

Benefits 191

Chapter 191: Confess

As Nora and Demetri stepped aboard the luxurious yacht, a beautiful sight awaited them. The deck had been transformed into a private haven, with beautiful flowers and dimly lit lanterns casting a warm glow. As they sailed to the middle of the ocean, the silence between them today seemed to hold a profound anticipation.

Even the delicious meal seemed to leave no impression on Nora. Somehow, she knew that tomorrow would change their lives forever just like it had a year ago. When she signed the registration for their marriage she had never thought that it would take this turn.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking back to our wedding contract..." Nora answered with a smile.

Demetri raised an eyebrow at that. The contract?

"Nora," he began, his voice a soft murmur, "there's something I've been meaning to tell you. Something related to the contract. I think I have broken a clause... unintentionally of course."

Nora looked at his face and cocked her head, "Did you? I think I might have broken one too. So maybe we are even..."

"Are we? Depends which clause you broke...", Demetri answered.

"Let's dance, kitten."

Nora looked up in surprise. "But there is no music..."

Demetri merely smiled and produced a small sleek device and soon a slow melody filled the air. He extended his hand and Nora placed hers in his and soon they were dancing under the moonlight.

The quiet night carried the scent of the ocean and Nora leaned her head against his shoulder as they gently swayed under the moonlight.

She looked at the white moon behind him as her eyes filled with tears. A year ago, her only wish had been to get away from everyone and lead a quiet peace filled life. She'd thought that her mother simply did not like her, Antonio's cheating was her bad luck and so was her unhappiness.

But the year that had passed had shown her differently. Her mother did not just favour Sara over her or not like her, her mother had hated her with a passion that gave her pleasure for torturing her. And then there was the discovery that Sara's father had been someone else.

When she'd hoped to only leave, she'd found herself in a storm of such magnitude that she could not have imagined. And the only person who had been an anchor in that storm had been Demetri- a stranger at first, and then a friend, a lover and now a... soulmate..

Demetri felt her slight tremble as they swayed and held her closer, "Nora, do you see the dark night around us? Do you know why I brought you here in the middle of this dark ocean?"

Nora leaned back to look at him, something in his voice making her yearn to see his face. Gently, he caressed her face, his thumb wiping the tears in her eyes.

"Nora this was my life before you came into it. Just like the darkness of this ocean and this sky, it was vast and endless, consuming me, surrounding me only with shadows and storms. But you are like the moon that lights up my sky. Nora, I told you at the beginning of our relationship that you cannot fall in love with me. It was a condition that I did not want broken..."

"Even the thought of love scared me and yet now, I've gone ahead and broken that condition. And I hope that you will also find it in yourself to love me..."

The tears that had been silently flowing were now trailing down her cheeks as she looked at the sincerity in his eyes. "Demetri, I..."

"If you are still not in love with me, or are unsure of your feelings, then you do not have to say the words, Nora. I am willing to wait. You see, I still have two more years before I have to let you go. So, I am going to use them to convince you that your right place is by my side."

"You would divorce me if I don't fall in love with you?" Nora asked with a hiccup.

"I hope that day does not come, Nora. But if there is ever a time that you feel that you are unhappy with me, then I will do whatever you want."

Even as Demetri spoke the painful words, Nora did not reply. Because she could not. Never in her life would she have thought that she would turn so ugly if Demetri confessed to her. She was sure her mascara already covered her cheeks and she could feel the snot in her nose. It made her want to cry more until, Demetri gently wiped her tears and kissed the tip of her nose, "You are not looking too ugly. Don't worry."

That made her giggle and broke the tension that seemed to surround her. "So are you going to tell me? Am I going to have a Wife with benefits now or do I have to wait a couple of more?"

Laughing, Nora covered his mouth and said, "You have to wait..."

Even as Demetri felt faint when she said that he'd have to wait, Nora continued, "Only a few more minutes... I want to do this properly."

Feeling as if he'd gained a new life, Demetri looked into her eyes and waited, "I've broken the condition too, you know. I went and fell in love with you. And like you, I was not willing to wait for you to love me. I want all of you now and forever. And I want to be yours now and forever.

Taking his hand in hers, she gently moved it to her dress and carefully shifted the dress off her left shoulder, "Demetri Frost, you taught me everything. You showed me what it was like to love and be loved. I never realized it but from the moment you stepped into my life, I was yours."

Demetri looked down where his hand was against her pale skin and felt his breath catch when he read the words that she'd inscribed just over her heart..."Only His"

Leaning down, he gently kissed her just above the tattoo before taking her lips in a soft kiss...

Chapter 192: A Wish

Nora's heart raced as Demetri gently kissed her, slowly inching his way to her face. Her hands wound around his neck, eager for him to do more. As Demetri straightened, he gently kissed her forehead, murmuring, "I love you, Nora. Always and forever. Don't forget that."

As Nora was about to reply, Demetri suddenly jerked. The jerk caught her off guard and before she could react, Demetri had pushed her to the floor with urgency. Soon, alarms were blaring around the yacht and Nora realized the Demetri had pressed the emergency button on his watch.

Panic hit her as she realized what had happened. They were under some sort of an attack and Demetri had been hit.

The warm glow of lanterns now seemed eerie as security personnel swarmed the deck, their once-silent movements now replaced by urgent footsteps and shouted commands. They were guards whom she had never seen, always protecting him and her from the sidelines.

