

## Chapter 146 In the Rain, Blurring Reality and Dream

As soon as the words left her mouth, Isabel saw Xander's eyes snap open. The previous dullness was gone, replaced by a fierce, piercing gaze.

Seriously?

She couldn't help but smirk, though she muttered a silent complaint to herself.

Before she could even finish her thought, Xander had closed the distance between them, pinning her firmly against the wall once more.

The rain poured down around them, soaking them to the bone.

The autumn chill bit at their skin, but it did nothing to cool the heat building between them as they clung together in the downpour.

It was impossible to say how long they stayed that way. When the rain finally eased, they separated reluctantly.

Isabel slung Xander's arm over her shoulder and began helping him back toward the hot spring hotel.

As they walked, she muttered under her breath, "I said I was willing, but I didn't mean right there in the middle of a storm."

She felt a dull ache in her abdomen and rolled her eyes upward.

How could he have that much stamina, even with a fever? If he were at full strength ...

She couldn't even imagine it!

With a determined sigh, she tightened her grip and quickened her pace.

Back in their room, Isabel immediately went to work, checking his pulse and doing what she could to stabilize him.

Xander's body wasn't like anyone else's. If her guess was correct, every time he spiked a fever, the virus in his system mutated, bringing on waves of pain and bouts of delirium.

And it was no ordinary virus—it was incredibly resistant. Standard medications barely made a dent, taking hours, sometimes days, to have any effect. That's why, once Xander got a fever, it would often last for days.

And standard fever and anti-inflammatory drugs could only treat the symptoms, not eliminate the root cause. So every time the virus reactivated, it came back with full force.

She needed to get his temperature down fast and bring him to a hospital. Proper medical equipment was the only way to analyze the virus and understand how it adapted and evolved each time it reappeared.

She remembered something Samuel had once told her: Xander's family had a history with this illness.

His grandfather had shown similar symptoms, a strange genetic condition that seemed to skip generations.

Ignoring the lingering ache in her own body, Isabel continued tending to Xander.

Thankfully, she'd managed to stabilize him.

Isabel accompanied Xander onto the ambulance, her focus unwavering as they sped toward the hospital.

Meanwhile, Kaleb pushed open the door to his hotel room, looking exhausted and disheveled. The moment he stepped inside, a pungent odor hit him—a mix of overpowering perfume and something sour, almost rotten.

He didn't need to guess; Eva must have doused the room in fragrance to mask the stench.

"Oh ... my stomach ... " Eva groaned, emerging from the bathroom with one hand clutched to her abdomen. She shuffled forward, her face pale and drawn.

"Kal, you're back?" She called weakly, glancing up at him.

Kaleb frowned, exhaling sharply as he moved to her side.

She'd been holed up in the bathroom so long that a faint but lingering odor clung to her.

He hesitated for a moment before finally reaching out to steady her.

Eva noticed that hesitation, and her expression faltered, a hint of sadness crossing her eyes.

"Are you feeling any better? Do you need to go to the hospital?" he asked.

"I took some medicine, so I'm feeling a lot better," she replied, forcing a smile. It was a lie—she was barely holding herself together, lightheaded and dangerously close to dehydration.

But she didn't want to cut their hot spring trip short. Kaleb was always so busy, and even though they saw each other daily, chances for a getaway like this were rare.

Of course, she didn't blame Kaleb. A man should be ambitious, after all—it was his drive that afforded her the lifestyle she loved. And besides, she felt lucky—luckier than Isabel, anyway.

When Isabel had been with Kaleb, he'd been even more buried in work. He'd never taken her on a vacation.

But then a sudden thought struck Eva.

Her stomach had been perfectly fine earlier, but right after she bumped into Isabel, the nausea had hit out of nowhere.

And last time, at the coffee shop, Isabel had also "accidentally" stumbled into her, leading to the same miserable symptoms.

Could Isabel be behind this?

"Kal, don't you think it's a little strange?"

"What's strange?"

Kaleb was completely baffled by Eva's sudden remarks.

Eva rubbed her stomach, wincing. "I was fine earlier, but then Isabel bumped into me, and suddenly I'm like this. I'm just thinking—"

She didn't even finish before she saw Kaleb's expression darken.

Kaleb's face was tense, his jaw clenched as he looked at Eva with a mix of disbelief and scrutiny.

"You think Isabel did this to you?" he asked, his voice laced with skepticism.

"I mean ... isn't it a bit too much of a coincidence?" Eva stammered, but Kaleb cut her off sharply.

"I saw her bump into you, sure, but if you're saying she somehow caused your stomach problems just by touching you—do you really expect me to believe that? What, does Isabel have some kind of superpower that gives people diarrhea with a little shove? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Kaleb's disbelief was palpable. The Eva he'd once seen as sweet and innocent was now grasping at straws to paint Isabel as some kind of villain.

When she'd said Isabel pushed her, he'd believed it.

When she'd blamed Isabel for her miscarriage, he'd trusted her.

When she'd claimed Isabel had thrown coffee on her, he'd sided with her.

But every time he'd placed his trust in her, he'd ended up questioning himself.

In the end, he'd chosen to forgive her anyway because she'd cried to him, saying she only did these things out of love for him.

All of that, he could forgive. But this? If he fell for this, he'd truly be as blind as Isabel had once accused him of being.

"I'm not trying to frame her. I didn't mean it like that. I was just ... making an observation," Eva murmured, a flicker of panic showing in her eyes.

She rarely saw Kaleb look at her like this, with disappointment and disbelief. He used to reserve that look for Isabel. Now that it was directed at her, she couldn't help but feel a stab of fear.

Kaleb's gaze softened slightly, noticing her pale face and trembling legs. She was probably so exhausted and dehydrated from her stomach issues that she wasn't thinking straight.

"Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital?" he asked, his tone gentler now.

Eva felt a brief wave of relief—until a sharp cramp seized her abdomen.

Her eyes went wide with horror.

Oh no!

Not again.

Without another word, she clutched her stomach and bolted back toward the bathroom, her footsteps rapid and desperate, echoing through the room like a series of frantic firecrackers.

Kaleb stepped outside, pulling out his phone and dialing 911.

The scene shifted.

Meanwhile, at the hospital ...

When Xander woke, the first thing he noticed was that Isabel wasn't by his side.

Had she gone back to the hotel?

His expression darkened. As much as he wanted her here, he knew her feelings didn't mirror his own. She didn't owe him anything; she had no reason to stay with him in the hospital.

He sifted through hazy fragments of last night, trying to remember.

At some point, he'd asked her, "Do you really hate me that much?"

She'd hesitated, then answered, "It's not that I hate you. It's just ... I ... I haven't ... "

"Haven't fallen in love with me," he'd finished for her, the truth stinging more than he'd let show.

Through his fever-blurred vision, he'd seen the conflict on her face.

After that, his memory dissolved into a feverish fog. The rest was a blur, except for one vivid, lingering dream.

In it, Isabel had whispered she was willing to be his, fully and completely. Overcome with joy, he'd claimed her, pouring out all his passion and longing, making her his in every way.

Now, awake and alone, Xander chuckled bitterly, his voice rough with self-mockery.

Dreams, he thought. A cruel contrast to reality. Isabel would never say those words to him.

He glanced around the sterile, empty hospital room, the cold white walls grounding him back to reality.

This was reality.

Last night, he must have passed out from the fever. Isabel had likely brought him here, then left.

As he mulled it over, the door opened, and a familiar, clear voice rang out.

"You're awake?"