



CHAPTER 3

CLARA

James indeed signed the divorce papers, and as planned, Lyra retrieved them for me. His promptness in signing likely stemmed from the fact that I made no demands of him. It's astounding to think that I sacrificed my family for someone as despicable as him.

Staring out of the airplane window, memories of my life two years ago ooded my mind. While I wasn't exactly joyous then, I lacked nothing materially. Achieving a balance between wealth and happiness proved impossible, particularly given my family's accumulated generational wealth.

It pained me deeply to realize that throughout generations, women in our family were treated as insignificant. It felt as though we were groomed solely for business marriages, rather than valued for our individual worth.

Growing up, my upbringing wasn't any different. My parents spared no expense, sending me to the best business school and providing a life of luxury. Thankfully, they also respected my desire for privacy, shielding me from the prying eyes of the paparazzi—a request I made on my sixteenth birthday, one that my father honored without hesitation, knowing it wouldn't hinder his pursuit of finding the "perfect" suitor for me.

It was during my time at school in Mexico that I crossed paths with James. He swept me off my feet, and before I knew it, I had fallen deeply in love. But consumed by the fear that he might only be interested in me for my wealth, I made a decision I would come to regret: I lied to him about my background, spinning a tale of being an orphan on scholarship. And to my surprise, he believed every word of it.

Imagine my heartbreak when I went home for the holidays on the claim that I was inviting my only surviving aunty, only for my father to show me a picture of a man I was suppose to get married to during Christmas.

I didn't see the man and I didn't have to. The thought of marrying anyone that wasn't James didn't sit well with me, so when I got back to Mexico, I told James that I wanted us to get married. He asked me for my reason and I told him my aunt wanted to marry me off to an old man. He didn't want to lose me either, so he was cool with the idea and we got married with his father present.

Bless his soul, he was a good man.

Time flew and before I could blink, it was Easter already. During my journey back home for the Easter holiday, James expressed his desire to accompany me. In response, I proposed that he delay his departure so that I could personally inform my aunt about our marriage prior to his arrival.

He readily agreed to this arrangement. Thus, I proceeded to make the trip ahead of him.

I arrived home and wasted no time in telling my parents and my only sibling of the fact that I got married few weeks after New Year celebration. Their reaction was one I expected, intense anger and disappointment. I expected Xavier, my usually supportive elder brother who had always stood by my side, to be angry as well, but he was more disappointed in me than angry.

Instantly, my parents presented me with a grave ultimatum: either get a divorce or face the dire consequence of being removed from the family register.

Well...seeing my divorce with James, I guess you already know the decision I took. I went back to Mexico and told James that my aunt took me off the family register. He wanted to talk to her on our behalf but I told him that I didn't need her.

James made me a promise to always love and cherish me till the end of time... a promise he very much broke.

The pilot announced our arrival while the airhostesses went round to perform their duties. Closing my eyes, I felt the airplane descend to a country I didn't think I'll ever set my foot on again.

Getting off the plane, I grabbed the medium sized suitcase I had with me and dragged it to the arrival gate, half-expecting to see Xavier, my brother.

Yesterday, I mustered the courage to send him a text, informing him of my arrival in Manhattan and subtly hinting at my need for assistance in transportation. However, I wouldn't be surprised if my message went unanswered.

Coming to a halt, I swiftly scanned the bustling crowd for his familiar face. Disappointed by the absence of his presence, I let out a resigned sigh and took a few steps forward, prepared to handle the situation on my own.

"Ms. Clara?" A deep, husky voice called out from behind me. Turning around, I felt a wave of shock and embarrassment wash over me as I locked eyes with the last person I expected to encounter.

It was Damien Blackheart, my former ancé whom I had left behind to marry James. Though I recognized him instantly, I chose to feign ignorance.

"Yes," I responded, maintaining the facade of unfamiliarity with his identity. After all, we hadn't crossed paths before. "How can I assist you?"

His gaze, intense and inscrutable, swept over me, leaving a chill in its wake. "Your brother is tied up in a meeting, and he asked me to pick you up."

Ah, so he did receive my message after all. "Thank you," I said with genuine gratitude, offering a smile. "And sorry for the incon_."

Without a word, he retrieved my suitcase and strode past me. I hastened to follow him as he placed the luggage in the trunk before joining me in the backseat. The driver started the car, and we began our journey.

Clearing my throat, I sought to break the awkward silence. "So, I'll be staying at..."

"I'll be taking you to my private residence," he interjected, his tone brooking no argument. "Your brother will meet you there."

I couldn't help but wonder when they had forged this unexpected friendship. "And why am I not going to the hotel I booked?" I inquired, unable to mask my surprise.

His gaze icked towards me briefly. "I have no interest in being embroiled in the scandal of an affair with a married woman," he stated bluntly.

Instinctively, I glanced down at my nger, now devoid of the ring that once symbolized my ill-fated marriage, before swiftly tucking it away in my pocket. "I apologize for any inconvenience," I murmured, feeling a pang of guilt for the disrespect I had shown him by hastily marrying someone else.

The remainder of the journey was cloaked in silence until the driver pulled up to a gate, granting us access. As we arrived at a grand villa, he alighted from the car and led the way towards the imposing house, leaving me to wordlessly follow in his wake.

"Feel free to use the guestroom to freshen up and unwind. If you need anything to eat, just let the staff know," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Thank you," I murmured quietly.

As he began to walk away, I halted him with a question that has been on my mind. "Do you happen to know when Xavier will arrive?"

His gaze pierced through me with an unsettling emptiness, making me feel like nothing more than a piece of furniture in his home. "He's your brother, isn't he?" he replied icily, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Why don't you give him a call and find out?" With that dismissive retort, he turned on his heel and ascended the staircase, disappearing into one of the rooms.

Left standing alone in the hallway, I felt a wave of unease wash over me. Despite the plush surroundings and attentive staff, I couldn't shake off the sense of being an unwelcome guest. As I retreated to the guestroom, my belongings already taken care of by the staff, I couldn't bring myself to indulge in the offered comforts. The thought of showering or requesting food felt awkward and out of place in this unfamiliar environment.

"Where is she?" My brother's voice, familiar and comforting, reached my ears, causing me to jump to my feet, my eyes welling up with tears. Hastily pulling open the door, I practically flew into his waiting arms, where he enveloped me in a tight embrace without hesitation.

As we stood locked in our embrace, I couldn't help but notice Damien lingering in the background, his gaze fixed upon us with an inscrutable expression. The moment our eyes met, he turned on his heel and walked away, disappearing from view.

"Are you here for the holidays or are you planning to stay?" Xavier whispered, drawing back to study my face with concern etched in his features.

"I'm here to stay," I replied with a strained smile. The longer I gazed into my brother's eyes, the more I realized just how much I had missed him.

"And what about him?"

Tears continued to spill down my cheeks as I shook my head. "We got divorced three days ago," I admitted in a choked voice.

Nodding understandingly, Xavier pulled me back into his comforting embrace. "That's good, because I need you, and the company needs you."

Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to melt into the embrace of the one person I knew without a doubt loved me unconditionally.