved away nonchalantly.

Claire decided to seize the day. Watching people mingling on the dance floor, some making out in some dark corners, others chatting and laughing while seated at the booths with faint light, it was all worth it.

And finally there was a cocktail glass in front of her, a pink liquid dressed with a slice of pineapple, umbrella, and a little straw. She arched an eyebrow at the sight of it, and admittedly it was enchanting to the eyes. The bartender shrugged.

"That was quick. What's the name?" Claire asked him.

"I call it . . ." He leaned over with a big, playful smile. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey gorgeous?" Claire had a soft sip without leaving his eyes. "Are you flirting with me right now?" Her voice was comprehensive.

"Not really, I'm just admiring your eyes." He pulled back to attend another customer.

"How cute," Claire uttered with a smile.

"What did you say?" he asked over his shoulder while picking glasses.

"I said you are not my type!" Claire replied loudly enough for him to hear.

He bursted out laughing, together with another guy who was sitting next to Claire. "Why not? I'm handsome, I'm cool, so why not your type?" He served a smokey whiskey to the guy, still smiling.

"Yes, you are cool," Claire replied. "But I love fire," she thought aloud, and for once she let her mind wander off to Ryan's penthouse, where she got to experience a million emotions in one day.

That's when she felt a hand slipping around her shoulder, startling her. "Hey, stranger?" He grinned at her.

"Gosh! Nathan?" Claire beamed when she discerned that it was her boss.

Nathan took a seat casually beside her, smiling back. "You look awesome, Levy." He winced a bit to catch a proper sight of her. "I saw you earlier, and I thought it was someone else," he said. "Double scotch please!" he told the bartender.

"Um, thanks. I didn't know you also come to these kinds of places," Claire said, licking the little straw of her delicious cocktail.

"Well, I do . . . once in a while. In fact, I'm not the only one; the entire team is over there except you," Nathan replied pointedly.

Claire followed his gaze and saw the rest. "Oh, how would I know if I wasn't invited?" She pursed her lips accusingly.

"Oh, our bad." Nathan gave her an apologetic look. "They wanted to invite you but . . . you know, they thought you wouldn't want to hang out."

"Oh please. Do I look like a pastor's daughter or something?"

He laughed loudly. "Jeez, you're so funny!" And his scotch was presented.

Claire decided to go to the others and said hi. They hanged a bit, before everyone else either went for the dance floor, restroom, or anywhere else away from the booth. In the end she returned to the bar with Nathan.

After a little more talk, mainly about work and other mundane stuff while enjoying another round of drinks, Gena's phone was ringing incessantly inside her purse. Claire opted to ignore as the Asian was utterly busy at the moment.

"It seems like Lydia is already drunk," Claire remarked with a laugh as they spotted one of their colleagues dancing out of the tune.

"Indeed. I just hope no one has recorded that zombie move, or else she won't know peace on Monday when everyone shares the video in the office," Nathan remarked, and they both laughed heartily.

Again, Gena's phone rang, and Claire finally decided to check who it was. She found out it was Harry, and staring at Gena, it was impossible to let her know from all the dancing she'd been doing.

Seeing how persistent the caller was, Claire decided to answer. "Hello?" she uttered, blocking her ear. Nothing was clear—*too much noise*. "Hello?" she yelled louder. It was the same.

She hung up.

"It's impossible to make a decent phone call here. Perhaps you should step outside," Nathan said suggestively.

"Yeah, it was useless," Claire replied, and luckily Gena was jostling her way back. "Oh, here she is."

"What's up, beautiful." Gena kissed her hard on the cheek, her mood at its peak.

"Jeez! I'll really appreciate this display of drunk love and all, but your lawyer has been calling you like crazy," Claire told her.

"Harry?" Gena asked sharply. Claire nodded her affirmation. "You should've just ignored him! He is the most annoying guy I know. How dare he call me now after ignoring my calls the whole day?" she snapped.

Trouble in paradise? Claire sighed.

"Okay, Gena, sit down and relax a bit. You're drunk and you should calm down." She forced her onto the barstool.

"No, I'm not drunk!" Gena lashed. "Wait, I'll show him what I really am," she muttered. "A lawyer or not, no one messes with Gena Montero! Not even the hot chocolate!" She stood up once again.

"Gena, what are you planning, huh?" Claire was appalled.

"Do you mind taking a selfie with us, Claire's boss?" Gena asked Nathan, who had been observing them in silence with a small smile.

"Um, no problem," Nathan answered hesitantly, bemused.

Claire frowned. "What are you doing, Gena?"

"Selfie!" Gena squealed. Saying no more, she placed herself between Claire and Nathan, and then snapped one picture of them.

"Oh God," Claire breathed.

"Hmm, this is good," Gena said, her hand busy on her phone. "And . . . sent!" she muttered.

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Ryan was finally back from his trip to Cuba. As soon as the SK private jet landed, Harry was there to pick him up. Now they were driving back to the city while making small talk regarding the deal they'd just closed.

"So, we're branching to Havana, aren't we? This is exciting." Harry grinned at their triumph.

"We definitely are. Now it's time to show those old men at the next board meeting. It's on Monday, right?" Ryan glanced at him.

"Yeah. This Monday," Harry replied, his eyes constantly on his phone on the dashboard despite handling the steering wheel.

"What's wrong? Are you expecting a call?" Ryan asked him casually, his eyes on his own phone.

"No, it's nothing," Harry replied curtly, but his face spoke completely the opposite—he looked mad.

Ryan smirked. "Is it a woman?" he asked him.

"Oh come on, why would you conclude it's a woman?" Harry snapped evasively.

Ryan creased an eyebrow at that, smiling. "I've never seen that look on your face before. Are you really seeing Gena now? Seems like you two are getting serious, huh?" he teased.

"Stop kidding around!" Harry sighed, his face anxious.

"Sure. I'll stay out of it." Ryan shrugged, finding him amusing.

After a small silence, Harry uttered, "Do you know where those two women are right now?" He gazed at Ryan.

"Those two women?"

"Yes. Gena and . . . your Claire," Harry said.

"Not really. Do I have to?" Ryan frowned tightly.

"Maybe you'd love to." Harry plucked his phone and touched the screen in search of something. "Check this." He handed the phone to Ryan.

It was a picture sent some minutes ago by Gena. Ryan's brows furrowed in apprehension of what Claire was wearing, and most especially when he detected the presence of none other than Nathan Panther.

"Do you know the place?" Ryan asked monotonously.

"I think I do." Harry nodded. "It's the only club Gena goes to, from what she'd told me." He rolled his eyes.

"We're heading there," Ryan articulated.

## TWENTY-ONE

Ryan made a grand entrance in the club. "Am I interrupting?" His voice was deadpan as his eyes settled on Claire.

"Ry-Ryan?" Claire gasped and stood up at the same time, startled. Her eyes squinted in bemusement.

Was this real or some alcohol playing her tricks? She couldn't help but wonder. But seeing that arrogant look, mingled with something like anger on the face of the man standing before her eyes, Claire grasped immediately that it was indeed Ryan.

But what the fuck was he doing here? She gulped, her eyes bored deeply into his. He was devouring her alive, despite the displeasure in his perilous gaze. His eyes were openly scrutinizing her tight dress, the curves, the cleavage, and his lips twisted in a confusing fashion.

"Hi, Panther," he greeted Nathan.

"Oh, hi." Nathan was just as surprised as Claire.

"Mind if I steal your colleague for a minute?" Ryan asked, ignoring Claire's astounded look.

"Um, sure." Nathan huffed a soft laugh, his voice a bit shaky.

"Thanks," Ryan said curtly and turned to Claire. "Shall we?" His usual insolent smile was back on track, his eyes gleaming.

"Ryan, what are you doing here?" Claire demanded quietly. "Do you actually think I'd just leave and—"

"You don't want us to create a scene here, do you, Claire?" Ryan whispered softly into her ear. She shuddered. "I'm fucked with anger right now so I can easily do it."

Anger? Over what? Claire glared at him with a crunchy face and a soft breath escaped her lungs. Considering the legit fact that some of her colleagues were present right

now, and her boss as well, she knew going against Ryan at this moment wasn't in her best interest.

"Fine, let me at least clear the cheque," she answered curtly and swiftly turned to the counter to grab her wallet.

Nathan held her hand and uttered, "I said this is on me, Levy. Welcome to the team treat?"

Ryan rolled his eyes behind Nathan's back. Only Claire managed to see it and she was on the verge of laughing. Fuck, she'd missed him terribly in spite of the mixed emotions she was currently experiencing. Was she glad he was here? Or was she not? She had no idea.

"Okay," she said politely to her boss, ignoring Ryan's cavalier look. "And today was fun. See you on Monday," she added, and Nathan smiled tightly.

"Are we done?" Ryan urged, sarcasm lacing his voice as he added, "Or you still have to kiss him goodbye so that you can finally seal your beautiful evening with butterflies?"

"Don't be a dick!" Claire murmured to his face and walked past him. She could feel his smile as he followed suit.

Ryan was right behind her as they headed to the exit, jostling past some guys who couldn't miss the chance to whistle at the sight of Claire. It made Ryan's hand tug hold waist possessively and shut them off as she smiled up at him.

Sneaky jerk! She loved it.

"You enjoy these lustful stares, don't you?" Ryan accused.

"I'm not answering that because you're twisted," Claire replied. "Oh no!" she suddenly muttered, thoughtful.

"What?" Ryan frowned.

"I forgot about Gena." She stopped moving, turning around towards the dance floor.



"Don't worry about her," replied Ryan, "she's probably outside with Harry. Let's get out of this place." He took her hand.

"Harry is here?" Claire was surprised. He nodded. "Ha! I can't believe this. So women can't have fun on their own in this century, can they?" she mumbled.

"Here we go again," Ryan remarked with a sigh, leading her out through the door. "Always challenging." It was less of an argument until they finally stepped away from the heavy music, and right outside it was a bit relaxing due to fresh air and less noise.

Claire spotted Gena and Harry arguing outside near the parking lot. She looked at Ryan, and he only shrugged.

"Let them sort their own issue," he said haltingly, "because we have ours to solve."

"Hah!" Claire huffed, catching a soothing breath. "Of course we do. Let me return Gena's purse first, because we indeed have a lot to discuss."

"Sure, baby." Ryan grinned diabolically, and Claire's eyes hissed at him.

And with that, she followed Gena. Harry seemed to have had his fill from all the drunk Asian woman. He was grunting, tired of explaining himself.

"Um, excuse me," Claire begged for an audience.

"Sure, go ahead, Claire," Harry replied with great civility and strode towards where Ryan was.

"Are you okay?" Claire handed the purse to Gena.

"Of course I'm okay." Gena spat. "Do you really think a few tequila shots could take me down?" She ran a hand through her hair.

"Actually, it was more than a few," Claire said with a laugh. "But anyway, what next? Do you want me to stick around? Because I wanna stick around." She peeled a nervous glance at Ryan, who was now talking to Harry.

Gena laughed loudly. "Why? Are you scared to be alone with him?"

"Honestly, I am," Claire confessed. "Is that weird? I mean, not even in my wildest dream have I expected to see him here. And I was trying so hard to avoid him." She puffed out some air.

"Weirdly fair," Gena replied. "Well, Harry wants us to get this over with before the night ends, and I want the same thing I guess."

Claire was fond of them. "He is so sweet—unlike someone I know," she remarked while shooting daggers at Ryan. "Well, I guess I'll just get going and face my fate for tonight."

"Okay." Gena chuckled, very aware of that fate's name.

"But please be nice, Gena. The guy is trying," Claire whispered.

"I'll try." They shared a friendly hug before parting.

Claire returned to Ryan, and Harry to Gena afterwards.

"I have plenty of questions right now," Claire muttered as she stood before Ryan. "But I'll only ask one."

"Go ahead." Ryan replied coolly, his eyes narrowed down at her.

"What's the meaning of this?" she asked.

"Meaning of what?" He scowled.

"Stop playing dumb with me, Ryan! I'm talking about you coming all the way here just to ruin my night. I can understand Harry's attitude, because he has a good reason to. But you? What made you come here, huh?"

"I also have a good reason." Ryan said.

"And what is it?"

"You," he said pointedly, and suddenly his face darkened. "Why were you flirting with Panther earlier?"

"Excuse me!" Claire exclaimed. "I wasn't flirting with him! And even if that was the case, it has nothing to do with you now, does it?" She pounced on him, her chest touching his.

"Oh it surely does!" Ryan muttered between gritted teeth "Everything about you, Claire, matters to me. Do you get it?" He gripped her waist tightly, pulled her closer to him, his face angered.

"No, I don't get it," Claire objected, panting, stirred by his tight hold. "I thought we're done with the shit, Ryan—when you decided to mute for over a week and left to God-knows-where without a word."

"Oh?" Ryan smirked, amused.

"Yeah," Claire breathed. "I thought it was over between us, and I was relieved that at last everything's back to normal. But guess what, here you are, once again to mess with my life, you jerk! Do you enjoy it? Do you like this—"

Ryan silenced her with a kiss, stoutly taking control of her psyche. She grumbled, holding his shoulders for support as he squeezed her back tightly, paying no attention to anything else; they were in the parking lot and probably someone could've passed by.

His lips, as always, were demanding of her mouth, twirling and swirling his tongue with hers, deeply, restlessly, both fighting for dominance. How she missed him! Claire couldn't deny this fact, and she felt conned when he pulled back, leaving her wanton.

"That's what I thought either," Ryan said, panting the same way she did. "But it all changed when I saw the picture of you, and that . . . that Panther. I hate it when you're with him, or any other man, while dressed like this. Fuck, can't you see how distracting you are, Claire?" He trailed his impetuous eyes down her chest, peeking through her swollen breasts barely covered by the dress cups.

Claire scowled at that. Her dress was just a party dress and some chicks in the club had it worse compared to hers. What's with him? Was he jealous? She smiled. For some stupid reasons this simple fact brought Claire a grand felicity. She was touched.

"And so what?" she questioned him, playfully grazing his growing stubble with the back of her hand. "Do you want me to praise you for your heroic act of ruining my night just because you disprove my dress? Because I was really enjoying myself there."

"Oh really?" Ryan snorted.

"Yes," Claire whispered.

"Do you want to go back?" Ryan's voice was calm, his eyes serious. "If that's what you want, you can go ahead, Claire. I won't stop you." He was mad.

Claire took a step back mentally. Did she want him gone and return to that noisy place?

"If not let's get the fuck out of here." Ryan led her toward the taxi that'd been waiting forever.

They were both in the backseat, taciturn, staring at either side of the windows. But a while later Claire found herself staring at him, and she was dying to make him talk somehow.

"I missed you," Ryan uttered hoarsely. "You were always on mind," he added, and nothing but sincerity laced his now calm voice.

Claire could feel the butterflies fluttering their wings in her stomach.

"If you did, then why didn't you do anything about it?" she asked him with a perfect indifference.

Ryan smiled gently. "Because I wanted to do as you want. I wanted to leave you alone."

"And then what changed?" Claire returned, her gaze tentative.

"I don't know." Ryan sighed, tipping his head exhaustively onto the headrest. "Maybe you're too irresistible to be left alone." His smile was pure provocation.

The heat rose into Claire's body, her core aroused by his voice alone.

"I met your girlfriend last week," she told him, unable to hide the feeling of discomfort at the remembrance of her encounter with Doris. "She knows about us; I can feel that she knows."

Ryan's face didn't flex. "What did she say to you?" he quizzed.

Claire took a deep breath, dropping her head on his shoulder. He slipped his hand around her neck and pulled her closer, body to body, hugging her side.

"It's not even important, Ryan. Whatever she said doesn't seem to cure my illness, my stupidity, and you're the reason for everything," Claire muttered in a low, defeated voice. "Where did you go?" she asked him.

"To Havana," he replied.

"Business?"

"Hmm. Business."

"Is it beautiful over there?" She looked up at him.

"It is. But I had no time to explore the beauty of it."

"What a waste." She sighed.

Ryan laughed. "Perhaps next time I'll take you with me so we can explore together."

Only if that next time existed, Claire thought without making an audible comment. She shut her eyes at his soft kiss on top of her head. Was she ever going to stop melting in his arms? Wanting him to hold her tight? Desiring more of him each time? She couldn't tell as she loved all of him.

The car finally pulled over at Claire's house after a short traffic free ride. And that's when she realized how crazy her feelings were growing for this crazy man beside her. She didn't want to go away from him. How could she when all she needed was feeling him deep inside her?

"We're here, Claire. You should go in and rest," Ryan said calmly.

For once ever since they met Claire wished for Ryan to beg her to stay. She hoped that he'd at least force her, as he usually did, but he did not do as such. Staring at each other, they remained silent inside the car, the driver waiting with all his patience for someone to exit.

No one did for almost a minute.

"If it weren't for Doris," Ryan uttered out of the blue, "would things be different between us?"

Would they? Claire wondered.

"I don't know, but I'm certainly sure that you're not the type of man I dreamed of," she answered.

Ryan frowned. "And who is your type? Panther?" His tone was accusing.

"What's with you and Nathan? Are you jealous of him?" Claire chuckled.

"Ugh!" Ryan groaned dismissively.

Claire chuckled again. "But then again, why not? He may not be that handsome, but he still looks good enough. He's charming, he does make me smile most of the time, and he's single."

"I swear if you continue talking that way about him, I'm going to transfer him to some overseas branch!" Ryan snapped quietly, his voice menacing.

"What? Are you crazy?" Claire laughed aloud. "Why would you send an innocent and hard-working man away just because you don't like how I talk about him?" she blurted.

"Because I can," Ryan replied blankly. "And I thought by now you've already confirmed that I'm crazy and capable of doing just that."

"No, you can't do that," Claire argued.

Could he?

"Oh yes I can, Claire. Try me," Ryan replied.

"Oh no, you're just bluffing, Ryan Stevens!" She bit her bottom lip.

"Don't try me, Claire. I'm not as good as you want to believe."

"I know you're bad—so very bad. But I also know you're good," Claire said softly, and her words seemed to deepen into Ryan's heart.

His eyes shone amorously.

"You really love trouble," he muttered, smiling indulgently while stroking her hair. She smiled ditto. "Let's go home," he said.

"Home?" Claire's voice lurched haphazardly.

"Mmm." Ryan bobbed his head affirmatively.

"Your home, you mean?"

"If you prefer that name, yes," Ryan uttered. "Stay with me," he added, and it was enough to melt Claire's heart.

"Let's go," she breathed.

## TWENTY-TWO

The private Elevator shut after they both slipped in. Ryan's eyes were on Claire, devouring her quietly.

"What?" Claire breathed, her chest rising and falling as she couldn't understand the caprice of her hormones.

Why was she feeling like a little prey waiting to be pounced on? Desire pooled inside her; she wanted him to grab her, kiss her, and feel all the fireworks he made her feel. She'd missed him.

And Ryan wasn't indifferent.

There was something he couldn't put his finger on whenever he was with her. If it was desire, then it was stronger than he'd ever felt toward a woman before.

"Oh fuck!" Ryan wasted no time as he hauled her toward the wall, gripping her throat, and his mouth was holding hers captive. His bag was on the floor, followed by Claire's wallet.

He was impatient. He kissed her hard, demandingly, roughly, squeezing her breasts, her buttocks, yanking her dress to her waist. Claire loved it. That fire he ignited made her feel alive. She let him assault her, relishing every kiss, touch, and bite.

His finger eased inside her pantie, and she moaned as he rubbed her most feminine core, arousing her further. Damn! She shut her eyes, her lips busy mingling with his.

"Ryan . . ." She was panting heavily, watching his lustful gaze as they eyed one another. "I missed you," she uttered, holding his face quickly, hungry to feel him. "I missed you more, baby. Fuck I want you, Claire. Now. Right here!" Ryan groaned, his voice hoarse, intoxicated, and the next thing Claire felt was her face against the wall, her waist bending slightly.

"Oh God," she moaned, Ryan's finger inside her sex.



"Yes, baby." He was unzipping his fly, just a little space to free his already hard erection. "I'm taking you from behind, Claire. You look so good this way," he muttered, messing with her hair after a swift kiss.

"Yes, please," Claire murmured, her breath sound and ragged. "Fuck me, Ryan," she begged and he briskly pounced inside her.

"Argh!" he groaned, stilling onto her, filling her slowly. "I love how I feel inside you, Claire. You're perfect, baby." He took a deep breath, and she held hers, waiting taciturn. Slowly Ryan eased out, and then pounced back in.

"Ah!" Claire cried, feeling his resplendent length deep inside her sex. Holding her steady, Ryan began thrusting her, in and out, faster and faster, again and again, driving her crazy.

It was sweet, sexy, the longing adding pretty much to it. Why was this so right? Claire felt it was, so did Ryan. They were perfect, moving in synergy, rasping and crying with pleasure.

The elevator came to a halt as he came loudly, hugging her tight. They stilled for a good while, breathing soundly, their bodies locked physically and spiritually. It felt ethereal.

"What are you doing to me, Ryan?" Claire muttered, dropping her head tiredly on his shoulder, sweating.

"Exactly what you're doing to me, Claire." Ryan kissed her neck gently. "I can't stay away from you. I go nuts when I try." He chuckled.

"You're already nuts, though." Claire chuckled along. "What do I do with you? With us both? We're both nuts, Ryan."

"Don't do anything. Let's get you out of this elevator and give you what you deserve." Ryan pulled back and zipped up his pants.

"What I deserve?" Claire flushed as she turned around to face him.

Ryan grinned. "Yeah? You didn't come and I'm not selfish, baby. I love hearing you screaming my name when you come for me." He picked the bag and grabbed her hand, smiling seductively. "Where should I fuck you next, huh? In the bedroom or here in the living room? Or when we shower later?" he cajoled her.

Damn him! Why was he talking of sex as if he was addressing something mundane? Claire scowled.

"Stop being silly, Ryan. I'm not doing it again," she said, flushing.

"I know," Ryan returned, laughing gently. "I know you prefer surprise treats and instead planned ones. Now, have you had dinner?" He was back to serious.

"Um, no?" Claire shrugged.

"You need to be punished," he muttered, his voice unlighted. He threw the bag on the couch. "You were drinking with an empty stomach, Claire. What the fuck!" He glared at her.

Oh boy? Back into Daddy Ryan? Claire rolled her eyes mentally.

"Well . . . I wasn't feeling like eating," she muttered, ignoring his usual scolding.

"What a sleazy excuse. Come, let's see what we can do about that," said Ryan and both headed towards the kitchen.

As always, the kitchen was neat and smelled a smooth scent of lime . . . or lemon? Claire couldn't differentiate the two. The fruit basket was full, the snack cabinets, too. And even the fridge when Ryan opened it to check if there was anything decent to eat.

"How do you have so many groceries when you were away for a week?" Claire was surprised, but she suddenly got a hint. Silly her! "Oh, does she drop by to do the chores?" she quizzed.

"Who?" Ryan prompted while rummaging through the cabinets.

"Who else? Your girlfriend?" Claire took a seat.

