

CHAPTER 5

CLARA

Stepping into the house where I had spent my childhood, I couldn't help but feel a wave of nostalgia wash over me. Everything looked exactly as it did two years ago when I left home.

"Come on," Xavier urged, breaking me out of my reverie. "They're waiting for us in the study room."

Following Xavier in silence, we ascended the stairs and stopped outside the familiar door. With a couple of knocks, Xavier pushed the door open, and we entered the room.

The first person I laid eyes on was my mother, dressed impeccably in a white dress that bore a striking resemblance to Versace. Her hair was tightly pulled back into a bun, and I couldn't help but wince at the thought of how uncomfortable it must be. Adorning her outfit were expensive silver accessories that surely cost a fortune.

My gaze then shifted to the awards rack mounted on the wall, almost bursting with accolades. The shelf dedicated to my father was nearly filled to capacity, while my brother's was already brimming with awards. My mother's shelf boasted a few awards, likely acquired through her involvement in various charity events. However, my own shelf remained conspicuously empty, a stark reminder of my absence and lack of achievements compared to the rest of my family.

"Stop staring like you're lost and take a seat," my father, Frank Jones, instructed me, his voice calm yet unmistakable authority that had long been a trademark of his demeanor.

Obediently, I settled into the chair before nervously summoning the courage to meet his penetrating gaze. "Hello, Dad," I greeted, offering a slight smile in an attempt to diffuse some of the tension in the room.

"Have you finally overcome that madness?" he asked, his tone measured.

I glanced at Xavier, seated next to me, and he subtly nodded, silently encouraging me to respond to my father's question.

"All I can say is that I'm sorry for abandoning my family, even though it often felt like I was the one abandoned," I began, "but I stand by my decision to reject a marriage to a stranger."

"And how did marrying someone you knew work out for you?" he countered, his voice retaining its composed tone, yet I knew better than to gauge his level of anger solely by his voice. "Two years into the marriage and you're already divorced."

He gestured towards Mum. "I didn't know your mother until I married her," he continued, his gaze lingering on her as he spoke. "We met at the altar for the first time, and despite the years, we're still together." Interlocking his fingers and resting his elbow on the desk, he leaned forward. "It's not just about marrying someone you know; it's about compatibility. And you and that bastard you married were never compatible."

I bit down on my lip, fighting back the urge to respond. I had to remind myself that he was unwell, and arguing with him would serve no purpose, especially when his time with us was limited. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick?" I finally managed to ask, forcing the words past the lump in my throat and pinching myself hard to stave off the tears threatening to spill.

He glanced at Xavier, his expression bordering on a glare, and Xavier simply shrugged in response. "She needed to know now that she's back," he replied, his voice calm yet firm, defending his decision to inform me of my father's condition.

Dad redirected his gaze to me, his voice firm yet tinged with a hint of vulnerability. "Don't make a big deal out of my sickness," he replied stoically. "I still have some time left."

Suppressing the urge to react, I bit down on my inner cheek and avoided meeting his eyes.

"Look at me," he commanded, his voice leaving no room for disobedience. Slowly, I lifted my head, meeting his gaze as he continued to speak. I half-expected him to offer words of comfort or reassurance, but instead, he slammed a document onto the table and pushed it towards me.

"This is a business that is usually passed down to the female daughters in the family," he explained, his tone matter-of-fact. "Your grandmother did a very good job handling it."

Curious, I picked up the stack of documents and began to flip through the pages. "A real estate company?" I murmured, my brow furrowing in confusion. "How come I didn't know that Grandma ran Comfort Zone?"

"It requires both our signatures to transfer ownership to you, and I can only sign if you promise me you're done with that riff-raff."

James? He's a closed chapter of my life. "I'm done with him," I muttered, brushing off the mention of my past relationship. That wasn't my concern at the moment.

"I know nothing about real estate," I admitted, feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the sudden responsibility thrust upon me. Despite holding an unused degree in business management, the dynamics of the real estate industry remained foreign to me.

"Xavier knows nothing about real estate either," Dad countered, addressing my brother. "And I'm too busy to coach you."

I glanced at Mum but Xavier's chuckle only served to heighten my anxiety. "She would be a better option if it has to do with charity organizations," Xavier suggested.

"Blackheart," Dad interjected, effectively halting our conversation. "Damien is the perfect coach for you. I've already discussed it with him, and he's agreed to mentor you for two months."

My eyes widened in disbelief as I turned to Xavier for confirmation, but he simply shrugged in response to my unspoken query. "What exactly is he into?" I asked aloud. "Real estate?"

"Damien is into many things," Xavier explained patiently, his tone carrying a hint of admiration. "He has a company called GoFood, which focuses on the production of consumable products using pure agricultural produce. In addition to that, he's involved in hotels, casinos, bars, golf clubs—you name it. And yes, he's also invested in real estate."

Xavier paused, searching for the right words to explain his thoughts. "More accurately, he knows which real estate companies to invest in and which to avoid," he continued, his expression contemplative. "He can predict which ones will fail and provide a thorough analysis of why, just as he can identify those that are poised for success."

I couldn't shake off the discomfort that Damien's presence always seemed to evoke in me. There was something about him that made me feel as though I had done something wrong, even when I hadn't.

"He saved our business from potential doom," Xavier chimed in. "That's why Dad wanted to marry you off to him, as a gesture of thanks."

Right. Because that sounds like a lovely way to express gratitude. I hope you detect the sarcasm in my voice. "Do I have any say in this?"

Dad shook his head. "I'll sign the document after two months, once Damien assures me that you're capable of running the business. I suggest you put your pride aside and learn," he advised.

Two months... I could endure that. "Fine," I relented, albeit begrudgingly.

"So, are you staying with us?" Mum interjected, diverting everyone's attention to her.

I shook my head, ignoring the expectant look on Dad's face. "I'm finding a place for myself," I declared.

"You can have one of our apartment complexes in the city," Dad suggested but I shook my head.

"It's fine, I can handle my accommodation myself," I insisted, determined not to rely entirely on them. With some savings tucked away, I was confident I could secure something moderate and comfortable. Besides, once I began working in real estate, I could afford to move to a larger place with my salary.

"You can stay here until you find a place," Mum persisted, her tone laced with concern.

Once again, I declined her offer. I knew that if I stayed with her, she would undoubtedly drag me along to every charity event and social gathering in her relentless pursuit of community involvement.

"I've already made arrangements with Xavier to stay with him until I find a place," I countered, hoping to put an end to the discussion.

"He'll have his male friends over," Mum argued, clearly not ready to let the matter drop.

I blinked slowly at Mum, my confusion evident. "And?" I questioned, failing to see the significance. "I'm in my mid-twenties and no longer a virgin, so what's the big deal about him having male friends over?"

My father's eyes widened in bewilderment, and Xavier swiftly rose from his seat, sensing the need to intervene. "We should get going," he announced, his tone brisk as he sought to wrap up the awkwardness in the room. "I promised her I'll be taking her shopping today."

I shot Xavier a puzzled look. When did he promise that? Nonetheless, I chuckled softly and rose from my seat, grabbing my purse. "Dad," I called out, drawing his gaze to me. "It's good to be home."

A faint smile tugged at my father's lips, though it was almost imperceptible. "It's good to have you home."