

CHAPTER 4

CLARA

That night, Xavier took me to a hotel because he insisted the one I reserved wasn't up to standard. I spent the night trying to come to terms with everything that had happened. The next day, Xavier stopped by to deliver some unexpected news: I had to go home and face our parents.

"I don't think I'm ready to face Dad," I murmured, feeling a wave of shame wash over me at the thought of admitting that I had made the wrong choice to him.

Xavier, who had been seated on the white sofa, rose and joined me on the bed. "I think you should meet them, especially Dad," he urged gently, his expression sympathetic.

I frowned, uncertain of how to respond. Then, out of nowhere, Xavier dropped a bombshell. "He's dying," he blurted out suddenly.

My eyes widened with shock. "What did you just say?" I demanded, unable to process his words.

Sighing heavily, Xavier looked down at his intertwined fingers, his expression pained. "He was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, and he has about a year to live," he explained quietly.

I blinked slowly, tears streaming down my cheeks as I processed Xavier's words. "Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?" I choked out, my voice thick with emotion. "Did you all keep it from me because you didn't see me as part of the family anymore?"

Xavier lifted his head and offered me a gentle smile. "Despite his anger towards you, Dad was always worried about you," he reassured me. Chuckling softly, he reached forward and tucked a stray hair behind my ear. "Even though you may not have realized it, Clara, you were always Dad's little girl."

I had every reason to argue against that statement, to refute the notion of being Dad's favorite, but I chose to remain silent. "Fine," I relented. "Let's go home. But I'm not staying with them. I'll find my own place."

Xavier nodded in understanding. "That's cool by me," he agreed readily. "I wouldn't advise you to live with them anyway. Mum will drive you crazy."

I can imagine.

I chuckled softly, feeling the normalcy between us return as I made my way to the closet to change into something more presentable. After an hour of deliberation, I emerged from the closet, clad in a simple black dress that I hoped would suffice for the occasion.

Xavier observed me closely as I gathered my belongings from the bed. "What brand is that?" he inquired.

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't know," I admitted with a sheepish grin, stung my phone and earphone into my bag. "I got it from a clothing store at a fair price."

He rose from the bed, eyeing my attire with a critical gaze. "In other words, it isn't a designer out," he remarked, tilting his head slightly. "At least not a popular one." Although his lips pursed disapprovingly, he refrained from making any further comments about my choice of clothing.

As I prepared to leave, Xavier approached me with a small smile playing on his lips. "I picked something up for you on my way here," he revealed, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a Tiffany necklace. "Turn around," he instructed gently, indicating for me to face away from him.

Smiling warmly, I turned around. "When you said you got something for me on your way here, I was expecting anything but a Tiffany jewelry," I admitted with a chuckle, genuinely surprised by his choice of gift.

He fastened the necklace around my neck. "What were you expecting?" he asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Takeout, coffee, anything but jewelry that costs thousands of dollars," I replied honestly, realizing that I had momentarily forgotten Xavier's penchant for extravagant gifts. He always found joy in showering his loved ones with expensive things.

Grinning smugly, he admired the necklace adorning my neck. "It fits you perfectly," he remarked proudly.

"Thank you," I said gratefully, touched by his gesture.

Exiting the hotel, we made our way to Xavier's car. His driver, a stranger to me, greeted me curtly as I settled into the back seat. A few minutes into the ride, Xavier broke the silence once more, his tone serious.

"I'm not trying to judge you or be rude, Clara, but you don't look good," he remarked, his gaze filled with concern rather than judgment. "What happened to your savings? If you had invested them wisely, things wouldn't be this bad."

Just thinking about it now makes me realize how foolish I've been. I admitted with a heavy sigh. "I gave James my savings to start his real estate business."

Xavier's brow furrowed in disbelief. "You gave him everything?" he echoed incredulously. I bit my lip nervously, nodding in response, unable to meet his gaze. "Damn," he exclaimed with a chuckle, though there was a hint of sympathy in his voice. "You were truly in love, Clara. But I don't judge you. Love is not a crime; you just happened to meet the wrong person. What really happened between you two?"

Tears welled up in my eyes at the mere thought of James, and I turned to stare out the window, unable to face Xavier. "He was having an affair," I confessed softly, my voice barely above a whisper. "And he wanted me to turn a blind eye to it just because the woman promised to help him grow his business."

A heavy silence engulfed the car, the only sound permeating the air being the soft music emanating from the stereo. When I finally mustered the courage to glance at Xavier, I found him staring at me with a mixture of anger and concern etched on his features. "What did you say he does again?" he asked, his tone laced with a hint of menace.

"I understand what you're getting at with that question," I responded, recognizing the implication behind Xavier's inquiry. "But please, just leave him be." Despite my intense dislike for James, I didn't want to jeopardize his business. "He's in my past now, and I want him to stay there."

Xavier's clenched fist rested heavily on his thigh, a clear indication of his simmering anger. "I can't just let this go," he insisted through gritted teeth. "Someone needs to teach him a lesson for what he did to you." As I opened my mouth to protest, he raised a finger, silencing me. "I'll talk to Damien about it. I'm sure he'll come up with something."

Frowning deeply, I couldn't help but feel uneasy about Xavier's proposed course of action. "What do you mean you'll talk to Damien?" I snapped, my frustration mounting. "You do realize he's my ex, right?" I exclaimed incredulously. "How could you even consider asking my ex-uncle to confront my ex-husband on my behalf?" It seemed like he had completely lost his mind.

Xavier's chuckle grated on my nerves, his amusement only adding to my confusion. "Who is your ex-uncle? Damien?" he queried, shaking his head in disbelief. "You never met him for one day, and yet you consider him your ex?" He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Believe me when I say Damien doesn't consider you his ex, not in the slightest."

Feeling a mix of relief and embarrassment, I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "Either way, he did want to marry me, but I chose James instead," I admitted reluctantly.

As the car turned into a familiar neighborhood, Xavier's next words caught me off guard. "News flash, love," he began, his tone teasing, "Damien didn't want to marry you either."

My frown deepened at his revelation. "What do you mean by that?" I demanded.

"It means that the way you resisted the idea of marriage was the same way Damien resisted it," Xavier clarified, glancing at me with amusement in his eyes. "What? You should be relieved. Damien didn't want to marry you, so I'm sure he was glad when you had a change of heart and decided to marry..." He trailed off, scratching his brow in mock contemplation. "What was his name again?"

"James," I deadpanned, my voice flat.

"Right, James," Xavier echoed. He reached for my hand, offering a comforting squeeze. "No hard feelings, love, but I'm pretty sure you both turned each other down."

As the car pulled into our compound and came to a stop beside the fountain, the security guards opened both doors, but I hesitated to exit. "What's wrong?" Xavier inquired, his brow furrowing. "Why aren't you getting out?"

I tore my gaze away from the gigantic building before us to glance at him briefly. "Are they expecting me?" I questioned.

He nodded. "I informed them of your return last night."

"And were they thrilled to hear that I'm back?" I pressed, noting the hesitation in his response. When he didn't reply immediately, I scoffed at the expression on his face. "Of course they aren't happy," I concluded bitterly. "I'm more like the prodigal daughter right now."

"You know Father can be unpredictable," Xavier remarked, his hand seeking mine once more, offering a reassuring squeeze. "Let's hope for the best reaction. Besides, he has something to share with you that I believe you'll love."

"And what could that be?"

"You'll find out," he replied cryptically, flashing me a reassuring smile before stepping out of the car. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves before following suit.

Together, we made our way into the house to face my parents, whom I hadn't seen in two years.