"She can't do that," Ryan replied frankly, frowning a bit.

Really now? Claire smirked. "Why can't she?" she asked.

"Because she doesn't have access to my house," Ryan answered curtly. He was holding a jam, butter and bread. "Breakfast for dinner, do you mind?" he asked, his smile hopeful.

"She doesn't have access? But why?" Ignoring his final remark, Claire stuck to the first question.

"Damn it, Claire! Can you please stop talking about Doris? She doesn't have access to my house because I don't want anyone to have it!" Ryan lashed furiously, his eyes dark. "The only person who has it is the one who cleans, buys the fucking groceries, and cooks sometimes. Now, is that enough for an explanation?"

"Okay, I get it! You don't need to shout!" Claire spat. Ryan sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Claire. I didn't mean to yell." He strode towards her and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry," he breathed

"You always yell at me," Claire uttered, her voice as soft as a little girl's. "I hate it." She was melting in his big arms.

"You're just so fucking annoying, that's why I yell sometimes." He glanced tenderly at her, and a smile crossed his face at the sight of her pursed lips. "You know what? I think I better tell you this because I can't drag it any—"

"I'm going to use the bathroom, Ryan. I want to pee," Claire urged.

"Oh, okay." Ryan let her go.

The bathroom was in cream and gold furnishing, quite clean and well-kept.

"What's wrong with you, Claire? You knew where you're getting yourself into, so then why does it bother you now, huh?" She took a deep sigh while eyeing the mirror, unable to understand this change in her feelings toward Ryan each new day.

Back in the kitchen, Claire found Ryan busy with dinner setting. A plate of well-cut sandwiches was on the breakfast table, and some scrambled eggs were just poured out of the skillet, and the aroma was inviting.

Oh, she loved watching him cooking.

"A sandwich?" Ryan asked upon seeing her.

"Hmm, it looks delicious." She smiled while marching closer.

"Sit down," Ryan instructed.

"Thanks." She grinned. It's these little displays of affection that stopped her from leaving, right? Claire wondered, putting away the great sex of her life he constantly made her taste. "Hmm, yummy!" She was chewing greedily after a bite.

She was very hungry, and Ryan seemed pleased that she was.

"What a food monger," he uttered in a low voice, smiling.

"I heard that. Aren't you the same? Look at us, eating in the middle of the night," Claire said, causing scattered chuckles in the air.

"I know, right?" Ryan poured her a glass of cold juice.

"I love Guava juice. It is my favorite," Claire said, taking a small sip.

"What a coincidence! I love it, too." He was applying some mayonnaise into his sandwich.

"Do you like that thing?" Claire asked with disgust.

"Of course. I love my sandwich with mayonnaise." Ryan said.

"I hate the sight of it!" Claire grimaced.

"Why? Does it remind you of something?" Ryan teased, wiggling his eyebrows playfully.

"Not really, it's just—" Frowning, Claire stopped when she realized the meaning behind his stupid remark. "You're so vulgar, you know. How dirty!" She nudged him.

They both started laughing.

"I'm just trying to understand our differences here," Ryan uttered, having some eggs. Claire rolled her eyes. "Anyways, I believe there must be some things we have in common."

"Okay, let's try this," Claire said suggestively. "Fried chicken or steak?" she asked.

"Steak," Ryan answered, grinning.

"I love chicken," she uttered, and he laughed softly. "Winter or summer?"

"Um . . . Summer," Ryan replied curtly. "Why would I want too much cold?" He bit his sandwich.

"I love winter, because it's good for cuddling," Claire said dreamily. Ryan wrenched an eyebrow at that. "Okay let's see, the best vacation spot: beach or the countryside?"

After a little thinking, Ryan said, "A beach I guess."

"I love a cool country side, with large trees, and maybe a river? But I love beaches, too. Well, anywhere is fine for me," Claire said calmly.

"Well, black or white?" She looked up at him, smiling.

"Black," Ryan answered.

"Ugh, so typical of you," Claire muttered. "Truth or dare?"

"God!" Ryan laughed aloud. "Dare."

"I dare you to carry me to the bedroom, and sleep with your hands off of me tonight," Claire stipulated.

"Piece of cake!" Ryan said confidently. "But can you?"  
What the fuck! Of course she could do it.

"We'll see about that, Ryan, we'll see." She smiled. "About our differences, I give up. We're like north and south."

"That's the point, Claire. Unlike charges attract," Ryan remarked, amusement patent in his voice. "Oh, by the way, I'll be having dinner at home this weekend. And I want to be the first one to invite you over. Will you come with me?"

"At home—you mean at your grandpa's?" Claire asked. He nodded affirmatively. "Um . . . Sure. But why? What's the occasion?" She was curious.

"Nothing grand. It's some kind of family tradition that we all have dinner together at the end of the month. Our mother started it, some years ago, and grandfather won't let it die," Ryan explained.

He made it sound like an obligation, but Claire liked it.

"Okay, invitation accepted," Claire acquiesced.

"Wow, you're so cooperative today. What's going on?" Ryan teased, seeing how agreeable she had been for a change.

"Maybe because you've rested being a jerk for once? But don't push it, Ryan, I may start to rebel." Claire said, and there started the bickering.

After dinner and shower they retired to bed. It was past midnight and evidently exhaustion was part of both of them.

Ryan flicked the lights off. "You looked sexy in that red dress," he said while laying down.

"So I've heard," Claire bragged, "from two guys, excluding you." She grinned at him. Ryan glowered at her through the luminous mood outside. "Oh yeah? And you must be very happy, huh?" Sarcasm splattered on his displeased face.

"Of course, I am! Who wouldn't be?" Claire smiled, provoking him.

Ryan sighed heavily. "I'll let it slide this time." He drew back onto the pillow. "But don't you ever dress like that when I'm not with you, get it?"

There was a crazy part of Claire that loved his controlling nature. She had no idea why but it stirred her up in some strange ways, and even more from the fact that she would object to him whenever he played bossy.

"Says who? I can wear whatever I want . . . and whenever," she argued.

"Okay, pray that I don't catch you," Ryan muttered. "Because if I do—"

"What? What will you do, huh?" Claire jumped atop him, swiftly. She leaned down toward his face. "Will you punish me with your kisses? Or lock me up in this castle?"

Ryan smirked, biting the corner of his mouth. "You're really looking for trouble, aren't you?" he breathed huskily.

"Am I?" Claire quipped, softly grinding her behind on him.

"Don't provoke me, Claire. I'm not sure if I can resist the temptation, so let's try to sleep quietly. I have a meeting in the morning, and I'm damn tired."

"How about a goodnight kiss?" She gently pressed her lips on his, and his arms slipped around her waist in similar fashion.

Their kiss was very slow, accurate, and intense. It was enticing.

"Damn," Ryan grunted suddenly and tried to move.

"I thought we had an agreement, sir. Just a kiss, remember? Goodnight." She whispered, and pulled herself away from his arms.

"Really? Are you playing hard to get now?" Ryan lamented, panting.

Claire chuckled. "There's always next time, Ryan. You have a meeting tomorrow, and I need to visit the construction site "

"Good. We'll go together then, because I need to see how the work is proceeding." He dropped back.

"Okay, let's do it," Claire relented, "so that everyone can know I'm sleeping with the big boss."

"No one will know, but it doesn't sound bad either." Ryan smirked.

"Jerk!" Claire giggled.

"A handsome jerk?" He grinned.

"An evil jerk." She shifted to his side and lied down. "Tell me about your trip. Why did you go to Havana for one whole week?"

"Well . . ." Ryan started telling her of it until they both fell asleep in each other's arms.

Next day, around nine in the morning, Claire woke up and sadly the house owner was nowhere to be seen. Just great! She yawned, stretching. Tiredly, she clambered out of bed so as to get herself ready. That's when she found a note on the bedside table and read it.

*Hey beautiful,*

*I had to leave early because of a meeting, and I didn't want to wake you. I'm not sure when I'll come back, but you're not a prisoner. You can leave anytime you want using the door; and if you prefer our elevator, the pass code is . . .*

*Later, R.*

What a great way to begin her morning! Blushing, with butterflies dancing gleefully in her stomach, Claire gave Ryan a call.

"Hi, there. Am I interrupting?" she said softly.

"No, I'm glad you called," replied Ryan. "Are you still at home?"

"You mean, *your* home?" she corrected.

"Our home." Ryan's voice was gentle and teasing.

"Stop it, Ryan. It's not funny." Claire headed to the bathroom to start getting ready for work.

"I'm not being funny, though. It was just an apartment a few days ago, and now it feels like home," Ryan said. Claire held her tongue. "Okay, forget what I said. So are you going to the site?"

"Yes, but after I go home and change," she answered, her feeling unfathomable after his comment.

"Oh, I forgot you were wearing a disturbing dress last night. Well you can drive yourself home; there's a car key where you found the note," Ryan instructed.

Oh? Claire flushed. "I don't have a license," she muttered while grabbing a toothbrush, her eyes on the mirror.

What a sight! Messy hair, glowing skin, a happy smile. It was worth it. Ryan gasped. "Seriously, Claire? What are you? A cave woman?"

"Thanks a lot for insulting me." She grinned, squirting some toothpaste, her phone between her ear and shoulder.

"Oh please, don't give me that! Get yourself a license, will you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Don't call me Sir!" he barked, and it was enough to make her laugh.



She started brushing her teeth after saying, "Don't worry, Ryan, I'll just grab a taxi outside."

"I don't like that," replied Ryan, deadpan.

"Well, bear with it." She rolled her eyes. "Thanks for giving me the password, I'm honored."

"Oh, you should be."

"You just can't be modest, can you? Well, I'm hanging up. Have a nice day."

"Likewise, and call me when you get home."

"I'll think about it, Sir."

"DON'T call me Sir!" he snapped and Claire hung up, laughing.

It was eleven in the morning when she finally got out of the private elevator and into the parking lot. She only used it out of curiosity of whether the password given was authentic or not.

She was elated to find that it was, and that Ryan gave it to her willingly.

"Claire?" A voice called her, startling her badly.

"Bruno," she uttered, swallowing hard.

Her heart skipped a beat.

## TWENTY-THREE

Claire knew she was done for. Only a fool wouldn't discern that she was coming from Ryan's place as he'd just exited his private elevator, dressed a bit vulgarly for her usual taste.

She wouldn't be surprised if she looked like a call girl, she mused inside. Now what was she going to say?

"Um, hi." Her voice was feeble.

"Hi." Bruno tried to smile but it was almost impossible. He couldn't hide the confusion, and his usually charming face was currently a brochure of questions. "Are you going somewhere?" he asked gently, seeing how uncomfortable she looked.

The dress was one among the reasons. Jeez, it was only meant for the darkness—now that it was beaming bright, she felt more naked under his gaze.

"Home," she replied.

"Oh. Alright, maybe I could give you a ride if you want?" Bruno offered. Such a gentleman! Claire smiled restively. "I mean, if you don't have a car, that is."

Well, she had the keys of Ryan's car, but it felt awkward telling that to Bruno. Decidedly, she acquiesced to his offer.

"Thank you," she muttered as he opened the door of his silver Chevy Corvette.

An intense silence filled when they started moving. Claire had no guts to utter a word, and Bruno looked too serious to be mindless. It crept her, thinking of what was going on in his mind.

Damn, this was uncomfortable.

"So, are you and Ryan . . . kind of together right now?" Bruno asked after hesitating for a while. It was sudden, but it was bound to happen. "I guess you're coming from his place, right?" he added carefully, his smile unable to touch his lips as it normally did.

Oh God! Claire took a deep sigh.

"Um, I guess," she answered vaguely.

"You guess?" Bruno chuckled, glancing at her briefly.

Claire sighed again, rattled. What was she supposed to say? That she was just fucking him whenever she was horny but they have no name ready for their affair? It was complicated.

"It's complicated," Claire thought out loud, meaning it.

Bruno scowled. "Why? Does Ryan give you a hard time or something?" His voice was gentle, avuncular concern lacing it.

He wasn't mad, was he? Claire couldn't read him as she desired to. He was hard to fathom. It's as though he was angry a while ago, but now he was cool and casually inquired of it.

"Well—" She stammered, fiddling with her fingers. "I don't know how to explain it, Bruno, it's a delicate matter." She was getting overwhelmed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Claire. I don't mean to pry, trust me. I'm just too surprised, that's all." Bruno said upon seeing her discomfort.

Evidently Claire wasn't up for discussion about her relationship with Ryan. However, in Bruno's case, she felt compelled to explain further.

He'd been a good and caring friend from the very start. She just didn't know how to say it; she was so afraid to ruin the image he had of her.

"It's okay, Bruno," she said, staring at him with difficulty. "You don't need to be nice about this. I know what you're thinking right now because this is not just about me and Ryan."

"What do you mean?" Bruno frowned bemusedly, handling the steering wheel with ease.

"I mean, I shouldn't be involved with Ryan and I know. But it just happened," Claire uttered.

"Huh?" Bruno looked more confused.

"Frankly, I don't even know how Ryan and I reached this point. It just happened like some stupid game, and then I forgot everything else," Claire said, and he patiently

listened. "I'm so ashamed that you had to find out like this, Bruno. I can't even say that I wanted to tell you because I'll be lying. In fact, I didn't want anyone to find out about this."

"I understand," Bruno said with a smile; his usual smile.

"You do?" Claire was utterly shocked.

How could he understand her being a shameless bitch? Now she was confused.

"Hey relax, beautiful," Bruno said casually. "I don't see any reason to feel ashamed of it. It's not like we easily have control of our own feelings when it comes to matters of the heart, right? I think you're being hard on yourself."

"Even so," Claire whispered, her eyes on her lap. "I know it's wrong and I shouldn't be with him."

Not while he had Doris. It was totally wrong, and she was the guilty one.

"Why are you insisting it's wrong?" Bruno asked. "Both you and my brother are grown up adults. You're both of sound mind, and you're both single . . . right? So what's the problem if you decide to have something intimate? I think it's totally okay, and you're just overreacting for nothing." He grinned at her.

Was he serious? Claire could laugh at this but she had no energy to do so.

"Of course it's not okay—" She paused. Something between Bruno's words hit the back of her mind abruptly. "What did you just say?" she asked him briskly.

"That there's no problem with you being with Ryan?" Bruno beamed.

"No, not that!" Claire practically snapped, her curiosity wilder. "About Ryan and me being single; what do you mean by that?" she quizzed.

"Oh, that? Nothing much." Bruno shrugged. "Just the fact that you're a single woman, I suppose, and as far as Ryan is concerned, he has been single for years now for all I know."

"What?" Claire breathed, her eyes narrowed.

"In fact, I really hope you two are serious," Bruno continued, his eyes on the road.

"I'm sure grandfather will be happy to hear that he's dating someone. I only hope he's serious with you, unlike the others."

"No," Claire huffed incredulously, ignoring his last incoherent sentence.

"What?" Bruno gazed at her.

"Ryan and Doris," Claire uttered haltingly, gazing back at him. "Are they not in a relationship?"

Bruno frowned. "What are you talking about? Doris and Ryan in a relationship? What nonsense is that?" He laughed loudly.

What the fuck! Claire's eyes widened.

"They are not?" she demanded.

"Of course not. They are not in a relationship, and they've never been. Well, other than a boss and subordinate, or friendship since childhood, which we all share, there's nothing more. Jeez, where did you even get that?" He made it sound like the craziest thing to even imagine.

"Um, nowhere," Claire breathed softly. "I only thought so." She was suddenly exhausted.

"Okay, is that why you kept talking nonsense earlier? Because you thought they were dating and you—" Bruno paused halfway when he saw her all pale. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Claire replied, her voice low. "Um, just take the right turn over there and go straight," she instructed him on the way to her neighborhood.

A short silence reigned as Bruno followed her direction. She was lost in this new information.

"But you know what?" Bruno uttered, urging her to look at him.

"Everyone knows that Doris feels more than just friendship for Ryan. It's just that Ryan has clearly shut himself up when it comes to her and she never stood a chance with him since way before."

"Oh?" Claire felt some kind of relief and rage at the same time.

"Sometimes I feel sorry for her, and if she learns about this, I'm sure she'll be very heartbroken." Bruno's concern was for everyone close to him, it seemed.

Claire admired his noble heart.

Thinking of Doris, she uttered, "That is, if she hasn't learned that yet."

"You think she knows?" Bruno asked, curious.

"I don't know, Bruno, and I'm not even sure if it's important anymore," Claire replied, no longer entertained with the subject.

That jerk had been lying to her. She couldn't stop feeling mad about this.

"Why?" Bruno asked without imposing.

"Nothing, I'm just saying," Claire answered and refused to press on the matter any longer. They were already at her house. "You can pull over there," she said pointedly.

"Okay." Bruno did as she's told him, and the car halted.

Claire unbuckled. "Thank you for the ride. I'd let you inside but I don't think the timing is great. Maybe next time," she told him.

"No worries. Now I better go," Bruno replied, his smile intact. "Take care, huh?"

"Hmm." Claire nodded and exited. "Drive safe." She peered through the window and his smile was enough of an answer.

As though her already messed-up head wasn't enough, Claire bumped into her stepmother on the way to her bedroom. Was this morning cursed or what? She sighed heavily.

"Well, well, well," Selma started. "So now you come home anytime you want and dress up like a cheap striper, huh?"

Just what she needed!

"I don't think it's in your business, when I come or leave this house," Claire retorted.

"Look at yourself, young lady. Look at that dress, and the way you present yourself. You look like a whore in red," Selma whined with utter contempt, and Claire rolled her eyes from lack of interest in her ancient speech. "Where are you coming?"

"Are you done?" Claire shot. "Because I don't have forever to listen to you." The witch was definitely getting on her already twisted nerves right now.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? What if people see you walk like that in the streets? Do you want to tarnish our family reputation?" Selma snapped.

Claire laughed loudly this time. "Family? What family?" She folded her arms across her chest. "I'm sorry if you don't like my dress, I won't question your museum fashion sense."

"What?" Selma frowned.

"And about your reputation, you don't need to worry because I highly doubt that anyone can recognize me as your daughter. So guess what, you can have your reputation all to yourself, Madam Selma. I don't need it!" With that, Claire jogged upstairs.

"Tramp! That's what you are!" Selma snapped, but Claire was already gone out of sight.

The only thing Claire did once she was inside her room was to change into jeans and a V-neck top. She slipped into sneakers, tied her hair into a ponytail, ready to finish this game.

The trip to SK felt like eternity for Claire, for she kept scheming on what to say and do to Ryan. She was furious with him and she had no idea what was going to happen after today.

At last she arrived.

The very same receptionist from her first visit to SK was at the front desk. She seemed to remember Claire as well, judging from her flashy smile while greeting her.

"How can I help you?" she asked Claire.

"Can I see Mr. Ryan Stevens? I suppose he is here," Claire asked in a hurry.

"Do you have an appointment with him?" The receptionist asked, and Claire shook her head disagreeably. "Well, I don't think I can help you—"

"Can you inform him that it's Claire Levy who needs to see him?" Claire told her curtly, desperately.

"Well, I—"

"You know what," Claire cut her off. "Never mind. I'll just call him myself." She was on the verge of bursting with anger, and this lady was wasting her time.

Either due to the recollection of her boss's relationship with Claire, or the angry mood she was in, the receptionist immediately changed her mind.

"Wait, I'll just call his office," she softly said and grabbed the telephone receiver.

"Good." Claire was restless throughout the minutes that the call was made and transferred to Ryan's office.

"You can go ahead, Mr. Stevens is expecting you." Her smile was polite as she instructed Claire the way to Ryan's office.

As quickly as Claire budged in, the elevator lifted her to Ryan's office floor. From there, his new and kind-looking secretary led her to Ryan's office. It was big, modern, and spacious.

"I wasn't expecting any less. The credit line is too shady and the last thing I want is taking a fucked up risk right now. But I can refer you to someone who's an expert with casinos." A heart wrenching voice welcomed Claire.

Ryan was in the middle of the phone call, casually leaning onto the edge of his desk. He beamed ecstatically when he saw Claire walking in, and even motioned for her to move closer.

Her heart flipped, but she strictly ignored his gesture, making him frown. She had no time to even admire his office, or his exquisite suit that multiplied his hot looks. But no distractions today! Claire declared.

"Sorry, I have something important to attend to. I gotta go." Ryan hung up instantly while moving from the desk. He placed his mobile on the table. "I didn't expect to see you so soon, baby." Smiling, he paced towards Claire with a big smile.

"Neither did I," Claire remarked coldly while unfolding her arms.



Ryan frowned at the tone of her voice. He was alarmed. Why are you here?" he questioned, standing right before her.

Panting mildly, Claire responded to his query. "I only came to give you this!" She slapped him hard on the face.

Startled, Ryan cocked his head to the side, accepting the blow. But he immediately recovered. Has any woman slapped him before? He smirked, and he was now glaring at her, eyes dark and raw, confused. But he took it calmly.

"What was that for?" he asked coolly.

"For being such a lying jerk! How could you do this to me?" Claire muttered crossly.

"What are you talking about?" Bemused was Ryan's disposition.

"Was it fun? Did you enjoy seeing me losing my head over you despite knowing you had a girlfriend already?" Claire was enraged as she neared him closer. "Why did you make me believe she's your girlfriend, huh?" she asked again, tears brimming in her eyes.

That's when Ryan got a hint of what's going on. And for the first time he seemed to be fretting. "How did you find out?" he asked, shocked.

"How did I find out? Is that even important?" Claire huffed.

"Listen, Claire—"

"Do you even know how I felt all this time knowing I was doing something terrible and yet couldn't stop myself?" Claire interrupted. "Do you even realize how stupid I feel right now thinking of all the times you had the chance to tell me the truth and yet you didn't?"

"I'm sorry, Claire. I wanted to tell you the truth but—"

God knows how many times he tried to tell her but failed for some reason. But yes, perhaps a part of him didn't really mind playing with her head.

"But you didn't!" Claire snapped dryly. "You didn't because deep inside you loved playing with my feelings, Ryan! Because you enjoyed every bit of it. You enjoyed seeing how stupidly I made a fool out of myself while you could've just told me the truth." She sobbed.

"Claire, please, that's not what happened," Ryan insisted, his voice unguarded, his feelings out in the open. It was a regret, but she was too angry to see.

"I'm such a fool," she muttered, sniffing.

"Listen," Ryan sighed. "I don't know why I couldn't tell you, but it's not what you're thinking. I didn't mean to hurt you, I'm sorry." He tried to reach for her shoulders but she immediately winced aside.

"Don't touch me!" she sternly uttered. "I think the game is over. And yes, you've won, Ryan. I am stupid and you're the smarter one! You, Sir, have won." She was laughing, tears accompanying her laughter.

"Claire," Ryan whispered her name in a very foreign way, his face blanched.

He looked in fear; afraid of the meaning her words deciphered to him.

"Maybe you should start finding your next toy," she uttered with bitterness, feeling so played. "I'm already used to it, right? Bravo! I wonder what kind of pleasure you had knowing I'm just a measly woman who's ready to fuck you knowing you have someone you call a girlfriend. But it's not important because we're done!" With that she turned toward the exit.

