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A SOUR BIRTHDAY

ZANE:

Today is the day I have been dreading, but I know it will eventually come to pass. For the past week, I have tried to hold myself together in the best possible way. It is the worst feeling ever, but being with Kiara eases it. Yet today, I will have to make the most important move that will make or mar my life. While Kiara is in the shower preparing for her birthday dinner, I run my hands along the edges of the tiny piece of argentum bullet I recovered from the incident with Yusuf.

"Is everything okay?" Kiara's voice cuts through my thoughts, and I quickly stuff the bullet in my pocket. Then I turn around to see her standing in a towel, her body still wet.

Gosh, she is breathtaking. I wish there were a way to prolong what was about to happen, but this is fate.

I know I have said it a million times today, but I cannot help myself; it is the only thing I can think of at the moment.

"Happy birthday, baby," I say, closing the space between us as I take her lips briefly.

"Thank you," she mutters, then I spin her around, bringing her back to my chest.

"I would love to see you in that dress so I can rip it off your body at the end of the night." She chuckles when I say this, and I plant kisses down her neck, wanting to be drowned in the moment, but she fights hard for me to let her go.

Finally, she pinches my hands, and I let her go.

"You haven't even taken a bath," she scoffs.

"Remember, it takes a minute to get dressed," I say, and she rolls her eyes before disappearing into the closet to get dressed while I go into the bathroom to shower.

I step out of the shower, letting the towel hang loosely around my waist, water still dripping from my hair. The steam clings to the mirror, fogging up the reflection that stares back at me. But it isn't the steam clouding my mind-it's the weight of what I have to do tonight.

There is a mental battle going on in my mind until I catch sight of Kiara sliding into that red dress.

My heart stops for a second, and my mouth goes dry as I take her in. She is... breathtaking. The way the dress clings to her, outlining every perfect curve, every inch of her, drives me insane.

I can feel desire clawing at me, demanding I take her right there, but I can't. Not tonight. Tonight is her special night, and mine too. Sex won't take away the pain.

"Zane?" Her voice pulls me from my thoughts, but all I can do is stare. My eyes trail down her body.

"Kiara... you look..." I swallow hard.

She smiles. "You don't think it's too much?" she asks, smoothing the dress over her hips, turning slightly to catch her reflection in the mirror.

"Given I will be the only man likely to see you tonight, you can go stark naked," I say, trying to lighten the feeling in my chest. "Wear the skimpiest dress, sway your hips all you want, but you will end up in my bed tonight."

"Keep being cocky, and we will see about that," she says, applying her red lipstick, which I can see in the mirror.

I wipe my body, then I walk up to her, grabbing her throat and pressing my lips to hers, smudging her red lipstick on purpose.

"Zane!" she calls out, her brows creased, but I don't answer.

I walk away to get dressed.

Once we are both dressed, I can't help but glance at her again. Kiara is stunning, the red dress hugging her like it's made just for her. I grab her hand, intertwining my fingers with hers as we make our way to the terrace.

The private dinner is set up with such precision that even I am impressed, though I've gone over the details a hundred times to make sure everything is perfect. The terrace is lit by the soft glow of hanging lanterns, casting warm, flickering light that dances across the floor. A large table sits in the middle, draped in a dark, velvety cloth with gold trim. Twinkling lights are woven through the ivy-covered pergola above us.

"It feels like I am dreaming, and I couldn't have asked for anything more," she says, throwing her arms around me.

I force a smile as she kisses my cheek. Then I take her hand, bringing it to my lips as I plant a gentle kiss on it before leading her to the table.

At the center of the table is an elaborate floral arrangement of carefully picked lilies. To one side, a champagne bucket sits. Candles flicker on either side of the table with a small but steady flame. Plates of carefully crafted dishes are set before us-delicate portions of seared scallops, glazed duck breast, and rich chocolate mousse for dessert.

"Sit," I say to Kiara as I pull out a chair for her, then I take my own.

The night is calm, just as I had planned, with nothing but the sound of the waves from the beach beneath us.

We start eating, and I watch Kiara as she eagerly digs into the meal, her appetite growing with each course. Although I force myself to eat, I am grateful I can watch her savor her meal with the widest grin on her face.

With every bite she takes, I feel the night slipping further away from my control. She laughs, jokes, and reaches across the table to swipe a forkful of my dish, forcing me to smile at her at every instance.

"Zane, this is incredible," she says between bites, her hand resting lightly on her stomach. "I think I've eaten enough for two."

I chuckle. "I wanted to make sure you enjoyed yourself tonight." My words feel hollow, but I hope she can't hear the strain behind them.

When she finally sets down her fork, I know it's time.

I stand up from the table, slowly walking around to her side, my hand sliding into my pocket. I pull out a blindfold.

"Zane?" she calls out as I wrap the cloth around her eyes.

"Trust me," I whisper, leaning down to brush my lips against her ear as I tie the blindfold securely at the back of her head.

"Is this part of my birthday surprise?" she asks, her voice laced with anticipation.

I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. "You will find out."

I try to maintain my usual tone.

In one swift motion, I lift her into my arms, and she wraps her hands around my neck. Then I carry her out of the penthouse and into the elevator, making our way downstairs. I carry her outside, then put her down.

"Are you ready?" I ask, and she squeals in excitement as I untie the blindfold.

After it comes undone, she stands in front of a new SUV, her mouth dropping open.

"Happy birthday, love. You deserve the best," I say as I hand her the keys.

She turns around, shaking her head, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"Your plan was to make me cry today, and..." She throws herself onto me, bursting into full-blown tears before she can say a word. I pull her close, a chuckle escaping my lips.

"I love you," I say, and she presses hard against me.

My heart is thumping fast as I need to get to the last part of the night.

"Why don't we celebrate?" I ask, pulling away and walking to the car.

I open the front door, then grab the bottle of champagne I left there. I cork it open and take out the glasses, handing her one, then I pour the drinks for us.

"Cheers!" I say as we clink our glasses, and I watch her gulp hers down.

"You know, I'm thinking of doing it right now. Maybe we can imprint on the car," she says in a sultry tone as she runs a finger down my chest, but I feel nothing but pain. "What do you..." Before she can complete her statement, her eyes begin to shut, and she loses her balance, collapsing toward the ground.

I throw away the glass in my hand, catching her before she crashes to the ground.

"Z... Zane," she manages to say my name before she passes out.