

26.

"I would save you from your shackles—not completely, but just enough for you to find the strength to set yourself free."

He shouldn't have done that. He shouldn't have acted like a jerk to her. Damn it, he should have minded his business, just like she had said before. Then he wouldn't have found himself pacing the hospital hall and waiting. Earlier, just when he was about to leave, he realised she didn't look okay—pale, actually. He had wanted to ignore it, but her sudden hiss of pain caught his attention. He might have left if she didn't look like she was about to pass out. And now, here he was, outside a ward, pacing the hall and scolding himself for getting upset, acting like a jerk, and at the same time, not minding his own business. Not like anyone would in such a situation because, honestly, he didn't know it was her. He was just there at the right—or wrong—time, it seemed, to relieve his anger when he saw an angry-looking lady who was about to give herself a lifelong injury from how hard she was hitting the ball.

At first, he was just going to watch her, but her hits became so ferocious he couldn't just stand by anymore. He had never seen anything like it. She had kept hitting the ball so blindly, with such ferocious hits and cries, that he couldn't bear to watch or listen, or his heart might have died of panic before she did. So, he decided to stop her. Maybe he shouldn't have because when she turned—although he got hit—he couldn't believe it was her. The second sole source of his anger (after his mother's family had demanded that her burial ground be moved). He had instantly understood her fury because he saw the morning news about her, and even he couldn't contain his own anger, which still confused him because it wasn't his anger to feel. But when she parted those lips of hers to say those passionate, pitiful words about her ex-husband and all, he felt his anger multiply. Her vulnerable eyes reminded him of someone—his mother.

So soft and easily swayed by love that she ended up losing herself, and even him. Another wave of anger boiled up in his veins, and he gritted his teeth as he remembered she had said something similar to that.

His anger boiled again, and he shook his head as if trying to shake it off. He had better stop thinking about his mother, or he might end up breaking something. Those words of hers had riled him up so much that he had instantly snapped at her. He winced, turning around to continue pacing from another angle. He had always been a calm person; in fact, he rarely lost his cool. But it was both surprising and uncomfortable that a strange woman he barely knew could rile him up so badly, when, for his entire life, only his mother had been able to do that.

It wasn't even just once—it had happened three times now, and he didn't like it, not one bit. First, it happened when he hit that jerk for her, then when he snapped at her, and finally when she went all pale and in pain. He shook his head at the memory as if to wash it away.

The door swung open, and his head snapped towards it. There she was, Estelle—the one he didn't need to see right now. Although she still looked a bit pale, it was better than earlier. But why was she already out? His brow furrowed, and he rushed to her, ignoring her scrutiny.

"Should you be walking around?" he asked, honestly concerned about her health, his eyes moving from her hand wrapped around her belly to the door she had just exited.

Estelle glared at him for a moment and asked, "Who are you? And why exactly are you following me around?"

He blinked, clearly not expecting that. "That isn't what I expected to hear from someone I saved." She didn't even blink, so he let out an exaggerated sigh and continued. "The name's Ryan, and like I said, I'm not a reporter, if that makes you feel better. And..." He paused, allowing his gaze to stay intensely on hers for a long time, watching as she successfully squirmed a bit under his stare. It was small, but a man needed even a tiny bit of pride. "I'm sure our meetings are pure coincidence—they're not planned."

Estelle eyed him, her cheeks turning rosy for God knows what reason. "Sure, they aren't, considering you've shown up twice in two days. If you aren't a reporter, then what are you?"

"I—"

"You know what, never mind, I don't want to know." She turned to leave but paused for a few seconds as if pondering something, then finally turned around. "I'm sorry," she muttered, and he just blinked at her, surprised.

She might have interpreted his reaction differently because she continued to explain, raising her hands in a gesture. "For slapping you when I should have slapped the old man." Her lips curled into a little smile, and his heart tightened, so he frowned. Yes, she should have. He wouldn't pretend to understand why she didn't that night, nor would he pretend to know her pain, either. But she did need to stand up for herself. Everyone needed to face their battles, and let go of the things that caused them pain, even if they cherished those things with all their soul.

He swallowed hard, his gaze hard and serious as he met hers. With quiet force, he said, "Flip the script." Her brow knitted in confusion. "You're not the one who lost—he is. Put yourself in the spotlight, where everyone sees you and admires you. Let him appear as just another face in the crowd, watching from the sidelines. Make him feel small, make him realise what he's lost. That's when you'll know you've won."

Estelle gaped at him for a long time, completely at a loss for words. Twice. Twice in one day, a stranger had given her life-changing advice, and strangely enough, it didn't feel bad or intrusive. Instead, it felt energizing and empowering.

"What do you mean?" Her voice was soft, and she thought he might not have heard her. But he heard, and she knew he did from how intense his stare had become.

His gaze slid down to her stomach and behind her, where he could see a lady dressed impeccably in a suit. Her eyes darted around, then to her phone. From the panicked and disoriented look on her face, he could tell she was her assistant—the one he had texted through Estelle's phone when she was in pain.

"Take care of yourself," he finally said, his eyes sliding back to her confused ones before walking past her, hoping to walk out of her life for good. But as he walked out of the hospital and into his car, the earlier incident replaying in his head, he knew he couldn't leave. This was more than curiosity—it was a feeling. A need to help her stand up for herself and not die trying to be someone else's choice, like his mother had.

He hadn't been able to save his mother. No, he had tried once but gave up because he didn't understand what love felt like—not like he did now, or at least not like he thought he might. He hadn't felt it, not from anyone, not even from his mother. But seeing Estelle in the courtroom, broken and still fighting, he couldn't help but feel her pain.

Had his mother fought like that, secretly? Had she screamed for help in a corner of her room—help to save her from the stupidity of love? Had he been too jealous to see it? Was that why he was feeling this pain for a woman he didn't even know? If this was a second chance to make him forgive himself, then he would take it. Even if it was just once.

He pressed hard on the gas, and the car sped into the road. He would save her from her shackles. Maybe not completely, but loose enough for her to set herself free. He would do that. For himself, and his mother.