"Claire, wait." Ryan managed to grab her wrist and stood her. "Please, don't go," he begged, his voice low and worried.

"I want to be civil about this, Ryan, so let me go," Claire instructed.

"Claire—"

"Let me go, Ryan!" she snapped, glaring at him. He wasn't ready to do that. He didn't seem ready to let her leave like that. "Let. Me. Go!" She forcefully tried to rid his grip.

"Okay." Reluctantly, Ryan freed her hand. She left.

## TWENTY-FOUR

"Don't you think it's too early to shade tears, Cinderella?" A familiar voice mocked.

"Excuse me?" Claire scowled incredulously as her eyes met Doris. She wiped her unshed tears right away, her hatred for crying deeper.

"You look terrible," said Doris as she neared her, her manner rather spiteful and conceited. "Have you finally learned your lesson?" She crossed her arms on the chest, smirking.

This bitch! Claire tried her best to keep calm despite her stirred tempter.

"I can't say it was nice meeting you, so I'll pretend you're not here," Claire retorted, pissed off. She continued walking, ignoring Doris' victorious remark.

She was not worth it.

"There'll never be two suns in the sky," Doris uttered scornfully, and Claire halted in her tracks. "I'm glad you've realized sooner than later," she added.

*Fuck her!* Claire turned around. "Do we have a problem, Doris?" she asked calmly.

"Oh," Doris muttered, her tone sarcastic. "Sorry, I was just thinking out loud. Why? Did something happen so early in the morning to turn you into such a foul mood? Are the designs complete? Because that should be the only reason for bringing you here, no?"

"Bitch," Claire murmured. Watching Doris acting all high and mighty, as though she owned the world, made her sick to the bones right now. "I don't think that's any of your business. We are not close enough to talk about personal matters, don't you think?" She smiled slyly.

Doris scowled, but her smirk stayed. "Did you think easing yourself to him will make you his woman?" She sounded nasty.

Okay this was it! This bitch was clearly pushing too hard. Claire gulped tightly, and slowly released a smile.

"Oh, so this about Ryan?" she uttered wickedly. "If it is, then it's still none of your business, Director!"

"Anything related to Ryan is my business! I don't know what you're looking for, but I can assure you that you'll never find it!" Doris snarled, her voice laced with menace.

"Oh really, now?" Claire huffed a little laugh, hardly affected.

"I know very well people of your kind, little girl. I can smell a gold-digger even from a distance," Doris snickered, scrolling Claire up and down.

"A gold-digger?" Claire huffed, surprised to hear the name. "Wow, I wonder when I became that." It was very amusing.

"Do you think you've won a lottery or something by getting involved with him?" Doris lashed, angered by Claire's feigned indifference. Her eyes flamed. "No, darling. He'll just use you and then trash you like a used tissue."

Maybe she was right, Claire thought, but it no longer mattered.

"You know what, Doris," said Claire, sighing tiredly. "I'm not wasting my energy arguing with you. No, it's not even worth it."

"Oh, you're scared?" Doris sneered. "You don't know where you're getting yourself into. Be very careful with Ryan, because he's like fire and you may end up getting burned, girl."

"I know." Claire moved closer, her smile confident. "I've seen that fire so many times already. And it's *very* hot! But guess what, I know how to extinguish it quite well. You can ask Ryan himself if you want to."

Doris was losing it.

"You bitch!" She raised her hand but Claire caught it midair.

"I'm not the bitch here, Doris. You are! And don't you dare call me names, and much less raise your hand on me!" Claire shot, gripping Doris' wrist tightly. "And you're right; the sky has only one sun. And that sun . . . is definitely not you, Director! Now leave the sky be, will you?" Her eyes blazed, and Doris' were stormy.

"What's going on here?" Ryan's voice snapped them both, and it's how they parted their hands.

"Why don't you ask your fake girlfriend?" Claire shot sternly.

"Claire—" Ryan started but she was already walking away.

This was not part of the plan. All her life, the only person she'd ever had a heat argument with was her stepmother. But now it appeared she had made herself a new enemy. However, backing out without a fight was not Claire's style. Not at all. After all, Doris started it. And he who laughs the last, laughs the best.

It was not a discussing matter that, more than anything else, Claire wanted to forget Ryan. However, given what Doris had just insinuated earlier, her desires to enter the challenge grew immensely. She wanted to prove that woman wrong, but at the same time it conflicted with her need to stay away from Ryan.

What was she going to do? Follow her heart or her dignity? Sighing, Claire slipped into the first taxi she came across which took her to Gena's. Only her best friend would help her release the anger, she decided, and it was the wisest decision. Gena was at home and Claire was glad to find her. She was ready to vent.

"What's wrong, Claire? Your eyes are puffy." Gena frowned at her sight.

"Just let me take off these jeans first; I feel cramped. Can I have a T-shirt or something?" Claire said while peeling off her clothes.

"Suit yourself. But what happened? I can't stand the suspense any longer." Gena stalked her, as she walked towards the dresser. She was impatient.

Sighing, Claire plucked a T-shirt. "It's Ryan," she said, putting it on.

"Ryan? What has he done?" Gena inquired. Claire's silence made her more impatient. "What did that jerk do you huh? Did he hurt you last night? Because I'll personally kill him if he—"

"Okay, will you calm down for a sec?" Claire laughed, amused for real at last. "He didn't hurt me. At least not physically, if that's what you're thinking."

Gena breathed her relief. "Okay, so then what?"

"Well." Claire sat down on the couch and started telling Gena what really happened earlier today, including her tête-à-tête with Doris.

"The nerve of that woman!" Gena snapped. "I knew from the start something was off. It just didn't feel right that only she kept showing off that she has exclusive ownership of him. So, it was all a lie?"

"Yeah, apparently." Claire prompted.

"And shouldn't we celebrate for that? Why do you look like you've lost a round of the Olympic tournament?" Gena asked excitedly.

"Yeah, right." Claire rolled her eyes pensively. "I should be happy. In fact, I feel such a relief that I wasn't fooling around with a taken-man. But it doesn't justify my disposition either, Gena. I just feel so angry and somehow like a fool."

"Angry with Ryan?" Gena let out a weak smile, showing how understanding she was of the fact, and Claire nodded. "Oh, honey, I think I wouldn't love to be played like that either."

"That's exactly it." Claire sniffed. "He could've just told me the truth. Why did he have to play that way? I was feeling so terrible, Gena. Knowing that I was fucking someone with a girlfriend already was like a cheating whore, and yet I went on with it. And all to learn this? It feels like betrayal."

"And to think Harry has been with me and never said a word, how dare he?" Gena suddenly snapped.

"Hey, easy there!" Claire chuckled. "I appreciate your support, but I'd love not to involve you and Harry in this. He wasn't the one who implied that he was in a fake relationship, got it?"

"Okay. But he'll hear it from me!" Gena grunted, and Claire laughed hard. "Can I just lie down in a few? I'm feeling tired and my head is spinning." Claire said after a long chat. "I just want to get over this; Ryan Stevens can rot in hell."

"Are you sure about that, Claire?"

"Absolutely!" she reckoned.

On Monday, at work, Claire was inside Nathan's office after the morning briefing. The designs were proceeding accordingly, except for a few details made during their recent meeting.

"So, you think we should adjust a bit?" Nathan asked once they settled down, a big computer screen displayed with the specific illustrations.

"Not the whole thing. I was just thinking of using the false ceiling over here, and some LED lights with similar ambiance, but on this one . . . let's keep it as it is." Claire was tentative, seemingly engrossed into her element.

"That sounds great, Levy!" Nathan said, and thoughtfully he studied everything they were discussing about.

At last they were done with work matters.

"So how was your weekend?" Nathan asked when Claire got up to gather her notes.

"Just so and so; nothing major," Claire replied vaguely. "I'm sorry for leaving in such a frenzy at the club."

"No, don't mind. I knew you were in safe hands," Nathan teased, grinning up at her. "He seems like the jealous type, huh? Are you two dating?" he said.

Oh boy! This is exactly what Claire had been afraid of; her coworkers finding out her involvements with Ryan. It was pretty much uncomfortable, given her position in the office. But it wasn't a secret anymore, because as a matter of fact, they weren't dating.

"No, we are not dating. He's just someone I know. And if possible, I'd like to ask you to keep it between us," she kindly requested. "You know how things get around here; one little fact and people escalate the matter."

"But of course, it'll stay between us, Levy. That's your personal matter and this is the work place," Nathan said, sounding sincere. "I'm sorry for making such a comment. I know it's not my place, and he is the boss; a scary boss indeed."

Claire found herself laughing heartily at the sound of that.

"No, he's not scary at all. Maybe a little uptight . . . but not scary," she argued, blushing without knowing as she recalled the few moments she'd shared with him.

"Or maybe he tries to protect what's his too much," Nathan joked. "He seems to be extremely possessive as far as you are concerned—which is quite understandable."

"Oh really? And what does that supposed to mean?" Claire was curious.

"It means he's crazy about you, Levy, and I'm sure you know that," Nathan said.

"You know what, Nathan?" uttered Claire. "I'm not discussing this with my boss. But maybe if we bump into each other at Rocket next time, I may reconsider the topic." She got up.

So far the day was proceeding quite well, and the workload kept Claire too occupied to think about Ryan, and especially Nathan's comment about him.

But when her phone started buzzing around twelve, with Ryan's name on the screen, is when she started feeling uneasy. She slowly rejected all his calls, and got herself his text messages instead.

"How persistent!" she growled, eyes on the phone.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**  
**Please pick up my calls Claire.**  
**[Received]**

Ryan called again. She stared at the screen until the call ended. No, she wasn't going to give in. She stayed still for a while, pondering. Singing, she returned the text.

**What part of 'we are over' that you don't seem to understand? Please STOP calling me!**  
**[Sent]**

She placed the phone down on her desk and continued with work, which by now was already disturbed. Ryan was all over her head. Her mind wandered back to his penthouse, his hotel room, and all the time she'd spent with him. Yes, they were magical, and she could relive them over and over again.

Not even once she could bring herself to forget his wild kisses, caresses, touches and great sex she'd ever had. But other than being physical with him, was there anything else she was missing about him? She kept asking herself. When her phone buzzed again, she checked her phone quicker than she wanted.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**  
**All of it. I refuse to accept any of it, and that's why we should meet. We need to talk, and I'll personally make sure it happens.**  
**[Received]**



"The audacity!" Claire smirked when she read it. It was incredible how Ryan kept exercising his controlling nature even in this situation. He was supposed to beg her, not ordering as he did.

She grabbed the phone and typed furiously.

**But of course, Sir. How can I possibly forget your grand sphere of influence? You are right, I won't be able to escape you as long as I'm still one of your employees, but it doesn't mean I'm willing to follow your whim. Don't make me quit my job just to avoid you.**

**[Sent]**

Claire knew right from the start that avoiding Ryan was impossible, but she still wanted to try. However, sooner or later she was going to face him, and it scared the hell out of her. He had become both her strength and weakness at the same time.

She needed him to feel like someone had her back; something she'd forgotten in a long time. She wanted someone to feel proud of her, and he'd shown that within a very short moment of their interaction. So in the end it wasn't all about sex and good times, she thought. A new text arrived.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**Am I being threatened right now?**

**[Received]**

"Did he just emoji me?" A loud laugh escaped Claire's mouth.

She had to apologize to the others for the indiscretion, and luckily they were too busy bickering on some mundane topics. She could almost imagine Ryan's voice asking this question and it was comic. Was she missing him now? Oh no!

She typed the reply calmly.

**It's best you think it that way; after all it's what I learned from you. Unlike you, Sir, I've got things to do for your grand project, so I'll get myself useful where I'm truly needed.**

**[Sent]**

She tossed the phone aside in an obtuse attempt to get herself back to work, which became only short lived as another text was received.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**I also need you. I miss you, Claire. It's been one hell of a weekend without you.**

## [Received]

She swallowed and sucked in a deep breath while jotting the words into her head. He was missing her? It made her heart flutter foolishly. But no, she wasn't supposed to fall for it, she reminded herself, and decided to turn off the phone altogether.

Between working until late, revising the designs, and receiving a few calls from Ryan that she deliberately ignored, and only replied to one or two of his texts per diem; the week eventually flew by fast. She didn't see him, but she did miss him.

It was Friday once again. Nathan walked into their office and clasped his hands with a beaming smile. They all stared at him, waiting.

"Okay, guys," he said with a pause. "We'll be having a wrapping up meeting after lunch. We're finally done with this, and I hope everyone will get to sleep better this weekend."

"Finally!" Chris, one of the coworkers, shouted.

"Good job, everyone," Nathan said proudly, and got rewarded with cheers and happy comments. "Get yourself ready for Monday, Levy. We are going to SK, and I hope everything goes well."

"I'm going again?" Claire nearly shouted, utterly startled with the news.

"Of course you are. Why do you look surprised while we've been in this together from the start?" Nathan remarked with a knowing laugh, and Claire's heart began pounding nervously.

"Well, nothing." She sighed, and her biggest horror returned to haunt her.

## TWENTY-FIVE

The infamous designs for the SK project were finally coming to an end. Even though they remained wary of what Ryan Stevens would say after the next presentation, everyone seemed to be optimistic. With that, Nathan suggested going out for a round of drinks at Rocket.

"You coming, Levy?" asked Nathan as they slipped into the elevator on their way out.

"Why not?" Claire replied, completely aware of his ploy.

"Great. But only if you promise that we won't get busted again," he joked. They both laughed while waiting for the elevator to take them down.

Their team had nine members, including Nathan Panther, the leader. Elevator flung open and Everyone slipped in. Common noises filled the air as it slowly shut and began descending down.

Claire was exceptionally quiet with her thoughts. Her phone had been silent the whole day, no single text or call from Ryan. It was strangely disturbing. She was definitely missing him.

"What about you, Claire? How much can you bet that Lydia will get wasted tonight as she always does?" It was the voice of Chris, the most charming and talkative guy in their office.

"Huh? A hundred bucks?" Claire uttered without knowing what she was saying.

Everyone gasped.

"Woah, I'm team Claire, guys. And the winner takes all! Pray that you don't taste my shots, Lydia, which you surely will," Chris said, and the lady in question rolled her eyes.

"Okay, what's going on again?" Claire asked Nathan in a low voice, for they were standing next to each other.

He shrugged with a giggle. "You've just earned or lost yourself some cash here."

"Wait, what? Did I just bet on alcohol?" Claire blurted.

"I guess. You should start paying more attention to them, if you don't want to commit a few errors in future," said Nathan, laughing.

"Oh, thanks for the warning," Claire replied and they were already at the lobby. "So how much do I get, Chris? In case our bet wins." She decided to indulge into a team conversation as they exited the building.

It was already dark outside, probably around seven-thirty or more. They were like high schoolers on their way home from school, given how chattering and laughing everyone was. Claire found herself at ease from all this, at least for the time being.

However, suddenly, Nathan tapped her on the shoulder.

"What" Claire faced him, grinning from whatever she'd just heard from their banter.

"Over there." Nathan directed with his eyes towards the parking lot.

It was a bald man with a plump belly, Mr. Cornwall, their company's President. Claire's full attention was the man beside their boss. Damn it! It was the person she could recognize in just a single glance, and she did just that.

"What is he doing here?" she thought out loud.

"You should probably ask him yourself," Nathan teased.

No, she shouldn't.

"Can't we go right now?" Claire murmured, her tone appalled.

"I think it's not a good idea," Nathan said wittingly. "I mean, are you sure you want to leave?" He could probably tell that she wasn't decisive enough just from the look of her face.

Did she want to leave without talking to him?

"Well—" Claire stammered. "Damn it! Why do you have to be so honest, Nathan?" She was nervous.

"Because I know you're dying to be with him," replied Nathan.

Claire's eyes returned towards Ryan. He was dressed in a black office suit, his hands dug into his pants pockets, as usual, and he seemed half-interested with whatever Mr. Cornwall was saying.

"Guys, Claire won't join us for the drinks tonight. Let's just get going already, because I'm missing my bed," Nathan announced.

"Oh no, that's terrible," cried Chris.

"Relax, Ambrose. She'll definitely pay the bet. Right, Levy?" Nathan chuckled.

"Of course. Just keep me posted, partner," Claire replied.

"But why is she leaving? I thought it was a team thing, or is she too good to join?" It was Lydia's sarcastic remark.

Claire was used to Lydia's harsh remarks by now. The redhead was bitter and it was obvious that she wasn't in favor of Claire's presence in their team.

"Oh, come on, Lydia. She just said she'll join us next time so why put a big deal on it?" Chris remarked, and no one else seemed against him.

Lydia rolled her cheeky eyes.

"Okay, let's go already!" Nathan dispersed the group and turned to Claire. "Good luck." He grinned, cajoling her.

"Sure, have fun," Claire returned with a smile.

After a short sigh, Claire shifted her attention back to the opposite direction, where the two gentlemen were now shaking hands. Mr. Cornwall walked away in the company of a young man. He seemed to be his driver as he reverently opened the car door for him.

Ryan remained, and he watched Claire with a lingering smile as though concealing the urge to let out a real one. Puffing out some air, Claire firmed the straps of her black bag on her shoulder and started marching towards where he was standing.

"You look tired." Ryan regarded her warmly.

"If you weren't the boss, I'd say that you're stalking me," Claire muttered.

Ryan moved closer. "Stalking is too much, Claire, but you're not further from the truth." He smiled charmingly, and the sight made Claire shudder.

Was this jerk getting more handsome or what? She was in awe.

"Yeah, right." Her eyes rolled.

"Why is your phone off?" Ryan asked, eyeing her intently as if he was inspecting for any possible changes in her body.

"Because I decided so." What? Was her phone off today? She wondered.

"Exactly, why did you decide so?" Ryan scowled at her.

"Because it's mine, and I can do whatever the hell I want," she replied.

Ryan smirked. "I thought you might've changed a little in a week, but no. You're still as stubborn as a mule," he remarked, and she only shrugged. "Well, since you've

deliberately tried to avoid me, I decided to come and see you myself. How about dinner?"

The audacity!

"I was going for drinks until you showed up and ruined my plans as you always do," Claire answered accusingly.

"Oh?" Ryan arched his brows and uttered, "With who?"

"Not Nathan, if that's where you're heading." Claire choked a laugh, fully aware of Ryan's unbidden jealousy. He smiled. "You do know that I'm still angry at you, don't you?" she uttered softly, the evening breeze ruffling her hair.

"I do. But that's not the reason why I'm here. You remember about dinner tomorrow, right? Because you accepted my invitation?" Ryan asked gently, staring down at her with hope.

Dinner? Oh yes, the damn dinner!

"I remember, but that was before," she muttered recklessly.

Ryan's lips hardened. "Meaning?"

"I won't be able to make it," Claire replied while clasping her little scarlet jacket together, and then pinned it with her folded arms across the chest.

Ryan strode even closer. "Oh really? What can I do then? Because grandfather is already expecting you." His glistening eyes shone down on her as he asked, "You cold?"

"I don't believe you." Claire snorted. "You're lying so you can trap me into coming with you. And no, I'm not cold."

She was already feeling the heat. It was difficult enough having him so close to her, and here he was, provoking her hormones with his sexy and hot smile.

"Okay, wait a second," Ryan uttered and tucked out his cellphone. He touched the screen while she watched him, clueless, until he placed it onto his ear.

"What are you doing?" Claire quizzed. His smile widened, and his hand reached for her face trying to touch her cheek, which she immediately pushed away. "Stop it!" she scolded quietly.

Ryan giggled like a little boy, and she nearly did the same. Boy, he looked very relaxed doing these silly gestures. Claire felt happy. She had probably missed him more than she thought.

"Nice skirt. It's very short, though. I prefer seeing those legs in my shirt inside my penthouse," Ryan said, ogling her.

"You're sick." Claire blushed.

"Hi, Grandfather." Ryan was on the phone. Claire shot him a glare, surprised. He grinned. "No, it's nothing much. I just wanted to ask if it's okay to bring Claire for dinner tomorrow, because she misses you too much." He winked at her.

"What?" Claire gasped with total amazement. "Ryan, how—"

"Oh, is that so? Well, that's great. She's actually right here so you can tell her yourself," Ryan said into the phone, smiling victoriously. Handing the phone to Claire, he muttered, "It's Grandfather; he wants to talk to you."

This prick! Claire glowered at him.

"You're gonna pay for this," she whispered.

"I love it when you threaten me," Ryan murmured, his mood ever playful.

Crazy man!

"Mr. Stevens?" Claire spoke, and a smile appeared on her face right away "Okay, *Grandfather*. I'm just used to calling you Mr. Stevens, that's all."



Ryan smiled fondly. "You're beautiful," he whispered into Claire's ear, making her frown while wincing back so he wouldn't touch her.

"But of course I'll have to be there, since you're personally inviting me now," Claire said, smiling again. "Don't worry about that, Mr. St—I mean, Grandfather." Now she hissed at Ryan who kept teasing her face. "Okay, have a goodnight. And it was really nice hearing from you, too." In a few seconds she hung up.

"Why did he say to make you laugh like that?" Ryan asked with a chuckle.

"None of your business," Claire retorted.

"Seems like I'm being left out now. So we're set now, aren't we?" Ryan asked, taking his phone from her.

"You're such a conman," Claire snapped. Ryan's eyes widened. "What? You did this on purpose, didn't you? You just wanted—" Her lips were shut by his instantly, holding her deftly by the waist. "You—" She squirmed in his brace, trying to revolt.

Holding her tightly, Ryan kissed her lips harder and longingly. It was quite startling, sudden, and very unexpected. Claire yielded, and he was hungry—hungry for her.

He was indeed her weakness. She was longing for him, too. She was dying to be with him again, to feel his strong touch around her body, and all his luscious advancement on her.

She was ready for more but Ryan suddenly pulled out. His eyes were mysteriously dark, and something didn't seem right.

"What's wrong?" Claire asked softly, catching her breath.

Ryan panted mildly. "I . . . I'll drive you home," he said.

"Huh?" Claire stared ghastly at him. "You're taking me home?"

"Yes," Ryan uttered.

Claire was at a loss for words. "Okay," she murmured, disappointment lacing her voice.

They took a car ride in silence.

It was the kiss that had affected Ryan all of a sudden. As a matter of fact, this was the first kiss he had had with her out of his own conviction, with no games or fun.

It simply happened like something he strongly needed—an addiction—quite different from all other kisses he'd shared with before out of whim and challenges they had to one another.

Ryan hated the feeling.

He hated to be emotionally involved, and that precisely had started to become the case. Was he seriously falling for her? No. Never. It was time to stop.

He was always in control.

But this woman next to him had started to break his barricades. He knew it had to stop. He wasn't going to get involved with stupid romance once again. It's bullshit!

Not after everything that had happened before.

"Why did you lie about Doris?" Claire broke the silence, deciding it was time to get the answer from him.

"I didn't lie, I just didn't tell," Ryan replied curtly.

"It's the same thing, so quit playing smart with me," Claire retorted, glancing at him as he drove gently.

Ryan glanced back at her. "Okay, I don't know why I did that," he told her, sounding honest.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Claire was confused. Ryan sighed heavily, his eyes back on the road. "Ryan?" she called softly, reclaiming his gaze.

"I guess I thought it wasn't important at first," he explained vaguely, "because I had no idea we would see each other again."

"Huh?"

Ryan sighed again. "No, I knew we would see each other again. I just didn't think we would reach this stage. I thought it wasn't a big deal, but it began to be, and I was going to tell you."

"When?" Claire breathed.

"The last time you were at my place," Ryan said truthfully.

It was difficult for Claire to understand him, and even harder to understand herself. She was so weak over him. What was she seeing in him? Yes he was handsome, sexy, rich, but was that enough to totally go nuts over him?

"No, the answer is simple, Ryan," she uttered. "You just enjoyed seeing what a fool I am for pulling off my pants for you every time despite knowing you had a girlfriend. Was it entertaining?" She wanted to release all her doubts.

"That never crossed my mind, Claire, you're being unfair," Ryan said, his voice hurt. "But you know what? You're absolutely right. I'm a jerk, inconsiderate, and maybe selfish. I can't give you what you're probably looking for, Claire. Because in the end, every girl dreams of the prince charming."

"What?" Claire was wary.

Ryan smiled gently. "You're no exception, Claire. Just like every other girl, you're also dreaming of that sweet charming guy, don't you? But I'm not the prince charming. I can't be the man of your dream and I know that for a fact."

"What are you trying to say?" Claire could feel her heart pounding faster, fright filling her insides.

"I'm setting you free," said Ryan. "You can go now, and I'll keep my word."

"What did you say?" Claire snapped, staring horrified at him.

Ryan faced her. "I'm leaving you alone, Claire, just as you wanted. I won't bother you again, so you can go back to your life before we met and forget about me."

Claire looked at him, and no syllable came out of her mouth. Only tears brimmed in her eyes, one blink and they would've streamed down her face.

"Stop the car," she finally breathed without breaking eye contact with him.

"Are you crazy? We're in the middle of the road." Ryan frowned.

"I SAID STOP THE DAMN CAR!" Claire yelled, shock, anger, fear, and something intense that she couldn't put a name on painted on her face. "Stop it, Ryan. Now." She couldn't look him in the eyes.

Ryan's face stiffened as she tried to open the locked-door in a frenzy. She was almost like a madwoman. And she only wanted to be far away from him—that way he wouldn't witness her shading tears like a naïve little teenager.

"Okay, I'm going to pull over," Ryan said cautiously. "Wait, Claire, I'm pulling over," he added, and slowly did as much.

Unceremoniously, Claire ran for the handle and swung the door open.

"You're an asshole, Ryan Stevens! A big inconsiderate asshole!" she snapped painfully amid her sobs, and slammed the door afterwards.

## TWENTY-SIX

Bastard! She could no longer repress her tears.

It was mid-summer but Claire was surprisingly feeling a terrible chill. She fastened the sides of her jacket and enveloped herself tightly while walking speedily on a foot-walk lane, oblivious of anything and anyone around her.

She wanted to be at home as soon as possible, but there was no sign of any taxi, nor of any bus. What a *Deja vu*! She suddenly remembered the rainy day in Montesby and how it led to that fateful encounter with *him*.

How was she going to be home quickly now? She sniffed, watching the cars moving fast, the sky dark. And her stepbrother crossed her mind, quite unusual. She gave him a call. She couldn't care less of looking vulnerable. She just did it.

"I'll be right there, and calm down please," Jorge said.

"Okay, please hurry."

She was now sitting in a convenient store, her shoes off her legs. The heels had her legs tired, hurt even, and it occurred to her that she might need to use flats for a few days until the blisters healed.

All Ryan's fault!

"Hey, everything okay?" Claire was startled to hear this from Jorge, who was already standing before her. "What happened?" His worried eyes were on her bare feet.

She slowly rose up. "It's nothing. Just take me home, please."

"Okay." A quizzical look settled on Jorge's face. He led her slowly toward the car and in a minute there were both buckled up inside. "Have you eaten?" he asked gently while driving.

No, she didn't and she wasn't going to. Not with this feeling knitting her tummy tight. She could barely breathe at the thought of him.

"I'll have something at home," she muttered.

"Okay," Jorge said with a sigh. A short silence passed until he asked, "Did something happen to you? Do you want to talk?"

"No," Claire answered quickly, her eyes lost into space. She didn't want to even think of it. "I had a terrible day, that's all." She gave him a weak, assuring smile.

It didn't take long until they arrived home. All that Claire needed was to bury herself in bed and forget about Ryan Stevens. The jerk wanted her to forget him—his brutal words replayed in her mind, adding more to her disquietude.

"Are you really okay?" Jorge asked her yet again, eyes apprehensive.

"I'm fine, Jorge," Claire replied with a small smile. "Thank you for picking me up, and I'm sorry if I bothered you."

"It wasn't a bother, trust me. I'm glad that you called; at least I feel like a real big brother now," Jorge teased and managed to make Claire laugh a little. "Whatever happened, I hope you can recover from it." He smiled tightly at her.

How she wished for that.

She sighed heavily. "Thanks. Have a good night."

Once she got inside her bedroom, the nostalgic feeling began overwhelming her. She couldn't stop relishing the moments she'd shared with him, and mostly the last kiss he gave her as though he was afraid to lose her . . . only to hear him say that he was letting her go.

That bastard!

"It's over, Claire," she breathed as she clambered into bed, tears launching on her face once again. "Tomorrow will be fine." She hugged her pillow tight, shutting her eyes to perhaps deceive the pain.

The morning came, but nothing had changed. Her night had been horrible. She decided to have a cup of tea in the kitchen, for everyone else was still asleep. Waking up early had become her norm, except for when she slept at Ryan's penthouse.

The thought made her heart shrink, feeling homesick.

The reminder that she was actually invited for dinner at the Stevens this very day made her skin shudder to the bones. Obviously Ryan was going to be there. But she was going to be fine, she decided. She had to face him head on.

"Hey there, so early in the weekend and you're up already?" Jorge appeared out of nowhere, still in his pajamas.

Claire looked over her shoulder. "I think it runs in the family. Look who's talking." She faintly smiled at him, as he leaned casually against the breakfast table.

"Maybe." He sighed heavily, looking beat. "I still have some work in the office to finish this morning. And how are you feeling today?" He was still worried about her.

"I'm good." Shrugging, Claire fed him exactly the same lie she'd been feeding herself since dawn. "I'm actually going to the beach house today. I need my energy back for Monday."

"That's good." Jorge grinned at her.

The trip to Montesby wasn't as pleasant as it usually was. Claire's thoughts were all over the place until she arrived at the beach house. Unfortunately there was no one at home, and it was strangely a relief. She needed her solitude badly.

Her grandfather was out of town to attend personal matters; he had a few relatives of his own after all, and Claire understood that well. Her afternoon wore off idly, until she decided to call Bruno so the trip wouldn't go to waste.

"Oh, you're here! That's great. I'll be right here waiting for you," Bruno stated, sounding happy.

"Okay, Mister, just a few minutes and I'll be there." Claire tried hard to bury her sadness.

What was the point of brooding all by herself in such a huge villa? She quickly took a shower and changed. In one hour she was good to go.

"Hey, beautiful. I thought you were pulling my leg but you're actually here," Bruno regarded her warmly with a friendly kiss and tight hug.

As always, he was ecstatic to see her.

Claire melted in his arms, finding a small comfort in him. "As much as I love messing up with you, here I am."

Bruno scowled as he pulled back. "Something is not right. What's wrong?" He was inspecting her face.

*How observant.* At last a genuine smile appeared on Claire's face.

"Nothing. I'm just so happy to see you," she replied, partly telling the truth.

"Really? Then why do I find you sad?" Bruno inquired, hardly convinced.

No, she wasn't going to talk about Ryan with him. They were brothers after all.

"I'm hungry," she said, watching the pigtailed waitress passing with a plate of fine-looking dessert. They smiled at one another. "Super hungry," she added, staring back at Bruno.

"Huh? So . . . that's the reason why you're so down?" He narrowed his eyes inquisitively, a bit amused.



"Yeah." Claire nodded. "When I'm hungry I become super grumpy so you better feed me if you don't want to end up on my bad side."

"Oh, I'm so scared! Hurry, let's go." Bruno's comic voice made her laugh hard. "Shall we?" He flung his hand toward her.

"Of course." Claire accepted his gesture.

Braised short ribs with creamy polenta, and a frozen chocolate ice-cream instead of red wine was Claire's choice. She was utterly content while eating.

"Anything more, ma'am?" Bruno teased some moments later.

"No, unless you want me to stop moving at all and turn into a whale," Claire uttered, catching a deep breath. She was full, and the food was amazing.

Bruno laughed heartily. "It would be my pleasure if you stick around until later, and we can have dinner at home afterwards," he said suggestively while downing his glass of cocktail.

"That's precisely why I came." Claire licked her spoon, enjoying the chocolate ice cream that finalized the magic. "Your grandfather invited me over the phone so we will meet later anyway."

"Oh, is that so? But why do you make it sound like some kind of punishment if you go there?" Bruno inquired gently.

"Huh?"

"Come on, Claire. You seem unrelenting." He reclined back in his chair. "Or is it my imagination that you're hiding something behind that smile."

"Oh please, are you playing psychic now? I'm not hiding anything at all," Claire strongly denied. "And hey, why don't we check around places so you can show me how to take good pictures? I want to try photography for a new hobby." She tried to avoid the topic . . . that Ryan was behind her hideous disposition.

They left the restaurant and the day was spent roaming around aimlessly, taking pictures, in which Bruno gladly taught her about perfect angles, lights, and all the basics of taking good pictures at different times of the day.

"I guess I'll see you at seven?" He beamed.

"Of course." She responded similarly. "And thank you, I had a blast."

"Well then, I'll pick you up in an hour."

"Bruno, I told you I'll come on my own. You don't have to, really. I'm not some kind of a princess who needs an escort everywhere, okay?" Claire insisted but Bruno's grin was adamant.

"I'm such a gentleman who treats every lady as they deserve."

"Oh you! Stop being stubborn and get out of here." Claire shoved him off with a wave, and he laughed heartily while unlocking the car. "Later." She clambered off.

"I'll pick you up and that's final," Bruno stated, and it was clear that the Stevens were not the type to take a no for an answer.

At least her afternoon had turned out to be rewarding, Claire thought as she headed inside her villa. But the thought of how the night would turn out freaked her. She was going to see him, eat with him, and he no longer wanted her.

"Whatever," she murmured.

Back to the house, Claire realized how big and scary it was, now that she was alone. For a moment she wondered how she was going to sleep over in such a solace. She started entertaining the idea of checking into a hotel after dinner.

There was no way she would spend the night at such an enormous place, all by herself. She locked the door, turned on the lights and walked into the bedroom. She took some minutes in a shower with several depressing images replaying in her head. Afterwards she got herself into a lavender jumpsuit that carved her shape perfectly.

She was looking gorgeous, and despite the blisters on her ankles, she adamantly wore some cream strap heels. With her wavy hair cascading freely down her shoulders, and a little nude lipstick coating her pretty lips, she was absolutely ready to face the music. A deep breath escaped her for a number of reasons.

Exactly at seven Bruno called her.

"You just can't take no for an answer, can you?" Claire teased upon his insistence to give her a ride.

"No, ma'am. Just five minutes and I'll be there," he replied and they hung up.

Smiling, Claire recalled someone else who definitely never accepted rejection; the one who had turned her world upside-down in such a veracious way. She almost hated him, but she realized she had no legit reason to. For if she felt that way . . . then it could only mean that she'd fallen in love with him.

"Loving him?" she muttered to herself while heading down from her room. "You're just infatuated, that's all. He's sexy, and you apparently love sex."

When did she start loving sex that much?

Bruno's car approached the front yard. Claire had left the front door open, so she stayed put while putting on some silver earrings. She could clearly see him through the vast French window at the lounging area, and her smile was guaranteed. She beckoned him that the door was open.

"Wow!" Bruno gasped, his eyes gleaming. "Purple is officially my favorite color."

Claire giggled. "You're crazy. You look fresh by the way, I can't decide between a tux and jeans, which one is more spectacular on you." She grabbed her handbag from the console table.

"I think this is my element. Tux? Oh please." Bruno waved dismissively. They shared a laugh. "Such a nice house you have here—are you alone?" he asked, eyes roaming around.

"Apparently," Claire answered with a sigh. "I didn't know it was too dark outside." She stuffed her handbag with her cellphone and whatever she saw fit.

"Geez, aren't you scared?" Bruno asked. "It's quite isolated, and huge."

Claire reached for the light switch with a smile. "Oh trust me, I am, that's why I'm taking my handbag because I can't sleep here." She shut the main door after their exit.

A while later they found themselves at the Stevens' territory. The car pulled over near the other three randomly parked cars, including the familiar black Vogue Claire so well recognized.

Claire took a deep breath, for Ryan was certainly inside the house. Everything looked the same as before, except that now it was dark. Inside, Martha received them cordially, crying how delighted she was to see Claire again, and with Bruno.

"I wonder why he only comes here when you do. Are you his talisman or something?" Martha scolded, slapping Bruno in the arm.

"Come on! She's simply my destined companion. Blame the fates." Bruno grinned.

They all laughed.

The old Lady and Bruno seemed closer than with Ryan. Claire wasn't surprised, however, because it was evident that Bruno was the warmest and kindest between the two brothers.

And yet she had to get involved with the cold jerk.

She cursed inwardly at the thought, and that's when she heard Ryan's voice talking to someone that she also recognized in a second. It was Doris, and the two were in the living room together with Mr. Stevens.

Clearly, this was going to be a long night.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Mr. Stevens regarded Claire with a very bright smile. "Come in," he urged, standing up to warmly pull her into a hug.

Claire strode over, relenting to his wish. "Hi, Mr. Stevens. I hope you're doing fine." She was in his arms, and he seemed pleased to have her over.

"I am. But I told you to call me—"

"Grandfather!" Claire finished for him, flushing. They both laughed. "I better practice more often," she teased, trying hard to refrain herself from looking at Ryan.

"Yes, silly girl," Mr. Stevens remarked. "Thank you for coming tonight. I know you don't have any obligation toward this old fella but you've come anyway; and you look beautiful." He smiled at her.

"No, it's nothing. In fact I'm very grateful for the invitation . . . And for the compliment, too," Claire said calmly, and that's when her gaze shifted toward the other audience in the living room.

She received a wriggle of fingers and a plastic smile from Doris, who was seated cross-legged on the couch, holding a glass of red wine; same color as her tight wrap dress. She was gorgeous, and Claire couldn't deny her that.

Ryan was adjacent to her, and his eyes had been fixed on Claire from the minute she'd entered the room. It was the same sinister look he had the first time he met her. Claire sat close to Mr. Stevens, and across from Ryan himself.

"So, guys, when do we get to eat? I'm really starving." Bruno, as always, started to lighten the mood. He sat right next to Claire.

Rolling his eyes, Mr. Steven answered, "Why don't you go and ask Martha? It will be such a relief because I'm about to come and beat you to a pulp."

"Oh, Grandpa, are you still mad because I hid your whisky? The doctor said you shouldn't drink, so I only helped you lengthen your lifespan," Bruno replied, and the ladies laughed at the face the old man made.

Bruno leaned over and whispered something to Claire.

"You're crazy!" She laughed even harder.

Ryan got up suddenly. 'Excuse me,' he muttered dryly.

"Where are you going?" Doris asked briskly..

"Do I really have to tell you what I'm going to do in the bathroom? I said I'll be back!" Ryan boomed.

Oh, jeez! Claire's eyes widened, wondering why he was so bitter today.

"I don't understand why you worry about him too much. No wonder men are scared of you because they assume he's your husband or something," Bruno told Doris. "A free reminder, don't hang around him too much, or else you'll end up an old spinster." He laughed wickedly.

"Oh shut up, Bruno! Maybe you should start by looking for a girlfriend yourself!" Doris snickered.

"I already have a girlfriend, Doris. Don't take me for a loner!" Bruno hissed.

"So, how is work, Claire? I heard you're working on my company project," Mr. Stevens asked Claire, and the two got engrossed in their own conversation, oblivious of the rest.

Half of an hour later, Martha announced that dinner was ready and invited them to the dining room. The place was filled with an alluring aroma of baked, sweet potatoes, creamed spinach, and a large meatloaf. It was enough to make everyone's mouth watery.

An additional dish was presented: fish scallops, cucumber salad and steamed brown rice— perhaps for Mr. Stevens' healthy diet. Two bottles of wine, red and white finalized the setting. Everyone placed themselves on their seats around a huge wooden table.

"Hmm . . . this looks delicious, Martha. You're the best!" Doris uttered with extra enthusiasm. She obviously seemed to have had a little more to drink.

"Thank you, Doris. Enjoy your dinner, everyone," Martha said warmly.

Ryan returned right on time and pulled a seat across from Claire, ignoring all other empty chairs around. The two exchanged a rueful look in a split second, and it was full of unspoken words.

"Care for some scallops, beautiful?" Bruno asked Claire.

"No, I want the meatloaf even if I had those tasty ribs earlier." She smiled while trying to avoid Ryan's gaze.

He was busy serving himself some spinach and potatoes, the same choice as Claire's, and completely different from the others.

Doris was eyeing them, her face frowned.

"What happened to Harry? I thought he was supposed to be here as well," Bruno asked his brother, a few minutes later.

"He had other plans for tonight," Ryan answered while pouring himself some wine, no smile on his face.

"Something like a date?" Doris asked sarcastically, and all eyes turned towards her.

"What? Isn't he dating that Asian girl? Your friend, Claire, right?" She looked at Claire.

"Maybe," Claire prompted. "I'm not sure if they're dating yet, because dating is a little complicated nowadays."

Mr. Stevens laughed loudly, seemingly amused.

"Hold on! You mean Gena? Gena and Harry?" Bruno snapped, and no one responded. "Oh this is unfair! Why am I the only one who didn't know?" He pouted.

Doris rolled her eyes. "That's because you're too dense to notice."

"Instead of talking about others, tell me, when will you two start dating for real? I need a granddaughter already," Mr. Stevens barked. The boys lowered their eyes. "Don't tell me you can't find good women while they're just right in front of you." His gaze shifted between Claire and Doris.

Claire almost choked on her juice. Not because of his obtuse remark, but rather at the thought that she had slept around with his grandson, and she was super dumped.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked sharply and reached for a tissue that he handed her right away.

Claire was taken aback. Did he really care?

"Yeah, thank you," she said.

Doris emptied her wine glass and put it down heavily before saying, "I don't have any problem with that, Grandpa. But it seems your grandsons have peculiar tastes in women." Her contemptuous gaze found Claire. "What about you, Claire? You do have a boyfriend, right?"

"What?"

"That dull—" Doris started. "No. That handsome and dull looking guy I saw you with at the restaurant, remember? Actually, I think I know him." She started thinking, her eyes narrowed. "Oh, he is—"

"Don't you think you've had too much to drink already?" Ryan uttered, scowling at her.



"Oops. My bad." Doris smiled.

Martha returned with a telephone. There was a call for Mr. Stevens. The old man excused himself, for it appeared to be an important one. Afterwards the pineapple pie was presented. Bruno jumped for it right away.

The four of them remained silent. Claire tried her best not to look at Ryan. Her blistered ankles kept tormenting her, and her feet wouldn't stay still.

At some point she even brushed her legs against Ryan's, without any deliberate attempt to, and immediately withdrew back. Ryan released a faint smile, making her feel so stupid, before resuming his eyes on the pie.

"So, beautiful, are you really dating the dull and handsome guy?" Bruno, like a big-fat traitor, raised the issue once again.

If looks could kill, then he'd have been dead and gone from Claire's glare.

"He's not dull," she bellowed.

Well Jorge was a bit dull, but she didn't appreciate anyone calling him names.

"My apology," Bruno muttered.

"Oh, now I remember," said Doris with a sly smile. "He's the CEO of Demott Architects. You are really something else, Claire. It seems like you're only surrounded by rich guys, huh?" Her voice was pure sarcasm.

Now Claire had had her fill. "What are you trying to say, Doris?" She threw the napkin on the table.

"Me? Nothing. I only said what I saw, but I'm sorry if my honesty offends you." Doris replied innocently.

"No, Doris, it's not your honesty that offends me. It's your rotten attitude and immature ways of dealing with facts!" Claire spat. "That guy you saw is my brother! And you're right; it's fun to be with rich guys." She was indeed pissed, her eyes blazing.

Doris fumed. "You—"

"What? Don't you know that way better than I do? If you don't have something better to say, other than picking faults in me, then go home and treat your alcoholism!" Claire snarled.

"What?" Doris snarled back. "You—"

"It's not my fault that you can't have *him*, so stop being pathetic," Claire whispered nastily after getting herself up. "Excuse me; I think I'm already full." She breezed out of the dining room.

"What a bratty bitch," Doris snapped, her face red from anger.

"I think you should just go home." Ryan said crisply, his lips hard as he glared at her.

"No, I won't. I'm still eating, can't you see?" Doris snorted.

"Well, at least stop making a fool out of yourself then!" Ryan remarked, angrily.

Claire was sitting in the sun lounge near the swimming pool. She was inspecting her bare feet and a few bruises. Her heels lay down on the floor. Despite the cool and relaxing atmosphere outside, she was still mad. There was no way she was ever going to like Doris, she decided.

"Oh, there you are," announced Bruno, and she lifted her gaze. "What happened to your feet?" He dropped down reflexively and took a close look, frowning.

"It's nothing. I just had a few blisters yesterday," Claire replied.

"Nothing? You got to be kidding me! Wait here; I'll go get some band aids." He stood up and left.

Her feet were the least of her problems right now.

She simply couldn't stand the situation anymore. With Doris breathing under her neck, and Ryan behaving like a total stranger whom she happened to have his house passwords.

How stupid was that?

Bruno returned and sat down. Slowly he took her feet into his lap. "Does it hurt?" he asked gently, gazing up at her, and slowly took a cotton stick and the ointment tube from a small First Aid kit.

Claire was a bit started, but his tenderness calmed her down. "Um . . . Now it hurts." She grimaced when he applied some ointment.

"Easy, it'll be quick." Bruno said, his smile assuring. "I'm sorry about earlier, I feel partly responsible."

"No, you weren't. I think Doris and I are natural enemies." She forced a laugh, and he easily joined in.

"Just forget about her; she is drunk and she will probably regret it when the morning comes." Bruno tried to cheer her up.

"You know what?" Claire started, tucking her hair behind her ears. "I just don't understand her. She is so hostile towards me, as if I've wronged her dreadfully. It's not the first time she provoked me, and it's not like I'm the reason why she can't have your brother for herself." She rolled her eyes.

"Aren't you?" Bruno muttered.

"I'm not," she returned. "She should maybe find someone else to vent her misfortune, because I'm not with Ryan, and if she wants she can keep him." Her anger resurrected.

"Care to explain? I saw you leaving his place and you admitted something was up." Bruno was enticed as he sat straight.

"There was," she answered quickly. "But not as serious as you imagine!" she added furiously. Bruno laughed at that, hardly stepping his eyes off her. "What? You think it's funny?"

"No. I mean, you look cute when you are mad," he teased her, and she could no longer contain the laughter. "See? You are laughing now!" He sounded victorious.

"Just finish playing doctor so that I can leave already," Claire snapped quietly, flushing.

Bruno scowled. "What do you mean leaving? You aren't going anywhere, pretty lady."

"Why not?"

"Grandfather won't let you, especially not without finishing the pie," Bruno warned, and she looked archly at him. "Okay, not only grandfather, but also me. I can't let you leave while you said that you can't sleep alone in that house."

Claire had no plan to sleep there all alone.

"I'll sleep in a hotel. Which reminds me . . . I should probably get going now." She sighed heavily, her thoughts derailed.

She was feeling so lonely right now despite Bruno's cheerful presence.

"Hotel? You're crazy," Bruno rebuked instantly. "We have plenty of rooms here, and there's already one for you. Don't you ever mention hotels and stuff." He was not kidding on this one.

"Oh boy!" Claire chuckled.

"Yeah," he insisted. "Well, unless you want me to accompany you, of course." He grinned at her.

"You wish." Claire huffed. "I'd rather sleep on the rug, or share Martha's bed. You're so untrustworthy." She was laughing delightedly until she caught a glimpse of Ryan.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Ryan was holding the drunk Doris, leading her toward the red Mazda.

"You like him a lot, don't you?" Bruno broke the awkward silence, his eyes tender on her face, busy reading her reaction.

"Huh?" Claire gazed at him.

"Ryan . . . Do you love him?" he asked directly.

"Are you crazy, Bruno? Of course not," Claire answered too quickly.

Bruno laughed. "It's alright; you don't have to feel busted."

"Busted?" She scoffed.

"Yeah. I just saw the way you looked at him." He smiled indulgently. "I'm not judging you though; I only don't want you to get hurt in any way." He seemed genuine, and it crept fear in Claire's heart.

"Why would I get hurt?" she queried, utterly intrigued and curious.

"Well, Ryan is my brother, but he's too complex. He is just not the type I'd be comfortable knowing someone I care about is involved with. At least not until you get to know him better, and be ready to accept what he is. That's all." Bruno was confusing her even more.

What was the mystery about?

"I feel like you don't want to tell me the real issue, right?" Claire asked, narrowing her eyes intelligently.

"There's nothing more to tell. And if there is, then only Ryan himself can tell you," Bruno said casually, evasively even.

"No, it's not important." Claire decided.

Deep inside she was dying to know who Ryan Stevens really was, and what made him so different and complex, but asking for more would only prove desperation. No, she refused to seem desperate for him.

In the meantime Ryan and Doris were still arguing as they headed towards the car. He clearly saw Claire and Bruno at the pool; both he and Doris did. His jaw tightened, a strange wave of distaste filling his throat.

"Do you see that? Our dearest Claire is now flirting with our little Bruno," Doris murmured lazily. "Now tell me, Ryan. Do you have feelings for her?" She looked him in the eyes.

"You are drunk, Doris," Ryan retorted, his face dark.

Doris slammed the door angrily. "I'm not drunk! I know what I'm saying."

"Okay. Can we go now?" Ryan asked, trying to ignore her words.

"Why are you pretending that you don't understand my feelings, huh? Am I not attractive to you?" Doris suddenly asked, her voice pained. "I'm tired of waiting in vain! I'm so damn tired of playing the good understanding friend. I love you, Ryan. I really do." Now she sounded desperate, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears.

The words made Ryan stuck by the door. That's exactly what he'd been trying to avoid. He never wanted to hear that from her, and he had been trying his best to avoid such a situation.

"Please get inside the car," he purred, still hoping to find a closure.

But he knew eventually they had to talk of it.

"Or what? You'll fire me for not being professional? Oh please, Mr. President! Mind you that we're no longer in the office right now and I can speak whatever I see fit!" she barked.

Ryan was getting exhausted. "Fine. How about we discuss this tomorrow when you're sober?" He tried to be nice, and for once Doris seemed calm and relenting.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Claire bid Mr. Stevens good night, ready to leave.

"There's no way I'm letting you leave at this hour while we have enough rooms for everyone in this house," Mr. Stevens said.

"See? I told you he won't agree," Bruno whispered in her ear.

"Now I understand where your grandsons have got this obstinacy from. I think it's strictly genetic," Claire said with a smile. The two gentlemen laughed delightfully.

"Okay, I guess I don't have a choice." She chose to stay.

The rest of the evening went uneventfully, and by the time Claire had retired to her respective room, Ryan wasn't home yet. She got up abruptly, feeling upset, and stood up by the large window. It had the perfect view of anyone who went in and out of the mansion.

Claire hadn't any clue on what upset her more. Was it the fact that he wasn't home yet? Or that he'd left with Doris?

Or maybe both?

She kept pacing hence and forth inside that huge Victorian-style bedroom, that according to Bruno, it used to be their mother's.

For a moment Claire decided to forget about Ryan and get some sleep. But it was more of a fool's errand as tossing and rolling in bed became her bedtime story. Damn it! She was going insane, hence she made a choice to call Gena instead, to let it all out.

"Okay, what did he do to you this time?" Gena urged.



"That jerk said it's over, can you believe it?" Claire lamented, tears brimming in her eyes. "He really enjoys messing with me, Gena! How could he do this when the whole Doris story is over now? And I'm at his house going nuts while he's away with her."

"Oh, sweetie, and you're going to let him mess with you? I thought you were bolder than that," Gena replied after a short silence.

"And what am I supposed to do, huh? Go on and beg him to continue harassing me?" Claire was still striding around, a fist on her waist.

Gena laughed. "You mean the sweet harassment? Come on, Claire! Just admit it that you love his mysterious ways of getting into you. He drives you crazy, my friend."

"Oh, I don't know, Gena!" Claire exhaled, exasperated. "I don't even know what I want anymore." She pursed her lips, highly conflicted.

"Well, I think I do. You just need a little push, and I hereby push you to go and talk to him. No you don't even need to talk, just attack him!" Gena said.

"Attack him?" Claire smiled at last and found another stop near the window. "I don't want to be away from him, Gena. It drives me insane knowing he's no longer with me. What should I do, huh?"

They talked a little more, without any definite solution to the problem. But at least Claire was able to laugh. Sleeping became more difficult than before. This strange urge to be next to Ryan was something she failed to understand.

It was irrepressible.

"I can't take this," she breathed and bolted out of bed.

Slipping her feet into comfy slippers, Claire pushed her way through the silent hallway like a thief, without any idea on whether Ryan was back or not. It was probably midnight already, she thought. She still remembered where Ryan's bedroom was as she headed there straightaway.

It was closed, as expected, and she stood outside the door as though conflicted over her next decision. It was stupid, and she had gathered that much, but she was still there. It was something she couldn't control, and she wondered what a crazy woman she'd turned out to be.

"What are you doing?" A voice startled her, and she nearly jumped.

Ryan! She comprehended right away.

She whirled around to face him. "Um, nothing, I just got lost," she answered.

Sleazy move.

"You're lost?" Ryan sauntered closer, frowning.

"Yes, that's what I just said." Claire held her breath, surprised that he had been out up to this time.

With Doris? Her heart tightened at the possibility.

"Okay, let's pretend I believe you," Ryan muttered lazily, and Claire discerned the ruffled state he was in, barely holding his full equilibrium.

Shirt half-buttoned, hair a bit ruffled, and eyes darker.

"You were drinking?" Claire asked reproachfully.

Ryan neared the door, only a step from her. "I was. Why? Were you waiting for me?" He smirked.

"Of course not! Why would I wait for you? And you're drunk," Claire retorted. "Is that what you were doing with Doris all this time?"

A faint smile escaped Ryan's lips, making her frown. He sighed heavily before saying, "I can't believe you still love whining." His gaze was cajoling.

"I'm not whining, Ryan. I'm only asking," Claire snapped.

Why was she so concerned about him despite everything? She hated this.

"Why should I answer your question, Claire? Are you my wife?" Ryan asked, chuckling.

"Bastard," Claire murmured under her breath, anger surging back into her system.

Briskly, Ryan seized her shoulders, holding her closer. "I left you alone but you're still lurking around. What do you want from me, Claire?" His voice was laced with menace, his eyes raw.

Claire could feel her heart beating fast, but she didn't budge.

"I want to torture you the same way you're torturing me! I want you to feel exactly what you're making me feel! In that case, I'll make sure you don't get to feel at peace after twisting my life around, Ryan Stevens. You don't deserve it," she said, looking him straight in the eyes.

"What?"

"You heard me. I won't leave you alone, Ryan."

Ryan's eyes faltered as he slowly released her. Why was he bothered about this? He wanted her far, but seeing her all he needed was to hold her close, kiss her, hug her, and just sleep by her side—even without getting inside her pretty thong.

"Go to your room and sleep, Claire. It's late." He reached for the door knob, his steps unstable.

He really didn't want her anymore. Claire felt a sharp pain at the thought, her eyes getting watery as he pushed the door to draw himself in.

She sucked in an audible breath, ready to go back to her room and find that sleep, when she suddenly heard him stumbling onto something.

"Ryan!" She didn't think twice running toward him. "Fuck, you're definitely drunk! How did you even get here?" She was holding him, his arms around her shoulders, and hers around his waist.

"I'm not drunk," Ryan hissed.

"Yeah, right. That's what all the drunkards say," she quipped while shutting the door behind them. "Let's get you to bed." She tried to scoot him toward the wooden four-poster bed.

But he didn't want to move. Instead, he took her in his arms, hugging her from behind, longingly.

"Claire," he uttered, his voice hoarse. She stilled in his brace. "Just for tonight, let's sleep together."

"Sleep together?" Claire murmured, her skin shuddered.

"Hmm," Ryan replied, breathing into her hair.

"And then what?" Claire asked gently, her chest rising and falling as she breathed. "You'll wake up tomorrow and ask me to get lost, is that it? Or have you forgotten what you told me yesterday?" She loved being this closer to him.

She still needed to feel him every single day. How stupid was she going to get? She could no longer understand.

"I don't know." Ryan sighed, his chin resting on her shoulder. "Can't we just forget it for one night? I won't even fuck you, I swear. I just want to feel your warmth."

Ditto. Claire had no doubt of her desire.

"You're really weird, Ryan." She broke out from his embrace to take a good look at him. "Very weird," she breathed, eyes bored deeply into his tired brown ones, beautifully lit by the moonlight through the window.

"Only you know that much, Claire. You're like the light at the end of my tunnel," Ryan muttered, making her eyes shimmer when he brushed the back of his hand against her cheek.

The heat rose in her, and her breath hitched.

"What do I really do with you?" she asked, but more to herself than to him.

She wanted him—she knew she couldn't avoid him, and it was even useless trying to. Even at this moment she wasn't ready to say no.

"Just stay with me, please," Ryan entreated.

"Okay, I'll sleep with you," Claire muttered, accepting her fate.

In a few minutes Claire was helping him get settled inside. He was very tipsy, now that she'd seen him walking to the bedroom, and even stumbled by the couch.

"Aren't you taking your clothes off?" she asked.

"If I do, I'll end up between your legs. And I hate that you're wearing someone else's pajamas," he uttered, keeping his drunk talk. Claire giggled. "Oh, so I'm a clown now?" He was on the bed, seated, while taking off his shoes with difficulty.

Claire knelt down to help him. "Don't be such a baby now. Take off the jeans at least; and you look dashing on them by the way." She eyed him.

"Oh, do I?" He beamed, his eyes barely holding up.

"Yes, you do."

"But you only had eyes for Bruno earlier," he complained like a child, stroking her hair.

Claire smirked. "Is that so? Maybe it's because you're such a jerk who left a defenseless woman alone in the middle of the road." He was done with the shoes.

Ryan frowned remorsefully. "No, Claire . . . I didn't . . . mean to—"

"Sleep, Ryan, you're tired," Claire said as she rose up. She didn't want to discuss this topic—not with him so drunk. "Lie down." She helped him into bed, placing a pillow behind his head.

"I'm sorry," Ryan breathed.

Claire didn't know how to take that apology, for it was ambiguous. Why was he sorry? For dumping her? Or for some kind of regret upon tossing her aside? She wished he could clarify, but his eyes were already shut.

"You really know how to drive me nuts," she muttered, watching him with a big sigh. "And I think I'm falling for you like a fool." She sat beside him for a very good while, doing nothing but staring at him, listening to his sound breath.

Slowly she leaned over and placed her lips on his, closing her eyes at the feeling.

Ryan's eyes opened gently, and Claire felt the chill when he suddenly gripped her waist, pulling her closer. He wasn't sleeping? She screamed inwardly, watching him struggling to stay awake.

"I promised I won't fuck you, Claire, so don't provoke me," Ryan croaked.

"Mmm," Claire hummed, bobbing her head.

"Good. Now let's sleep," said Ryan and in a minute he was holding her tight as he once again shut his eyes.

At some point, in the middle of the night, Claire made an attempt to get up so as to return to her room, but Ryan kept her body too close and too tight to allow her to leave. She decided to give up by holding him back and enjoyed his warm body blanketing her against the night breeze.

She slept in his room until five in the morning. Ryan was still asleep but she had to return to her own room. A warm smile escaped her while fixing the covers up to his

neck. Sleeping Ryan was more like an innocent baby boy. She clambered off the bed and rushed back to her room.

The following morning during breakfast Claire noticed that Ryan wasn't present. She decided to subtly make an inquiry about his absence, and the answer didn't come as good as she was somehow anticipating.

"I think he went out about a quarter of an hour ago," Mr. Stevens replied, his eyes indulging in a huge newspaper.

"Maybe he went to see Doris," said Bruno. "We all know how she left last night."

"Oh, is that so?" Claire prompted, and it was like a piercing to the heart.

After breakfast Claire was standing near the front window, arms folded across her chest, leaning onto the window frame. What business was Ryan having with Doris to leave so early in the morning? It really perturbed her.

"Are you enjoying the flowers?" Mr. Stevens queried with a smile.

Startled, Claire gazed up at him. Her smile appeared as she answered, "Yes. It's beautiful out there."

"It is." He sighed deeply, seemingly mindful over something serious. "So then, why do you look so sad?"

"Sad? I'm not sad," Claire replied weakly.

"Oh, Claire, I may be an old man, but that's precisely why I've lived long enough to understand the meaning behind people's words, looks, and even smiles." He grinned at her.

"Grandfather, what are you trying to say now?" Claire laughed briefly.

"Care to take a little walk?" Mr. Stevens asked suggestively.

"Of course," Claire agreed wholeheartedly.

They were heading towards the garden as he said, "I know my two grandsons very well. And from that, I'm very much aware that Bruno cannot be the one to make you sad; he's too loving to cause anyone a heartache, especially those he cares about." He stared at her sideways, in a serious manner. "So is it Ryan?" he finally asked.

"Huh?" Claire gasped in shock.

Laughing, Mr. Stevens said, "When we talked on the phone the last time, I wondered what you and Ryan were doing together at that time of day. But it's not important. What's important is how he looks at you, and the way you look at him, Claire."

Oh boy! Was she busted? They took a halt, a cool morning air refreshing their bodies. The sun was reluctantly piercing through the thick clouds.

"I . . . I don't know how to deal with him, Grandfather." Claire decided to come clean eventually, unable to hide a thing from him. "I'm not even sure what I feel for him. And with how complicated he is, I'm afraid it's useless to even try." She was exasperated.

"I understand," he said. "Ryan is like a cactus. He doesn't allow anyone to touch him, but it doesn't mean it's impossible to do it. He is a good boy. You just need to be a little patient with him."

"But what if he doesn't let me?" she asked, sounding like a little girl.

"You won't know unless you try, Claire. Don't give up on him yet, I am begging you," Mr. Stevens pleaded like a father begging on behalf of his impudent son. "He will come around, I assure you, and I can feel that only you can make him."

What the hell was going on? Why did he sound as though there was something dark about Ryan's past that made him into the jerk he was right now? Claire was bemused.

"Um, I can't promise anything," she said truthfully. "Sometimes things don't happen just because we want them to. And what if I'm not as patient as you think I can be?"



Mr. Stevens smiled tenderly at her. "Then I'll assume it wasn't meant to be. And you are right; it's not an obligation, Claire. God, I don't even know what I was thinking asking you such a thing. Forgive this desperate old man if you can," he said, and it was painful for Claire to see him like that.

In the end she had no response to any of his pleas. She got herself ready to go back to the city. She had no intention of waiting for Ryan whatsoever, and only focused her mind on the grand presentation tomorrow at work, which again, had to involve *him* in the picture.

## TWENTY-NINE

"Wow!" Jorge gasped aloud. "Is something going on in the office today? Because you look awesome!"

"Oh please, don't make my head burst so early in the morning," Claire replied, blushing. It was Monday morning, and she was ready for work when she bumped into her stepbrother.

"But I'm pretty serious," Jorge insisted, gazing at her fondly. "You look amazing. Well, you always do, but you've pushed beyond ordinary today."

They headed outside as Claire replied, "Thank you. I have an important presentation today."

Indeed she was looking her best, dressed in a tight, milky white dress and burgundy scarpin heels that matched the shade on her lips. She'd tied up her hair into a professional bun, and her neck was encircled with a simple gold necklace that came in handy with its matching watch and little earrings.

"Hop in, I'll give you a ride." Jorge offered when they reached outside.

"Thank you," Claire replied and drifted into his dark-grey Ford SUV that he seemed to have much loyalty with considering its age.

Arriving in the office, Claire received the same praises when her colleagues landed eyes on her. Boy, had she overdone it or what? She somehow wondered as she muttered her *thanks*.

"I can bet this round's going to be a total success," Chris teased.

"Maybe she should be a little subtle, or else people might think she's trying to use her looks to attract our clients," Lydia said, and everyone stared at her. "What? I'm only

being honest here. We all know how easily distracted men can be, and I don't want our reputation drained in the mud."

Ugh, why was this bitch so bitter?

"Don't worry, Lydia," said Claire. "I won't ever tarnish your reputation, if that's what you're worried about. But hey, it's not such a bad idea if my looks could actually distract them while Nathan gives the presentation, right?" she added, and the rest laughed in unison.

"That's right, we should've employed this tactic long ago and they'd accepted our designs right away," Chris joked, and a funny discussion arose.

Lydia rolled her eyes as though everyone was nothing but simpletons.

"Okay that's enough, Ambrose," Nathan told Chris amidst his funny speech. "Levy, in two hours," he said to Claire pointedly.

"Yes, Nathan," she answered.

Two hours later the two were at SK. Ryan and three other gentlemen joined them shortly in the conference room. Harry wasn't present, and neither was Doris. Instead, there was an old woman who seemed to be regarded rather respectfully by everyone, including Ryan himself.

Before they began, Doris popped in. "Oh, I'm right on time," she said and rushed into her seat next to Ryan.

"I told you to take a day off. Why are you here?" Ryan asked her quietly.

She smiled slyly, her eyes on Claire. "Just because I got rejected by my boss doesn't mean I'll fail to perform my duties. You can save your concerns for someone else who desperately needs it." She sat straight, eyes on the projector that was being set.

Ryan sighed softly, and his eyes met Claire's. She didn't fret. He quickly averted his gaze to the front, ignoring her look full of untold words.

The lights went off and the presentation began a moment later. Again, Claire was seated across from Ryan, but he hardly glanced at her today.

**"And that's it."** Nathan finished his presentation.

"I like it. The designs are fresh," Ryan stated, his voice deadpan, his face utterly serious. "I'm sure everyone agrees with it." He eyed the elderly woman, who smiled and nodded at him.

Phew! A sigh of respite escaped Claire.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Nathan proudly, his grin directed toward Claire as though expressing his joy and gratitude.

"Well, I expect things to move pretty quickly and effectively." Ryan's eyes were on Nathan. He nodded. "That will be all." He got up after a quick glance on his watch.

He was leaving? Claire blurted mentally, watching him pretending she was not here. He'd been indifferent since her arrival, and it was now driving her nuts. But wasn't she supposed to be happy? She strangely wasn't.

Everyone gathered their things and stood up, ready to call it done.

"Good job, Nathan," Doris said with a big smile. Her mood was strangely boosted this morning. "Claire. Not bad." She smirked and followed Ryan, who was heading toward the door.

"Cobra!" Claire muttered under her breath.

With her heart feeling bereft, Claire gathered her things and exited the room.

"Can you believe we did it?" Nathan was jubilant. "I guess I'll have a good sleep today." They were waiting for the elevator.

"Yeah, I'm glad," Claire replied absentmindedly.

The elevator halted and its doors parted.

"What's wrong? You look kind of angry?" Nathan asked, his brows furrowed.

"I'm not angry. I'm very glad we're done with stage one." Smiling, Claire strolled inside the cabin.

"You're right. I'll just call the office and share the good news." Nathan grinned.

Claire's head was too occupied to even listen to her boss' whining. She kept thinking of the weekend she'd spent at Stevens', and his words about not giving up on his grandson too soon.

It wasn't as easy as Mr. Stevens probably thought.

However, Claire was ready to forget Ryan, too. Crazy or not, stupid or dumb, she knew what she wanted and she wasn't going to give up while she still could fight for it.

What was the point of running away from her own feelings? Afraid to get hurt? Staying away from him was already painful enough. She hated being far from him.

The elevator doors finally opened on the lobby floor. Still stuck to its cabin's wall, Claire told Nathan to go on ahead. She had something to do, and he wasn't going to stop even if the whole world thought she'd gone insane.

"I'll be in the office before twelve, I promise," she pleaded to him.

"Okay. But don't take longer than that, Levy. We're having a meeting after lunch," Nathan insisted.

"Yes, Nathan." Immediately Claire pressed the last floor button on the display.

At Ryan's secretary's office, the same petite brunette told Claire that Mr. Stevens wasn't to be disturbed, according to the instruction he'd personally given her.

"Is he with anyone?" Claire queried.

"No, he's not but—"

"Then you don't have to worry," Claire uttered dryly and off she left the poor secretary moaning in terror.

The moment Claire walked in, Ryan rose up from his seat.

"I'm sorry, sir," the secretary said nervously..

"It's okay. You can leave us alone. And don't let anyone else in, unless I say so," Ryan told her.

The door finally closed and Ryan's gaze was back on Claire.

"Did I ask you to marry me?" Claire snapped.

"Huh?" Ryan strode away from his desk, confusion evident on his face.

"I'm asking if I've ever told you to marry me . . . Have I?" Claire repeated, staring at him firmly in the eyes.

He sighed, and slowly laughter escaped him. "What's this all about, Claire?" he asked, leaning against his desk, arms across the chest.

Claire looked vexed. "I simply don't understand why you keep sending me mixed signals," she said.

Ryan frowned. "Mixed signals?"

"Yes. First you ask me . . . no, you beg me to sleep with you, and the next day you treat me like trash. So what is it that you want from me? If you're shutting me out of your life, then do it like a man, and stop this ridiculous and stupid game of yours!" Claire lashed.

"What about you?" Ryan asked coolly, ignoring her yelling.

"What about me?" She frowned.

"What do you want from me? You're the one who wanted me to leave you alone, and it's exactly what I'm trying to do. So then what do you want from me, Claire?" His voice turned louder, menacing even. He uncrossed his arms and stood up once again, just a step or two from her.

What did she want from him? Claire asked herself, and the answer was crystal clear by now.

"I want you," she answered and strode toward him.

"Pardon?" Ryan was stunned by her response.

"I want to spend most of my time with you, Ryan." Claire closed the distance between them, and he stilled, watching her. "I want to keep talking to you, having dinner with you, and even sleep with you." She circled her arms around his neck, her face as soft as her voice. "I want to continue whining around you, arguing with you, and receiving a bunch of bothersome texts during office hours. I want to laugh with you. I just want to do everything with you, Ryan." Her heart was beating fast.

Ryan's eyes gleamed at her, and something intense seemed to be crossing in his mind. He took almost a minute contemplating the profile of her beautiful face, and the depth of her intelligent eyes. Slowly his hands wandered about her waist, hauling her closer.

"I'm not a good guy, Claire," he confessed in a careless whisper.

"Do you think I haven't learned that yet?" Claire asked, seemingly unbothered. "I know perfectly well what kind of an asshole you are, and what a bitch I am to put up with you either way, and even beg you to be with me."

She was really a lost cause when it came to him.

"Must you be so brutally honest, Claire?" Ryan chuckled.

"Well, it's the truth." Claire smiled and a short silence prevailed.

"What kind of spell have you cast on me, huh?" Ryan uttered with a sigh, staring deeply into her shining eyes. He leaned back onto his desk, taking her with him so she stood between his legs, and his arms were still around her waist.

"I'm not sure," Claire replied, feeling back at home at the feel of his body so closer to hers. "And like I said, I'm not asking you to marry me," she teased.

Ryan scowled. "Why do you keep mentioning that?" he demanded quietly.

"Because I feel like you're terrified of commitment?" Claire said, hugging his neck tighter. "But don't worry, I'm not thinking of marrying you either." She kissed his lips playfully, teasing him.

"Okay, why do I feel suddenly offended?" Ryan snorted, and they both chuckled. "You look extremely beautiful today." His gaze dropped down toward her dress.

"So do you. Navy blue treats you better than black and grey," Claire remarked, and he was indeed breathtaking.

"Oh, does it?" Ryan grinned.

"It surely does." Claire took a deep breath, feeling at peace. "I missed you, Ryan," she breathed, her face closer to his.

"Me more, Claire. You have no idea," Ryan hissed to emphasize his words, his eyes dark and intoxicated. He gripped her tightly, and his mouth was instantly on hers.

This was it. Nothing else mattered anymore. Claire felt that bliss as her tongue mingled with his, kissing each other deeply and passionately.

All the thinking and pondering was water under the bridge. What mattered was that he was here, and she felt his warm breath against her skin.



"You do know if we go on doing this I may end up fucking you on my desk, don't you?" Ryan uttered breathlessly, and his hands had already travelled underneath her dress, caressing her things.

"Oh?" Claire bit her bottom lip, and slipped her hand between his legs. "Damn, your gun is loaded." She giggled.

"Fuck you. You enjoy making fun of me, huh?" Laughing heartily, Ryan pulled her dress up.

"Don't you dare, Ryan! I'm going back to work right now." She tried to walk away, laughing loudly.

"Oh come on." He pulled her back deftly. "Let's skip work," he announced like a child.

"Shame on you, Ryan Stevens! What a good example for your humble employee, huh?" she admonished him, still enjoying every second of being with him.

Ryan grinned. "My bitchy employee?"

Claire scowled. "Don't call me bitch, you asshole."

They started arguing again, and it felt just right.

"Do you have to go right now?" Ryan teased her lips with his, unready to let her go.

"I have to, Ryan. I also need to work on my license and I wonder if I can do it all by the end of today."

"Leave that to me," Ryan said.

"My license?"

"Yeah. You'll have it soon, unless you don't know how to drive at all."

"Of course, I do. I just have to renew it."

"Well, that's settled then."

"Okay, I'll be more than happy to get my license without lifting a finger. I need to go now, bye!" She tried to slip away, but she was back into his arms once again, and another long kiss followed.

Oh, she loved this.

"Can I pick you up later tonight?" Ryan asked when they finally pulled apart.

"If you want to," Claire muttered.

"Can we have dinner together?" he asked again.

"Of course, we can have dinner together."

"Sleep together?"

"Yes, Ryan. We can sleep to—" Claire glowered at him upon discerning his trick. He laughed heartily. "No, we can't sleep together on Monday, jeez!"

"Come on, Claire! Why not? We'll go to your house and you'll get a few clothes for work the next day'," Ryan suggested. "Or we can just buy everything you need."

It was quite tempting.

"No, I'll get distracted. And I have work to do," Claire said.

"No, you won't. I'll even help you."

"Oh, so now you're a designer, too?"

"I can learn. How hard can it be?"

"As hard as putting a building out of a bare land. Catch me if you can!" Giggling, Claire jogged toward the door.

"You'll be punished for that." Ryan looked happy, grinning at her as she walked through the door while blowing him a kiss.

The week was starting very blissfully. Time seemed to fly by fast, especially with Ryan's messages every now and then, to remind her of their dinner date, and a possibility of her sleeping over at his place and even his naughty regret that he couldn't have her on his office desk.

With a big smile, Claire returned his last message.

**Dear Sir, I clearly told you that I can't sleep over tonight; but since you're so insistent, let me just say that I'll give you my final answer over dinner. And about your office fantasies, maybe we can save it for another time; until then, just keep fantasizing about it, just like I do mine.**

**[Sent]**

She bit her lips at the thought of Ryan's crazy idea of having sex in his office. *What a maniac!* She was searching for trendy bathroom ideas on the internet, when her phone chirped again.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**I'll be hopefully waiting for your reply later tonight. And oh yes, I do fantasize about it. I just can't seem to love the waiting idea. And you haven't told me about your fantasy up until now. What's going on in that smart head of yours, Claire?**

**[Received]**

Again, Claire started laughing like an idiot, and thanked the heavens for whoever invented the office partitions for a little privacy. She immediately typed her reply.

**Aren't you a bit too nosy for a CEO? Well I'll let you know of my fantasies in due time Sir. Oh, don't say 'don't call me SIR' because I'll never stop if you do. Now please get back to work Ryan, and don't forget to pick me up later at**

seven.

[Sent]

She'd just placed her phone aside when another message chirped in. A sweet smile escaped her lips as she read it.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**My being nosy when it comes to you, doesn't even count as a defect. I have a meeting outside the office, but I'll definitely pick you up at seven. You just keep calling me sir, and you'll see what I can do to that foul mouth of yours.**

[Received]

Evidently she was anticipating the night so badly and even entertained the idea of sleeping over at his penthouse. Even though Ryan wasn't really hers, the fact that he wasn't anyone's either, made her feel confident all over again.

## THIRTY

Claire was feeling giddy as she exited the building. Her eyes met Ryan's right away. He was leaning casually against his black Mercedes. He beamed boyishly when she rushed his way, and then he chuckled when she catapulted into his arms while smiling like a schoolgirl.

"God, I missed you," she whispered, her lips on his at the same time, hungry and longing.

"Me more, baby." Ryan kissed her back, holding her waist possessively.

"Oh no, we're at my workplace." Giggling, Claire pulled back, apprehensive of her surroundings.

Ryan smiled. "The things you make me do, Claire," he said, for he was never acquainted with this public display of affection, either. She flushed, and his eyes were staring at her with daze. "You are still looking lovely even at night."

"So are you," Claire replied, smiling with content at the mere sight of him.

But suddenly Ryan's face contorted. "Why do you look uncomfortable with the shoes?" He lowered his gaze down to her heels.

Oh boy! Time to get scolded. Claire sighed.

"I have a small situation here. I got hurt when you abandoned me on the road. I walked two miles," she said, and he scowled even harder, which made her laugh at the face of being highly accused.

"You made me abandon you, Claire. You were ready to kill me if I didn't let you go," he said coolly.

What a smartass! Claire puckered her one eyebrow.

"Okay, I called it upon myself," she said.

"Good. No heels for a week," Ryan remarked and pulled her for a quick kiss on the forehead.

"Is that an order? Because it's thanks to you that I got the blisters in the first place." Her eyes closed, relishing this sweet and lust-free kiss.

Ryan's smile was bright as he gazed down at her.

"You bet that right, Claire," he said. "Until you're fine, find something else to wear. Even sneakers if necessary."

And that was enough to make them both laugh, imagining an office dress with sneakers. Claire couldn't compare this joy; it was inexplicable.

"Let's leave," she said, her heart jumping placidly. "I don't want to appear on the Lisbay Daily News so soon."

"Okay, ma'am. As you wish." Ryan opened the car door for her, grinning.

During the ride they only talked of work and the project at hand. Everything was going almost perfectly. They finally arrived at the same restaurant they had dined the first time going out together. Claire loved the place; it was intimate, and the food was terrific.

She reminded Ryan of their first meeting as they took a seat.

"At some point I regretted kissing you that day," she said.

"Oh you did? And may I know why?" Ryan remarked, making a wounded face.

"Because you're a very bad kisser."

"Am I now?"

"Yes, does that bruise your enormous ego?" Claire bit her lip playfully.

"No, it doesn't." Ryan smiled, his eyes gleaming proudly. "Because you wouldn't be here with me if I were as bad as you say," he added.

Gosh, no modestly at all? Claire huffed.

"Oh?" she uttered.

"Definitely," said Ryan. "But then again, the adjective *bad* can mean *best* sometimes. Would you rather I prove it right here and now?"

"I know you can't." Claire started giggling as his hand reached for her neck.

"Oh, Claire, you have no idea what I can do right here," he uttered and his smile was the most beautiful in Claire's eyes. "Wanna see what I can do with you?" He was hedonic.

"I swear you are crazy," muttered Claire, highly amused by his sexy threats.

Their food arrived some moment later.

"Nice choice. They make a perfect steak here," Ryan said upon seeing Claire's grin over the plate of grilled steak and mashed potato.

"I know, and I only wanted to eat what you eat," she replied with a wink, and he only shook his head, smiling. "Hmm . . . and I love the wine. What is it called again?"

"Cabernet Sauvignon," Ryan answered, "or the People's pleaser—as they call it."

Oh my! Claire took another sip and savored its rich and woodsy taste.

"So you know a lot about wine, huh?" she queried.

"Not really. It just happens that this is my favorite, that's why," Ryan said while slashing his stake. "But Doris knows a lot more. Maybe you can ask her for a few more recommendations." he teased her.

*Way to ruin the moment, Mr. Stevens.* Claire rolled her eyes.

"Oh, Doris again? Why don't you just date her already?" She snorted, a small hint of jealousy lacing her tone of voice.

"I can't date my co-worker." Ryan smiled.

"If she resigns, would you then?"

"I believe we're too close to date," he returned.

"You're crazy," she muttered.

"That I know already," he replied, and she smiled at last.

"And what were you doing with her yesterday after leaving so early for someone who slept drunk." She decided to quench her curiosity.

"I only went to see how she was doing. After waking up in an empty bed, of course," Ryan replied, his tone accusing. Claire chuckled. "Why did you leave me alone?" he added.

"Are you crazy? What if someone saw us sleeping together? They'll think I'm a bimbo. And did you have to stay with Doris the entire day? Because I was at your house until afternoon and you didn't return." She kept going hence and forth between two topics.

"No one would think you're a bimbo or whatever that peculiar name you've just used. You just didn't want Bruno to see you. Or do you think I didn't notice you two at the pool that night?" Ryan replied calmly. "And I didn't stay with Doris the entire day."

"Really?" Claire hoped it was true.



"I mean it," Ryan replied honestly. "I went on a random drive as soon as I left her place. It's what I do sometimes, hoping to run into good land or building somewhere."

"Oh is that so? And did you find one?" Claire asked.

"I think I did. And it was a very nice place—way better than what Clancy took," Ryan said thoughtfully. "It would make a perfect location for anything, but I'm still considering your hotel idea a good deal."

"Really?" Claire flushed.

"Yeah, but I'm also open to other options. And it seems like grandfather is also on your side." He grinned at her as he took a bite of his steak.

"Is he?" Claire beamed.

"Yeah. He always says good business is about flexibility, so if I'm going with it, at least I have his full support," Ryan replied, sounding positive about his next move.

"I'm happy for you, baby." Claire smiled fondly, indeed happy for his plans and future achievement. She knew he was an ambitious man with clear goals, and hard-working, too, which added more to her admiration toward him.

"Baby? I love the sound of that." Ryan looked happy.

"I bet you do," Claire muttered over another sip of wine.

They continued talking about land and real estate until they finished dinner.

"So, you're really not going to my place?" Ryan asked on their way out.

"I have work tomorrow, Ryan, and sleeping at your place means no sleeping at all," Claire said, and it made him laugh amusedly. "Oh, so I'm a clown now?"

"No, you're just being silly. And clown? Isn't that supposed to be my catchphrase?" Ryan queried while opening the car door for her.

"You stole Bruno's, why can't I steal yours? And I thought you were drunk last night; you still remember it?" She was baffled, wondering how much he managed to hear last night.

"I was drunk, but it doesn't mean I lost my mind." Ryan grinned.

They arrived at Claire's around nine o'clock. At the same time, Jorge had also arrived. He was exiting from the taxi as she clambered off Ryan's car.

"Claire. Hi," Jorge greeted, a little surprised that she was brought in a man's car.

"Hi, Jorge. Why the taxi? Don't tell me your car broke down again," Claire replied, reprimanding him. He just smiled. "I can't believe you. Why don't you just buy a new one? The same model maybe, or a little different? Man, that car is old and it should be in a museum by now."

Jorge laughed heartily and said, "Alright, Claire. You're starting to sound like mom."

"Oh no! May God forbid that!" Claire rebuked, and they both laughed, before shifting attention to the emerging figure from the black Mercedes.

"And who is that?" Jorge asked in a low voice, watching Ryan.

Before getting the answer, however, Ryan was already near. A smile settled on his face, and the same happened to Jorge as they got closer.

"Jorge," Ryan uttered casually.

"Ryan," Jorge returned, and the two shook hands.

What was happening here?

"Okay, are you two familiar with one another or something?" Claire inquired, unable to understand a thing.

"I interned at SK a few years ago during college," Jorge explained vaguely. "Ryan and I worked together back then, and as you know, our industry interrelates."

"Oh?" Claire uttered.

"So what's going on here?" Jorge quizzed.

"Nothing but a coincidence, I guess," Claire muttered. "Anyways, Ryan this is Jorge, my brother. Jorge meet Ryan, my . . . my friend."

Ryan scowled.

"Oh, that's great," Jorge prompted. "Why don't we all go inside? You don't mind, Ryan, do you?" he suggested.

"Not at all," Ryan answered, ignoring Claire's protest.

"Um, excuse me a sec." She pulled Ryan aside. Jorge nodded.

"Friend?" Ryan huffed, sarcasm palpable in his voice.

Claire sighed at that. "Are you crazy? Do you really want to meet my stepmother?" she snapped in a low voice.

"Why not? I'm curious to know what she looks like. Does she have horns? Because she sounds like a horror story."

"Will you please be serious for a while, Ryan?" Claire chuckled.

"I'm serious," Ryan replied. "I'm also being polite with my former colleague, that's all." He tried to move, but Claire pulled him back. "Now what, baby?" He sighed heavily, rolling his eyes at her.

"Even if I say that I'm going with you to your place? I was about to go and get my clothes, you know." Claire lowered her voice into a seductive tone.

Ryan's eyes shone and he quickly said over Claire's shoulder, "Jorge, how about next time instead?"

"Huh?" Jorge responded.

"It's a bit late right now," Ryan replied. "Now go get your things," he urged, and Claire broke into giggles.

Gotcha! She felt victorious.

"Okay, guys, why don't you keep talking for a while as I go in for a second," she told them while heading toward the gate.

"Oh?" Ryan uttered, amused.

"Come on now. Just talk about the weather, government policy, or football? Men like football, right? La Liga Santander, maybe?" She beamed crazily while moving past the front gate, leaving the two gentlemen laughing.

"She's quite handy, isn't she?" Jorge asked.

"Tell me about it," replied Ryan, sighing heavily . . . but joyously.

Inside her room Claire packed a few clothes for the next, and even the other next day at work. She grabbed a pair of sandals, a laptop, and other essentials, before slipping away in a hurry, a big smile on her face.

"You just arrived and you're already going out? What's happening to you, Claire?" Her step mother regarded her downstairs. "You don't even sleep at home nowadays. You're behaving like a lousy woman without a family. What would your father say if he sees you behaving so manner-less like this?"

Claire let out an exasperated sigh and uttered, "I'm really not in the mood tonight. And please stop pretending like you care. In fact, you should be happy that you no longer have to deal with my presence." She pushed her way out.

"I'm talking to you, Claire!" Selma snapped. "Claire! Claire, don't you dare turn your back on me!" She followed her suit.

Laughing, Claire barreled like a child through the front door. She was having a good evening and no one was going to ruin it. A Minute later she was standing before Ryan and Jorge, panting

"Let's go, Ryan," she said, holding his hand. "Bye, Jorge. Good night."

"Uh, okay." Jorge nodded.

In a rush, Claire slipped inside the car.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked her worriedly.

"I am." She nodded with a weak smile. "I just want to be in the penthouse now more than ever."

"As you wish, baby," Ryan said, and they both laughed. He stared at her for a very long moment, without saying a word.

"What?" Claire breathed, her voice smoother.

Ryan kissed her tenderly on the forehead, and her eyes clammed momentarily, feeling something deep and intense; something that wasn't physical, but rather very emotional. And when she opened her eyes, his smile was so amused.

"Your cheeks are burning," he teased.

"Stop it, Ryan," Claire snapped coyly, pulling away. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. I'm just wondering what you were imagining a while ago."

She huffed. "I wasn't imagining anything. I just thought that—"

"What?"

"That you . . . you . . . Ugh!" She pouted, crossing her arms on the chest, and Ryan laughed heartily while starting the engine. "You want to know my ultimate fantasy?" she suddenly asked as the car slid away from her home.

"Will you tell me?" Ryan grinned.

"Yeah, I . . . I want to have sex in the car," she finally uttered, blushing.

Ryan's eyes glimmered.

"Oh, is that so? Well, we can fix that right away."

"You're such a dick, Ryan." She flushed, a throb between her legs.

"I'm only being practical," Ryan muttered, laughing delightedly. "I can fulfill your fantasy, baby, just say the word. And you love my dick!"

"Crazy guy. Let's go home," Claire replied.

## THIRTY-ONE

"Okay, Claire, do you want me to undress your seatbelt or something?" Ryan asked after a long moment of silence.

Oh, they were home already! Claire smiled as her eyes met the parking lot.

"It's okay, I can do it," she muttered.

"Or we can't just work on your fantasy instead," Ryan teased.

Claire rolled her eyes at him. "I'm starting to regret telling you that, Ryan. You're being too sex-driven." She unbuckled her seatbelt.

"We both are, Claire." Ryan was amused, happy to have her right now.

"Maybe, but I'd rather use that huge car of yours instead of this," Claire suggested playfully, biting her bottom lip at the thought.

"The Vogue?"

"Yeah, that one," Claire said.

"Well, that's a fair point. It's huge and spacious," Ryan said thoughtfully, and Claire couldn't contain her laugh. "So we're saving for another time?"

"Yeah, for tonight I want something decent."

"Something decent? What is this, Claire? Are you suggesting I've been molesting you all this while?" Ryan laughed heartily saying this.

"Jeez, Ryan!" Claire scolded.

"Well, you implied it." He held the door handle, ready to make an exit.

"No, I didn't. It's your words." Claire used the other door to step out of the car, both laughing at whatever they bickered about.

"God, I missed your laughter," Ryan said as they stepped inside the elevator.

Claire blushed at that. The feeling was truly mutual.

"So, you want a decent treat tonight?" Ryan hauled her up against him.

"Ouch, Ryan!" Claire screamed in glee.

"Decent." Ryan huffed. What did she even mean by this? Claire stilled in his brace, smiling at this intimacy. "But why do I get the impression that you love the indecent one way better than that one?" He lay a soft kiss on her neck, intrusively caressing her thighs through the short dress she was wearing.

Claire whimpered. "What makes you think that way, huh?" Her legs parted at his playful touch.

"This." Suddenly his hand eased inside her underwear and slid his finger between her legs.

"Ah!" A startled moan escaped Claire.

"See? You're already wet, baby," Ryan whispered.

Claire yielded, devouring the taste of his burning lips that she could never get tired of.

"Tell me that you don't like this," Ryan demanded, thrusting his fingers in and out of her moist core.

Oh God! Claire could barely hold her lips together, the pleasure intense.

"No, I don't," she protested, hugging him tighter by the neck, relishing his artful gesture between her legs.



"Still playing tough, huh? I really miss this." Grinning, Ryan pushed her toward the wall so that he could finally face her. She was breathing heavily as he clutched her neck, eyes wild on her face. "Oh, you're so hungry." Ryan was staring at her with amazement.

"Don't be too sure of yourself, Ryan. I think you're the hungry one," Claire breathed, dropping her hand to touch his pulsating cock held inside his pants.

"Let's see." Smiling wickedly, Ryan twirled her back toward the wall.

Claire moaned and giggled at the swiftness of his move, but she didn't protest his darker intentions. Her cheek was against the soft wallpaper, her body pinned by Ryan's from behind.. His fingers felt warm and quick as he began to unzip her dress, and fuck—she loved it.

"Just don't rip my dress, Ryan. It's too expensive," Claire warned.

"I can buy you ten of those, Claire. I'm a rich man," Ryan boasted.

"So full of yourself." Smirking, Claire unbuckled his waist belt in a hurry, looking at his anticipating face.

Responsively, Ryan loosened the neckline of her dress down to her shoulders, gaining access to her chest. "Beautiful," he breathed, taking the strap of her bra with his teeth, and his free hand squeezed her breasts expertly. "I want everything, Claire." Impatiently, he yanked one bra cup and took her breast into his mouth.

"Oh!" Claire's breath turned rapid, feeling his tongue rounding her nipple, which immediately reacted to his touch.

The same applied to the other breast, making her moan louder, and the heat rose immensely when he began kissing her everywhere. Her body craved for more when he kissed her lips again.

"Tell me," Ryan snapped, his lips dominant over hers, kissing her fiercely. "You don't like this?"

"I love it!" Claire snapped back. Panting soundly, her hand undid the fly of his pants and grabbed his length.

It was hard, fully erect. She smiled lustfully, wanting it so badly.

"Oh, Claire," Ryan groaned, and she stroked him tentatively without rushing, gazing up at him. "I want to fuck you so badly, baby. I miss you like crazy," he breathed heavily, scowling at the rub of her soft palms.

"Then fuck me now," Claire ordered.

"Like this?" Ryan whispered with a smile.

"Yeah. I want to look at you," she replied, smiling back.

Yanking her dress about her hips, Ryan grabbed her waist while pushing her back onto the wall. He raised her leg about his waist, and eased himself into her in a swift pound.

"Ugh!" he growled as he filled her, and she moaned sharply at the feeling. "Oh, baby." He fisted into her hair, holding the back of her neck tightly while pouncing on her gently.

It was sweet. Claire could feel his every inch, their bodies into a perfect harmony as they moved in sync. He kissed her softly, and the sound of her voice made him go nuts. How was he going to live without her? He was such a fool to try letting her go.

The elevator made a dramatic halt. Kissing her deeply and hungrily, Ryan stilled into her, clutching her tightly as he came apart with a loud groan. Damn, this was quick. Usually he'd go longer, but with this woman . . . hell what was he doing to her?

"Oh, Claire! You're going to be the death of me, woman!" He laughed and kissed her lips hard, fleetingly.

"Same here," Claire replied, catching her breath as Ryan eased out of her.

"Come," Ryan said while grabbing Claire's bag. He rushed her out of the cabin. "I want to hear you scream, baby, when you come. I'm taking you again." He grinned at her astounded face.

Moments later they were sitting on the soft rug in the living room, both out of breath, satisfied and spent after the intense sex on the floor. Ryan plopped a bit and leaned onto the sofa, and then he wrapped Claire's frame in his arms and laid soft kisses on her shoulders.

It felt ethereal for both of them.

"Do you still want that decent whatever you were talking about?" Ryan broke the silence while rubbing her hair smoothly, her back lying lazily against his chest.

"Well, maybe." Claire smiled, teasing him.

"Huh?" He scowled.

Giggling, she gazed back at him. "Look, Ryan, it's not that I'm complaining. I just want to try something different, like what ordinary people do," she said softly.

Ryan glared at her, using the little moonlight shared via the naked floor-to-ceiling window of the living room. He looked bemused.

"Ordinary? What is that?" he queried.

Claire blushed. "Just having sex without lust," she said. "Making love?"

"Huh?" Ryan looked lost.

Sitting up, she explained, "I mean, doing things casually. Like we come in without a fuss inside the elevator, we take a shower, we lie down in bed like two civilized people, we talk, and kiss, then . . . you know what follows."

"No, I don't," Ryan retorted. "That sounds like a middle schooler's sleepover."

With that they both burst out laughing.

"Come on, Ryan. You won't know unless you try," Claire said while fixing her messy just-fucked hair.

"Oh please, Claire. Why do we have to be like everyone else? Don't we talk? We do, right? What do you want? Or should I prepare a bed full of roses and dinner with candlelight?"

"Why not? Other people do it."

"Well, I'm not one of them, Claire," Ryan snapped, a bit irritated. "I am what I am, and if it's too much for you to handle then—"

"Ryan, you don't need to get mad, okay? I was just saying!" Claire admonished him. Jeez, why was he so sensitive? "I'm not asking you to change your crazy sex. No. In fact, I like it. I was only talking to spice up the conversation and see what your take on it."

Ryan sighed softly, looking defeated. "Claire, I—"

"And you didn't have to yell at me." Claire tried to get up, but she was quickly pulled back into Ryan's arms.

"I didn't mean to yell," he said calmly. "I just . . . I just don't understand why you had to say that. You make me feel like an animal and . . . I don't know what to feel about it."

"Ryan." Claire moved closer toward his face, straddling him on her knees. "That's not true. Don't ever say that again, you hear me? I've never thought of you as an animal! Not even once. I love the way we do things our way, and maybe it's one of the reasons why I'm so crazy about you. Please, don't talk nonsense now, huh?" Her voice was pleading.

"I just—" Ryan stammered.

"I'm sorry," said Claire while pulling him into her arms, remorse pooling inside her as she hugged him.

Ryan yielded completely into her embrace, and it was something new. He was only human, Claire thought. Right now he was like a baby, afraid to lose his security item.

"I'll try to be normal," he whispered, hugging her back tightly.

Claire regretted mentioning that. Was he always this sensitive?

"No, don't," she rebuked. "I want you to be yourself, Ryan. Forget what I said, huh?" Ryan sighed. "Look, I have my demons . . . but you take me as I am. It was very stupid of me to say such a thing, Ryan. Forgive me."

"Really now?" Ryan raised his head, amusement evident on his face.

Yes, that was her Ryan. Claire smiled.

"I mean, let's do things naturally. Let's not push beyond limits, and this discussion is over," she said seriously. "Let's take a shower and get in bed."

"And then talk like middle school kids?" Ryan finally spoke in the same mocking tone that Claire knew by heart.

"We can even have a pajama party while at it," she teased.

The shower was long and refreshing. Inside the dressing room Ryan found Claire in a pair of white panties he'd bought her the last time.

"Hmm, sexy," he uttered, and she nudged him, smiling. "I'm telling the truth, though."

"Shut it, Ryan. Now give me something to wear," she demanded.

"Why would you wear anything? We're going to sleep, Claire, and it's unhealthy bundling up when you sleep with me."

"Really now?" She huffed, highly amused.

Ryan smiled at that. "Okay, take whatever you want. But I think it's useless because I'm going to undress you either way," he warned.

"It's okay, there's sexiness in being undressed, don't you know? And when will that be? I'm super satisfied right now." She grabbed a white T-shirt from the open wardrobe.

"Oh, there is? Well you should've told me sooner then." Ryan slipped into a blue striped pajama bottom.

"Will you free one of your wardrobes so that I can put on my clothes? Because this is the biggest dressing room I've ever seen." Claire wandered her eyes around for the umpteenth time.

It was huge indeed: a modernly made shoe display with a countless pairs, and full-sized dressers filled with expensive looking suits and casual outfits.

To the side was a little glass chest where colognes, aftershaves, deodorants, and masculine stuff were placed. Claire was in awe, but hardly surprised. It was Ryan after all.

"Don't worry; you'll have your personal space if you want." Ryan beamed at her.

Claire flushed. "Okay, I'll think about it."

"Don't think about it, just do it!" he ordered, and his business was no longer an issue—on the contrary. "Or should we just go shopping instead?"

"Why not?" The idea fluttered her.

The next morning Claire was up and ready when Ryan emerged from his enormous bathroom. As usual, their morning had started gloriously. She couldn't stop blushing at the memory of all the naughty things he did to her while they were taking a shower.

Gosh, this beast was a sex machine! An orgasm in the bathroom?

Claire was fully dressed in brown slacks, and a tucked button-up shirt in white. A little black belt squeezed around her slender waist, emphasizing the curves of her thighs. Her hair stayed loose and wavy—absolutely gorgeous.

And as agreed, she wore sandals which seemed so appealing in Ryan's eyes.

"Any complaints?" she asked.

"None, ma'am." He smiled. "You look great in a trouser, and I wonder what doesn't look good on you." He was fastening his necktie.

"Your oversized pajamas, maybe?" Claire teased him.

"Oh, that one, yes. You looked terrible. We really should buy you sleeping wear; sexy sleeping wear." He looked happy, his skin glowing handsomely.

"You and sex!" Claire grinned. "No, I can't you anymore."

"You can't me? Is that even proper English?" Ryan laughed heartily.

"I don't know." Claire shrugged. "Can I use one of your colognes?"

"Suit yourself," Ryan acquitted. Claire sniffed the three bottles until she got exactly what Ryan wore often. "Oh, you just had to use that." He shook his head, amused.

"What? I want to smell you all day long." Claire flushed.

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The car pulled over at Starlight and Ryan kissed her goodbye before she exited. She blushed profusely.

"You can just come and work for me instead. You'd make a perfect Personal Assistant," Ryan said.

"Me? Your personal assistant?" Claire snorted.

"Yes, you." Ryan laughed. "And I'll fuck you every hour." His lustful gleam was unchecked.

Damn! Claire giggled.

"And I'll get pregnant in no time," she answered and slipped out. "Drive safe, Ryan, and don't you even think of fucking your Personal Assistant over there."

"Huh?"

"You heard me," she snapped via his window. "I'll kill you both."

"What?" he gasped.

"Be good." She blew him a kiss and disappeared right away.

The day at work was proceeding smoothly. Claire kept herself busy, and even planned to skip lunch after a heavy breakfast of coffee and doughnuts. She had plenty to do. However, something was a little weird since her arrival this morning.

The ladies in the office were constantly murmuring while throwing her strange glances. What the fuck was happening? Claire scowled, unable to understand a thing. She wasted time asking Chris, her neighbor, if there was anything she was missing.

"Nothing major, Claire, just ignore them. I'm always on your side, you know." He winked.

"What?" she uttered but he was not interested to talk about it.

The answer to Claire's question was then discovered later in the afternoon when she stepped into the ladies' room, the perfect place for gossiping. She was inside the toilet stall when she heard two familiar voices talking about her.

"First she acts all high and mighty as if she belongs here and now this?" It was Lydia's voice.



Another replied, "So, is it true that she has seduced Nathan so that she could get in the team?"

Claire frowned.

"Who knows? Maybe. But someone saw her hooking up with our client. No wonder she wears expensive clothes. How can she pay for that designer bag with our salary? And she's just a newbie, to top it all," Lydia spat.

What the actual fuck!

Claire wanted to ignore it but she knew she could no longer tolerate Lydia's venom. She had to put this woman in her place. Hence she walked out of the toilet and went straight toward the vanity where the two ladies were standing in its front.

They looked rattled.

Claire started to wash her hands nonchalantly while staring at the mirror which reflected their faces. "Why have you suddenly stopped? It was getting really interesting," she muttered, her smirk devious.

"What are you talking about?" Lydia retorted.

The audacity! Claire laughed despite the anger.

"Nothing. Keep doing what you love doing best because it's probably the only thing you're good at," she told her, and sooner her heels echoed through the tiles as she cat-walked her way out. "Bitch," she breathed.

To calm her nerves down, she did the only thing that would take her anger away. She called Ryan as she walked into the elevator.

"Hey, beautiful. What a lovely surprise in the middle of the afternoon." Ryan sounded busy but playful as ever.

Claire flushed instantly, pressing the rooftop button. "I just missed you, handsome. Are you in the office?" she asked lazily with a smile.

"No, I stepped out for an appointment. Why do you sound so low?" Now he sounded worried.

What a smartass!

"Maybe I miss you too much already," she replied, suddenly wishing he was here.

"Is that so? Why don't you accept my offer then? Be my PA already," Ryan uttered, and her laughter was guaranteed. "I'm serious." He was laughing, too.

"You're so crazy! I can't be your assistant."

"Why?"

"What about my job?"

"I'll open a designing department just for you."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Will you pick me up later?" she asked, needing him badly today.

"Of course I will. We are going home afterwards, right? I mean, our home," Ryan returned.

*Their home?*

"Sure, let's do that," she answered.

"Okay, I'll see you later then." He sounded happy. "Be careful of Chris and Panther, I may have a spy over there."

Claire laughed again. "I didn't know you could be this jealous, but I love it."

"Oh really, now?" Ryan teased, and they talked for a while until her lunch break was over.

## THIRTY-TWO

Ryan was in his office going through several reports involving the remodeling project.

Earlier this morning he had the pleasure of visiting the site, and the progress was visible. Heavy machines and equipment were active all over the place, with all the workers as busy as required.

"I found another one in Montesby. It's our new target," Ryan said while closing the file he'd been reading.

Doris and Harry were also present in his office, and none of the other two seemed surprised by this news. Ryan always had a back-up plum—whether by luck or chance.

"Oh, finally we're kicking that bastard!" Harry was ecstatic. "Is it great?"

Great was an understatement. Fuck, that land was a goldmine! Location itself was to die for—somewhere near the sea—and the look of it was already breathtaking without anything built yet. Ryan wondered if the owner was ready and willing to sell it. If not, he'd move heaven and earth to get the sale, by any means humanly possible.

"It's perfect for just anything," Ryan replied.

"Have you checked with the owner? How much is he willing to sell?" Doris queried while arranging a few documents on the table.

"Not yet. But it'll cost a whole lot." Ryan looked thoughtful as he said this, reclined back in his seat while rubbing his chin. "I want you to personally check with the owner, Doris."

Doris was an expert in negotiations.

"Sure," she answered.

"I've shown Dexter the place, so he can drive you there," Ryan added, and she nodded. "And it has to be discreet; I don't need any snooping bastard in the picture." His face hardened.

Their meeting continued casually yet meaningfully.

"Okay, guys." Harry got up abruptly. "I have an appointment in the City Hall. I'll see you later."

"The City Hall or to someone with a G?" Doris remarked, wrenching a sarcastic eyebrow.

"You're such a mole, Doris!" Harry blushed. "We should definitely marry her off to some old geezer, Ryan," he commented.

"Marry me off? Who said I want to get married?" Doris snapped.

"Oops! Pretend I wasn't here." Harry scurried off immediately while laughing at the killer glare thrown his way.

"Idiot," Doris muttered with a faint smile before shifting her attention toward Ryan, who was already onto his mobile, a blushing smile on his face while drafting a message. "Are you going to Mrs. Powell's party tomorrow?" she asked him gently, her tone rueful.

"I must go, she's a family," Ryan replied, eyes on his phone.

"Okay. Send her my regards, because I won't attend." Doris scrambled into her heels, ready to leave.

"Why?" Ryan gazed up at her.

"Trust me, Ryan, you don't want to know," she replied. Ryan frowned, bemused. "Anyways, I'll probably leave for Montesby today, so I won't come to work until Monday. Enjoy your phone date with her." She headed toward the door.

Ryan was alone when his phone buzzed after a text he'd just sent Claire. He smiled delightfully. Damn, this Cinderella was seriously getting him. He was grinning as he answered her call.

"Hi. Am I disturbing?" Claire's voice uttered from the other end.

"I wouldn't have picked if you were, would I?" Ryan sat comfortably in his chair.

"Okay." Claire laughed softly, and he could imagine her face right near. "So, what party is it? And at what time?" she inquired about his invitation to accompany him to the party tomorrow.

"It's the opening of an Art gallery," he replied, "and it will be in the afternoon, around twelve or one."

"Oh?"

Ryan frowned. "Why? You think you won't be able to make it because of work?"

There was a short silence until Claire replied, "Well, I don't know, Ryan. I just can't leave work at that time."

"You know I can always make a call, and you'll be free to go," Ryan teased, but he wasn't bluffing. If it meant having her closer and next to him, then anything he was willing to do just to make it happen.

It was always great when he was with her, talking to her, hearing the sound of her laugh, and even that of her swearing words. What a foul mouth she had! And damn, he so much desired putting it into better use whenever she whined.

"That's precisely what I don't want," Claire replied, making him sigh heavily.

He just couldn't understand why she was so adamant about being helped. Was it the side effect of living without proper parental love? She probably skipped being spoiled by the people she lived with. This added much to Ryan's desire to take care of her.

"Why?" he asked coolly.

Claire sighed. "Look, I'll try to ask Nathan for an afternoon off. At least two hours," she said suggestively.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Nathan again?" He loosened his tie.

"Yes. Nathan. He's my boss, Ryan, and please let's not argue over this," Claire admonished him.

Yeah, sure! Just why was she so close to her boss anyway?

"Fine! Talk to your *lovely* boss and let me know," he said, and received a soft laughter from her. "What's funny now?" He laughed with her.

"You are," she replied mirthfully. "Okay, I'll get back to work now. I'll call you later when I'm free."

"Wait," Ryan said haltingly. "You are coming home later tonight, right? You promised me yesterday." He wanted her to his place, and lately it was more than that.

He needed her.

"I will, Ryan. See you later," Claire uttered.

He smiled with pure content. "Okay, behave."

"Jeez! Okay, Sir, I will." She hung up with a soft chuckle.

Ryan smiled to himself at the thought of a simple surprise he'd planned for her. The talk about candlelight dinner and a bed of roses last night really hit him, and perhaps he could try to compromise if she wanted that normal relationship—as she called it.

"Ordinary? How boring," Ryan breathed.

**At Starlight Claire had just finished** analyzing some designs she had been working on for a good while now. Being with Ryan this afternoon was quite a tempting proposition, but her work was currently on the line.

"You want two hours off? Why?" Nathan asked.

What was she doing? Claire knew this wasn't right, but damn her need to go to wherever with Ryan. Was she getting childish now? Ugh, she was losing her mind.

"No, it's nothing. Forget it," she said.

Nathan frowned dubiously. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Hmm," Claire hummed, nodding her head.

Ryan will have to forgive her this time. Fully aware of his hatred for the word *no*, Claire knew he was going to be mad. Well, she was ready to reason with him.

"Hey, precious. There's someone at the lobby asking for you," Rose, the pretty little redhead who sat next to Claire, said with a bright smile.

"For me?" Claire wasn't expecting anyone today.

"Yeah. He said he is a good friend of yours, and he looks *hot!*" Rose wriggled her brows playfully.

"A friend? Did he mention his name?" Claire asked after a small smile.

"No, he didn't."

"Okay, thanks," Claire uttered.

"Mention not." Rose smiled over the partition as she took a seat. "Maybe you could give me his number if you have no use for him, okay?" She winked.

Jeez this girl! Claire chuckled while standing up.



Who could that be? She wondered, and for a moment she thought maybe it was Bruno. But he was always the type to call first.

Ryan? No, it was absurd. Maybe not too absurd, in fact, because there was an incoming call from him as soon as Claire slid into the elevator. She answered immediately.

"I miss you," said Ryan.

Claire flushed a deep shade of pink. "Me, too. Are you at the Starlight?"

"Me? No, I'm driving. Why?"

*Oh?* "Um, nothing. I was just wondering. Where are you going then?" she pried subtly.

"I have a lunch meeting at G&G Hotel," Ryan replied. "Oh, I wanted to inform you that I won't be able to pick you up later."

"Why?" Claire scowled.

"I'm not sure if I can make it on time."

"It's okay; I'll just take a taxi home."

"Our home, right?"

"No?"

"What?"

"Ryan, I'm out of clothes at your place. Besides, you've just told me that you'll be late, so why should I go to your place?" Claire replied. "And please stop saying our home."

God, it always gave her impossible thoughts.

"Why?" Ryan demanded.

"It's confusing." Claire felt rattled inside, and somehow she wished that was indeed the case.

She felt more at home in his penthouse, after all.

"Why is it confusing?" Ryan laughed indulgently.

"I don't know," she uttered, seriously confused, and the elevator halted.

"Are you walking right now? Where are you going?" Ryan asked out of the blue, curiosity lacing his voice.

Claire rolled her eyes with a small smile. "Oh, so you can even hear my footsteps now?" She was heading towards the lobby.

"I can hear everything, Claire. Even your heartbeat," Ryan teased, and she laughed almost loudly. What a joker he was! "So, have you talked to Panther about tomorrow?" His voice was back to Ryan the boss.

*Oh boy! Here we go.*

"Yes, I did. But I don't think I can go with you," she answered carefully.

She could picture Ryan's crunched face as he snapped, "What? Why? Did that—"

"No, Ryan, it's not what you're thinking." He wasn't going to blame Nathan for this, was he?

"Oh, what is it then?" Ryan snorted.

"It's just—" Claire's speech was suddenly halted by the sight of the supposed guest waiting for her by the reception desk.

A sharp sigh escaped her lips, surprised.

"It's just what?" Ryan urged from the phone, sounding upset.

No, this was a joke. What was this man doing here? Claire fixed her startled gaze at the person grinning at her.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. Let's talk later, please," she said softly and hung up without waiting for his approval.

"It's been so long, huh?" her guest said. "How have you been?"

"Um . . . Cool." Claire shrugged indifferently. Her face was now blank, unable to comprehend what she actually felt. "What are you doing here, Denis?" she quizzed.

"Ouch! I was expecting a hug at least, if not a kiss. Why are you so unhappy to see me?" Denis returned, his tone a bit playful.

Fate was seriously pulling a prank on her.

Claire sighed. "Well, hi, Denis," she finally spoke, sarcastic in manners.

"Hi, Claire. May I?" Denis stretched his arms, beckoning her for a hug, and she just stood motionless. "Come on, Claire. It's just a hug, I missed you," he said, and with a soft huff, Claire complied.

It was a friendly hug, at least for Claire, and it's now that she was able to laugh at the situation. She couldn't believe that it was really Denis; the man she'd known since her childhood.

Her ex-boyfriend.

"When did you come back?" She finally got a hold of her usual composure as they parted.

"Just this morning, and I was dying to see the beautiful woman I've been told about for a month," Denis teased. "Damn, you look amazing, Claire Levy."

"Thanks. You don't look bad yourself," Claire said truthfully, and he stared at himself with a smile of disbelief.

He was just wearing a T-shirt and jeans, but it kept him breathtaking still. He had a nerdy look: intelligent eyes with glasses, but rather quite talkative.

They both seemed lost at words. It'd been four years exactly since they last saw one another, and for Claire it was quite unexpected. She'd nearly forgotten him after their deceptively cool breakup.

"Well, I hope you're fine. But you've caught me on a bad time, I'm afraid," Claire said while checking her watch.

She had to get back to Ryan and explain some stuff.

"I know you're working right now, so how about dinner tonight?" Denis suggested.

Claire's eyes widened subtly, and a soft sigh escaped her lips. "Um, I don't think I can make it tonight."

She had a place to be, right? It was a mental reminder to herself.

"Oh, come on! It's been ages since we last saw each other and you can't even grant me a simple and friendly dinner?" Denis complained.

"No, it's just—"

"What's stopping you? Are you busy tonight? When are you getting out of the office?" Denis was utterly incessant.

Damn. Why were all men he knew unaccustomed to the word no? Claire pondered. But Ryan was going to be ,according to him. Maybe one hour over dinner wasn't going to hurt.

"Alright," Claire uttered, knowing that Denis wasn't going to stop that easily. "Make it an evening dinner. I don't have much time to spare."

"Okay. When should I pick you up?"

"You don't have to. Just text me the address and I'll be there."

"That is only possible if you give me your number."

"Oh, right! But no." She glared at him.

"Huh?"

"I'm sure whoever told you where I work, must've given you my number. Are you playing with my intelligence right now?" She wasn't bluffing.

"You got me!" Denis laughed sweetly. "I see you're still smart, kiddo."

"Call me that again and I'll kill you," Claire warned.

"And still tough," Denis added over a laugh. "Okay, I'll see you later, Claire."

"Later." She smiled weakly, and off he left.

How could Denis appear just like that? She wondered as she made her way back to the office. He was indeed the last person she was expecting to see today. He had been out of her life for so long and she preferred it this way.

## THIRTY-THREE

Claire was with Denis around six in the evening.

While seated across one another in the restaurant, Claire finally spoke after a long uneasy silence. "Do you realize you've been staring at me for minutes now?" she asked, trying to get rid of the small discomfort of his eyes devouring her.

"I know," Denis replied with a smile. "I guess I'm trying to encode this new you. You have really changed, Claire; you are so beautiful."

*Here it comes.* Claire sighed.

"Was I ugly back then? Because I think that's what you're insinuating." She took a sip of water from the table.

Denis chuckled. "No, you've always been beautiful, trust me. But you look more mature now, and you're glowing in some ways I can't explain." He tried to continue flattering her, but the maître d' interrupted with the menu. Denis looked at Claire and asked, "What would you like to eat?"

"Anything," Claire replied, her tummy responding with a faint grumble.

If Ryan was here, he would definitely have something to say about it. She blushed at the thought of his face alone.

"Okay, how about Gnocchi and meatballs? Or some creamy mushroom pasta?" Denis asked suggestively.

"Gnocchi is fine," Claire replied.

"We'll have what the lady wants," Denis told the maître d', who nodded with a smile. "Can you recommend a wine for us?"

"Of course, sir. A red Italian would pair best with your choice. I'd recommend Chianti or Barbera," he replied.

"Okay. Bring us a bottle of either of the two," Denis said, and the guy disappeared. "I honestly don't like these fancy restaurants at all." His attention was back to Claire.

"Then why are we here?" Claire retorted casually.

"Maybe I wanted to impress the lady?" He grinned. "I know you are a woman of fine taste, Claire. I haven't forgotten that."

"Oh please!" She rolled her eyes. "Anywhere would be fine. You didn't have to force yourself."

"Still, I wanted a good first impression." Denis smiled, and she ended up laughing. "See? I think it's working perfectly well." His flattery was only in his head.

"So, where have you been all these years? I met your parents some months ago at a party." Claire decided to broach a new subject while making herself comfortable, ready for food.

"Yeah, they told me all that, and you've no idea how eager it made me want to see you," Denis said. Claire arched her eyebrows, stunned. "I've been all over the place; I hardly stayed in one Country. But I've been working in New York recently."

"Oh? That's impressive!" Claire remarked. "And where else have you been aside from the US?"

"Why do I feel in a hot seat all of a sudden?" Denis muttered with a placid grin, seemingly happy to have this moment.

"Just answer my question, Denis." Claire snorted. "I want to hear about your technological endeavors. Is that a crime?"

"You're still so tough, I swear." He sat straight, putting the jokes aside..

Claire shrugged at that. "Maybe I am."

"Okay. I've been in Hong Kong for a year, then another year in South Africa, then in Mumbai for several months. Afterwards, I went to Seoul, South Korea, for about one year and a half, and the rest in New York. It was all work and I'm sure if I give you the details you may fall asleep."

"Okay, spare me the details." Claire laughed.

Minutes later their food arrived, and it was all pleasant to the eyes. Claire was too starving to even waste time admiring the culinary dressing as she immediately dug in her Gnocchi.

The taste of Chianti was plausible, but she still thought Cabernet was the best. She found herself thinking of Ryan for a while until Denis's voice snapped her out.

"I guess time has changed," he started. "You look so different, Claire."

He'd said that one already, Claire thought.

"Have I? Well, it could be. After all, years go by and we all grow up at some point."

"Maybe," Denis muttered.

"But guess what . . ." Claire eyed him mockingly. "I'm still the same handy, pushy and most insensitive person you once knew," she said while stirring her wine glass nonchalantly.

Denis looked uncomfortable at the mention of that. Yes, jerk, I haven't forgotten the nasty words! Claire firmed her eyes at him.

"You're still angry at me, aren't you?" Denis asked calmly, his lips tight.

"No, Denis, I'm not angry at you," Claire said frankly. "The words just crossed my mind and I recalled our breakup."



Denis swallowed hard. "Claire, I—"

"It's all in the past now," Claire interrupted. "I was young, and you said nothing but the truth. I know what a stubborn creature I am, and maybe only a maniac can deal with me." She now smiled at the remembrance of one crazy person capable of dealing with her.

"Please, don't say that," Denis beseeched.

"I don't hold anything against you, Denis. That's my point," Claire reassured him. Maybe she did at some point, but not anymore.

"Regardless, I shouldn't have said those words. I'm sorry, Claire. And I never stopped regretting doing so." Denis sounded remorseful, but it was too late to apologize.

"Like I said, it's okay," Claire answered truthfully. "So, how was life in New York?" She smiled tightly while taking a sip of her wine.

"Actually, I was engaged for a year," Denis said, plucking Claire from her thoughts. "But we broke off the engagement recently."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. But why did you break off?" she asked.

"We both agreed it wasn't fair, because I still had thoughts of someone else. Someone I couldn't forget." He looked her in the eyes while saying this.

Claire felt uncomfortable, for some reasons, but decided to play dumb by saying, "Is that so? I should congratulate you, then. And sorry for the mess afterwards."

Denis smiled weakly. "What about you? Any special person in your life?" he suddenly asked, and it was a difficult question to answer.

Lately, each time someone asked Claire about that she'd feel conflicted. Who was Ryan to her? What sort of relationship did they share? She had no definitive answer.

"Yes, there is," she said flatly.

"Oh, I see." Denis said dryly. "And who is he?"

Claire frowned. Was he seriously asking such a question?

"Denis, you've just returned this morning. You and I have lost contact in five years, right? So how on Earth would you know the people in my life at the moment?"

"You're right." A rueful sigh escaped him as he scrambled for a glass of water.

Later after dinner, Denis offered to drive Claire back home, and insisted that he must do it since it was his fault that she was late.

On the way he kept asking about her job, family, and apologized for her father's death that his family couldn't attend.

"It's alright," said Claire. "I told your parents the same thing."

Being alone with Denis, inside the car, Claire could only think of the rides she'd had with Ryan.

This felt different—awkward even—and she had to think twice before responding to whatever Denis was rumbling about.

"Okay, I'm hereby dropping you home, safe and sound," he announced sassily once they arrived at Claire's.

"Are you sure you can't come in? The evil step mom will be very happy to see you," Claire said sarcastically.

"No, thanks, I'll pass," he replied defensively. Claire managed to laugh heartily.

"Thanks for tonight; I had a terrific welcome back dinner." His tone softened, his eyes beaming.

"Um, pleasure," Claire answered. "I . . . guess I'll see you around. Have a good night?" She had nothing else to say, and the atmosphere was getting tense from the way Denis was staring at her.

It was a longing stare.

"Sure. Be good." He smiled tightly, a wave of sadness crossing his face.

When she walked inside the gate it was nearly eight. A sigh escaped her lungs as she stopped by the garden to enjoy some fresh air. A pair of swings settled still, and she decided to reminisce about her childhood by taking a seat with a big smile. She gave herself a light swing and it was relaxing after a long, eventful day.

Thinking of Denis' return, that somehow took her by surprise, she ended up sighing again. But this is his home country; he had every right to return. She just didn't expect to see him, and she had no idea how she felt about his arrival. He was once an important person in her life, and somehow she couldn't help but revisit the past.

The upcoming autumn breeze drew Claire's smile nevertheless. She loved autumn, for it was her birthday season.

Suddenly her mind got a reminder that she hadn't checked her phone in three hours. The first thing that came to light was Ryan. She hoped he hadn't called her even once, because if he did, she couldn't fathom what was to be expected from him and his unchecked temper.

She rummaged through her purse and retrieved her cellphone. Her eyes went wide-open when she found several missed calls from him, and a few from Gena. That wasn't all; there were a couple of messages from Ryan that she quickly checked.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**Why did you hang up on me earlier? I'm almost done with the meeting, so don't leave the office yet. I'll come pick you up.**

**[Received]**

Claire gasped at the time of the text—five-thirty in the evening. It could've been sent when she was in an emergency meeting at work, because she had her phone in a silent mode. She scrolled the screen to read the next and it simply asked if she was busy.

God! She went for the next.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**Why aren't you picking up my calls? And where are you right now? Because I heard you've already left the office and I'm here like an idiot waiting for you.  
[Received]**

"Oh God!" Claire exclaimed, before scrolling for the next one, both sent around seven.

**FROM: RYAN THE JERK**

**WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU CLAIRE???? This is not funny! If you're not going to answer my calls in three minutes, I'm going to barge into your house and I don't care about your step mother or anyone else.  
[Received]**

Without reading the last one, sent just a minute later after the other, Claire returned Ryan's call instantly. She found herself pacing anxiously around the garden. She could only imagine how smoking mad Ryan must be right now.

How could she be so distracted all that time to forget about the cellphone in her bag?

She kept asking herself while waiting for her call to connect. It didn't happen, for it kept ringing and ringing without any answer. She made a second attempt, this time while seated on one of the sun lounges, tapping her feet on the ground, restlessly.

"Pick up, Ryan, please!" she muttered restlessly, listening attentively on the phone. Yet nothing happened. She immediately got up, took her bag, stormed out of the gate, and hauled for the first taxi she came across.

Recalling Gena's call, Claire decided to call her instead. As expected, it was also connected to Ryan's rampage about her or taking his calls. He must have checked on Gena as soon as he couldn't reach her mobile.

"What have you been up to, Claire? I've tried to call you and I was even worried," Gena lamented.

"It's a long story, Gena." Claire sighed. "But tell me about Ryan; did he call you or something?"

"Of course he did! Why do you think I've been calling you nonstop?" Gena replied. "He wanted to know if we were together or if I knew where you were."

Oh God!

"And what did you tell him?" Claire urged.

"Nothing, because I had no answer. So where did you go? Or maybe I should say where are you, right now?"

"I'm on my way to Ryan's, but before I was having dinner with Denis," Claire answered.

"Oh," Gena uttered. "I mean what?" she exclaimed aloud, startled. "Denis? The same Denis who happens to be your ex?" she added.

"Yes, him. He is back," Claire said.. " Well, I'll talk to you later because I'm too hyped right now."

"Wait, don't tell me about later because—"

"Gena, please, not now. I'm hanging up."

"Okay, later," Gena relented half-heartedly.

Claire almost forgot the password when she reached the private elevator to Ryan's penthouse. Jeez, she had to calm down! Thinking of Ryan's infamous temper when things didn't go his way didn't help her anxiety at all. He must be angry, and it terrified her to think she was to blame for some reasons. .

First she hung up on him while talking on the phone earlier this afternoon, and she didn't bother to call him back afterwards. Damn it! And the fact that it was Ryan, the

control freak, and not someone else, made Claire shudder to the core. She was in deep trouble.

The elevator finally stopped by the foyer and she stepped out. The lights were on, but there was no sign of any living being at present. Carefully, Claire sauntered into the living room and dropped her bag on the couch. Everything was in a pin-drop silence.

After making sure that the kitchen was checked, Claire made her way upstairs and straight into the master bedroom. It was neat, as though untouched at all since sunrise. Ryan wasn't here, she decided while checking the dressing room, and then to the bathroom. It was all clear.

"Damn, Ryan! Where are you?" she grunted after checking his study. "Is he out?"

Seated in one of the stairs, Claire called him once again. It ringed, and the sound wasn't far from her ears. She quickly bolted up, her eyes scanning the surroundings. Following the phone buzzing, she discerned it was coming from the dining room—the only place she hadn't checked. She headed there straightaway.

When Claire walked in, her eyes took an awestruck turn. The table was a nice romantic dinner-setting, with candles and all. Ryan had prepared it for her, and she wasn't there. She swallowed hard, guilty pooled inside her once again. His phone was lying on the table, near the half bottle of whiskey.

He was drinking?

"Oh boy!" Claire muttered, and she was now convinced of the storm coming her way.

## THIRTY-FOUR

The gym room!

It suddenly crossed Claire's mind that she hadn't checked the gym room.

Claire's eyes rested straight on Ryan when she entered the gym room. He was drenched in sweat, earphones on his ears, while running frustrated on the treadmill. It was crystal clear to Claire that he'd been doing this for a very good while.

Her heart was pounding fast as she looked at him—at his wide back.

The room was huge and spacious. It was serenely painted in white and light grey. A few workout machines were installed, including the treadmill near the wide window where Ryan was currently stationed. On the wooden floor lay two yoga mattresses, dumbbells, and medicine balls.

Sighing, Claire slowly shut the door behind her and paced towards Ryan, who was extremely absentminded to even discern her presence in the room. She reached the treadmill and took a few steps to announce her presence.

And he finally took notice of her.

"Ryan," Claire called slowly, carefully, standing before his eyes.

A startled look was evident on Ryan's face, but he didn't utter a word. Bouncing up and down as he jogged, his body wet and aphrodisiac, he slowly shifted his gaze at the machine's dashboard and turned it off. His steps slowed down gradually, his arctic gaze on hers.

*If looks could kill . . .*

"What brings you here?" Ryan asked in baritone while grabbing a small towel from the dashboard.

Expectant of his anger, Claire sighed softly.

"What else would bring me here?" She responded quietly.

"If I did, I wouldn't ask," Ryan replied dryly, wiping the sweat while leaving the treadmill.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to respond to your calls on time." She followed him.

"Is that so?" Ryan uttered cynically.

Wordless, they headed toward the door and made their exit. Claire was right behind him as she stalked him to the kitchen. Perhaps she needed some miracle for this day to end well.

"Are you angry? I don't understand your attitude right now," she asked calmly as Ryan stopped in the kitchen.

He didn't respond to that. He opened the fridge and pulled a chilled bottle of water. Claire remained patient, and he gulped the water until the bottle was empty. A sigh of refreshment lurched from his mouth, his eyes fixed on hers dangerously.

"Ryan, I'm talking to you!" Claire snapped, but he hardly responded. It was getting frustrating. "Okay, I get it. Maybe I shouldn't have come." Annoyed, she wanted to walk past him.

"Where were you?" Ryan held her wrist.

"I . . . I went out with a friend for dinner," Claire answered, startled.

Ryan squinted his eyes. "A friend?"

"Yes, a friend who has just returned today from abroad. Why? Can't I go out with other people now?" Claire didn't know why she said this, but it was probably a defense mechanism.



For some reason, she was afraid to tell the entire truth that it was her ex-boyfriend, even though she had no reason to hide that information either.

Perhaps she found it an unnecessary risk to take.

Ryan freed her hand with a sigh. "Of course you can. I just don't understand why you couldn't pick my calls. Were you that busy with her?" His face hardened.

*Her?* Claire cringed inside.

"I just happened to forget removing the silent mode after the meeting at work. And it was a *he*, not a *she*." She decided to come clean.

Ryan's eyes widened. It was a guy?

"Anything else I should know about him? Because it's evident that he's very dear to you." His tone was rather harsh, his sarcasm unchecked

"What are you insinuating?" Claire asked carefully.

"Nothing," Ryan answered, deadpan. "It's impossible that you forgot your phone in hours, unless you were having a great time with him. Does he like you, too?" he added cynically and walked out of the kitchen after dumping the bottle in the trash can.

"What's wrong with you? I said it was a mistake that I couldn't answer your calls. Do you really think I did it on purpose? Or for the reasons you're possibly imagining? My God, Ryan!"

"I prepared that damn dinner for us! How stupid of me!" Ryan scoffed incredulously, pointing a finger at the dining room.

"Yes, I know," Claire said remorsefully, eyeing the dinner table from a distance. "But we had no plans for dinner, Ryan. You said you were going to be busy for the evening, remember?"

Jesus, how was she supposed to know that he had other plans for them?

"Yes, I did!" Ryan bellowed. "But that's because I wanted to—" He paused, unable to say that he wanted to surprise her.

Fuck, he was so dying to give her the romantic whatever she was whining about just the other night! And for what? Only to find her busy with some friend who happened to be a guy! Fuck!

"You wanted what?" Claire inquired softly.

"Nothing." Ryan didn't see the point of embarrassing himself. "You should've just stayed with your friend instead."

"Ryan, please," Claire uttered exhaustedly, wishing they'd stop arguing. "Why would I stay with him? I only agreed to have dinner with him because I didn't want to go ho—"

"I don't need you here, Claire." Ryan's flat declaration made her eyes freeze. "You can go now."

"What did you say?" Claire whispered, her tone dismayed.

Not that she didn't hear the words; she just didn't want to agree.

Rejection—her worst nightmare.

"You can leave now," Ryan repeated dryly.

*I don't need you here.* A very intense silence settled as Claire tried to process his statement.

"Right," she breathed, her eyes as defeated just as her voice. "Why would you need me? You have everything." She was ready to go, ready to be far away from this place.

Ryan said nothing, his whole body tense as he looked at her.

"It's not like we're a couple, Ryan," Claire told him while wiping her tears with the back of her hand. "Which means I had no reason to explain anything to you as I thought. I'm the stupid one for coming here." With one last teardrop, she scurried toward the foyer.

He didn't need her. The words kept replaying, and it pained Claire brutally. What was she expecting? That she was going to be the center of his universe? How stupid was that? Why did she have to let him back into her life? She had already known that he was only going to hurt her.

She should've known that he wasn't the Prince charming, and neither that Knight in shining armor. He was nothing but a heartbreaking jerk! When was she going to accept this?

The night had already matured as Claire stepped outside the building. She took a deep breath and stared up in the sky, as though contemplating the twinkling stars and moon. It was beautiful. She slowly dragged her legs to the driveway so as to start walking to the main road.

Claire didn't think of it before, but this neighborhood was quite snobbish. Perhaps everyone had their own cars, which meant she had to walk to the main road for a taxi. It wasn't a bother at all, however, for she was already feeling awful as it was.

About five minutes later a familiar car pulled over beside her.

What the heck! Her eyes widened. She stopped moving and Ryan exited the car in a hurry, still dressed up in his workout attire. Seeing him, Claire quickly resumed her steps, walking speedily until he grabbed her hand.

"Hold on, Claire," Ryan beseeched.

Claire pulled her hand savagely. "What? Have you forgotten to tell me something else?" she snapped.

"No, I came to apologize," Ryan uttered, his gaze lowered towards her.

Ha! This guy was something else. Claire scoffed.

"For what? For telling me what I was already aware of? You don't need to apologize, Ryan. You were clear enough and I got the message," she said truthfully.

Ryan's hand fell, perplexed. "I don't know what's happening to me. I don't understand what you're doing to me, Claire. I hate it when you're away from me! I don't like it when you're not responding to my calls or texts, and it drives me nuts knowing you've done all that because you were with another man! I just can't help it!" he shouted.

"And what am I supposed to say, huh?" Claire shouted back. "What? That I totally understand that you only need me when it's convenient for you?" Tears rolled in her face once again.

"Let's just go back and talk, huh? Ryan begged her.

"I want to go home, Ryan. I'm so tired," Claire said, and it immediately hit her mind that her home was no longer her home anyway.

What a day!

"I was just confused, Claire. I didn't mean what I said," Ryan repeated, imploring her. "Let's go home, please." He held her hand, and she brushed it away.

"Will you please stop saying home!" Claire lashed. "That is *your* home, not mine. Don't do this to me, Ryan, I beg you!"

"Claire . . ." Ryan made a stride toward her, but she drew back stoutly. He looked dismayed at it. "Don't do this, Claire."

"I'll do whatever I want, Ryan! Let me go."

A small silence passed before Ryan uttered, "Fine, but I'll be the one to take you to *your* house." He grabbed her hand.

"What are you doing, Ryan? Let me go!" Claire protested.

"Don't be stubborn, Claire! It's late and you don't have a car, so I'll drive you home if you can't stay here!" Ryan continued dragging her into the car, which she ended up inside as he'd intended. "I'll just take you back to your house, so please try to be good—at least for once." He sighed heavily.

Facing the window, sulking, was Claire's response.

God, what was he going to do with this sexy little brat, huh? Ryan smiled amused at the pout face she made, her arms across her chest. As stubborn as she was, Ryan liked everything about her. Even when she made her angry and then smiled at the little things like her face right now.

"Seatbelt," he uttered, and Claire complied without a word.

In a minute Ryan roared the engine as soon as he'd buckled his own seatbelt. For the first time they rode in silence. Neither he, nor she, dared to utter a word. Claire was busy staring outside, and he was concentrating on the road.

Although it was the fastest ride, it felt the longest they'd ever had. When they arrived at Claire's house, she scurried out without simple thanks. Ryan sat still, watching her moving crazily until she disappeared through the gates.

This was the end. Claire wanted this to be the last time she was going to see Ryan Stevens. He wasn't the man for her—she adamantly reminded her thick skull.

And as if this ordeal wasn't enough for Claire yet, she got herself face to face with her stepmother when she walked into the living room. Just great! Claire sighed exhaustedly, for she knew what was coming her way.

"Do you even realize what time it is?" Selma snapped. She was already in her nightgown. "What type of a lady are you, Claire? Have I made such a mistake raising you?"

Claire had no argument. She was too exhausted to even wonder.

"I'm sorry, I had a lot to do and I didn't realize it was this late," she answered and started pacing towards the stairs.

"Why don't you just move to your own place so that you can come and go out whenever you feel like?" Selma whined, and Claire halted momentarily, gripping tightly the edge of the staircase handrails. "It's not like you can't afford to find yourself a place to live, right? You have money, you have a job, and you're a grownup woman now."

Claire whirled around and asked, "Are you that uncomfortable having me around?" She eyed Selma directly, and for a moment her mother seemed taken aback. "Do you really want me out of this house?" Her voice was surprisingly calm.

"If I tell you the truth, will you do as I say?" Selma said, her face pale, makeup-less and thick-skinned.

Claire smiled ruefully. "Who knows? I'm in a very good mood today, Mother. Perhaps I may grant your wish. So is that what you want?" Her question stayed.

Her step mother lunged forward. "Yes, I want you out of this house. I hate the sight of you, you make me sick to the bones, I never liked you one bit Claire, no matter how hard I tried, and I don't think I ever will; because you're not my daughter, I'm not related to you," she said.

Claire was as blank as a plain white paper. She had no idea what she felt and it didn't matter. There was nothing she didn't know, after all. "Okay. I'll move out of the house soon; I just need some time to find a place," she said casually, trying hard not to cry.

Selma nodded. "Good, you can take your time, as long as you disappear from my sight."

"Okay," Claire answered with another smile, and slowly ascended the stairs to her room.

Once inside her private chamber, Claire rushed over toward the bed. She sat down and found herself laughing and crying at the same time. It was so funny and absurd. Why was everyone trying to get rid of her in both directions? Her laughter increased as the questions without answers kept piling up inside her head.

Why was she such bad luck? Why was it that no one really accepted her? She asked herself, and it all felt more absurd. Maybe she wasn't supposed to be born. Maybe she should've just died during birth or thereafter. Was it so hard for anyone to spare a little love for her? Crying her heart out, Claire buried herself under the duvet, thinking of no one but her parents.

**Special Note: To anyone going through a difficult ordeal in life, please don't give up. There's a purpose to every life; and there's always a light at the end of a tunnel.**

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Thank you so much for reading CLAIRE part 1

I know you're disappointed that I stopped here, but this is definitely not the end.

For questions and information about my other books and continuation of CLAIRE, kindly check my contact information below.

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