She tried to move, to check on Demetri even as she felt the warmth of his blood coating her fingers. Her breath caught as she tried to whisper his name, his weight on her making her dread and think the worst.

"Demetri..."

She felt him stir and slowly raise himself over her. She could see the pain in his eyes as he tried to console her but just slumped over her...

"Demetri!" Nora's panicked cry was swallowed by the sudden eruption of gunfire. Multiple shots rang out, the sound sharp and disorienting in the confined space of the yacht.

Suddenly, a guard appeared in front of her and quickly took charge. She tried to speak, to make him check on her but the guard simply lifted Demetri and gestured for Nora to follow while crouching low.

Even as she followed in a daze, her eyes never left Demetri's now limp body, fearing the worst. Suddenly she felt a sense of helplessness that she had never felt before, not even when her own life was in danger.

Once inside the small pantry, the guard quickly spoke a few words while showing her how to stem the blood flow as he talked about trying to escape. Soon, her hands were stained with blood as the yacht turned sharply causing her to stumble. But she continued to hold onto him sharply fearing that she might lose him.

As Nora anxiously waited on the deck, her ears strained to catch any signs of what might be happening outside. The sporadic sounds of men running, shouting, and even the dull thud of bodies hitting the floor reached her ears. The air was thick with tension, and every passing second seemed to drag on infinitely.

Time lost its meaning as Nora held her breath, praying for Demetri's safety while continuously calling out his name like in a fervent whisper.

She felt him move under her hands but she wasn't sure.

After what like an eternity, the erred silence surrounded them, and the only audible sounds were the distant waves lapping against the yacht and her own labored breathing.

She wondered if they guards overpowered the assailants and hoped that Demetri would get help soon. She needed to believe that.

Suddenly, the door to the lower deck opened, and a group of masked men entered. Nora felt her stomach drop.

The first man spoke hoarsely, "Come with me."

Nora shook her head, standing in front of Demetri, ready to fight. Without another word, four men walked towards her, ready to surround her from all sides. Her instincts kicked in, and she fought back, kicking and flailing, but the sheer number of assailants overwhelmed her. Desperation filled her for she knew this was their only chance to survive. If these people succeeded then her Demetri may not survive.

However, the masked men were relentless, overpowering her with calculated efficiency. With swift, decisive moves, the attackers subdued Nora.

The room spun as her surroundings blurred, and she found herself being forcibly taken away from Demetri's side. She twisted and writhed, her efforts futile against the overwhelming force of the assailants.

As she was dragged outside with her face covered, all she could smell was the metallic scent of blood and smoke in the air. These people had been ruthless in their assault.

Soon, the dragging stopped and Nora realized that the yacht had stopped moving in any direction, only gently swaying in place.

A sudden sharp pain in her hand jolted Nora's senses and panic surged through her as she realized the familiar effects of the drug working on her system as her limbs grew heavier.. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, trying to think if her mother had indeed returned from the dead to drag her back with her.

She heard the distant voices of the assailants, now at ease since they had taken her. As she felt the world tilt around her, a distorted fog settled in her mind, only one name echoing in her head...

Soon, Nora was taken onto a smaller boat, which quickly raced in the opposite direction of the shore. Midway, Nora was once again passed onto another boat, while the boats sped in different directions so that anyone who tried to follow the trail would not find it easy.

As the boats sped in different directions, Nora's disoriented mind struggled to grasp the magnitude of the situation. The masked men aboard exchanged hushed conversations, words like Demon, dead and success echoing in her ears.

Through the haze, Nora felt herself being moved again, this time onto a third boat. Slowly, the boats merged into the seamless blackness of the open sea, leaving behind any hope of rescue while her drugged brain could only comprehend one thing- the one person who had loved her with everything was dead. Her Demetri was dead.

Any will to fight, to survive, to form a plan was lost in those moments and Nora succumbed to the drugs in her system. It made no difference if she lived or died if Demetri did not exist in this world.

Chapter 193: Accusations

"Is this your doing?" Elijah Frost stormed into the office. Wild strands of silver hair clung to his furrowed forehead, and his normally steady hands trembled with a mix of panic and anger. His piercing gaze bore into his grandson, accusing eyes ablaze with a turbulent mix of disappointment and suspicion.

Erasmi looked up at the old man and clenched his hands. Ever since waking up and discovering the truth, the one man he had avoided had been his grandfather. It had been a bitter pill to swallow. His own "grandfather" had held him as a hostage for all these years, manipulating and threatening his brother. The old man whom he had always looked up to had used him as nothing but a disposable weapon. He'd even been willing let him die and had signed off on it.

A little voice inside him spoke that he should forgive the old man for not fighting for him. After all, he'd been as good as dead. But the other things that Elijah Frost had done to him and to his brother had been unforgivable. He knew that seeing the old man would trigger him and so he pretended that the old man did not exist.

And yet now that he was here, he felt... empty. The old man he remembered had been larger than life while this one was frail and old. It made him realize that no matter how angry he was at the old man, he would not be able to exact his revenge.

While Erasmi was lost in his thoughts, the old man yelled loudly, "Tell me, did you do this? How can you be so cruel? How could you do this to your own brother?"

Erasmi breathed in deeply and composed himself before answering coldly, "I do not know what you are accusing me of, Mr. Frost. Would you like to clarify? If this is about me pretending to be Demetri, then it is only for a few days while he is busy."

"Ha! When he returns? You do not want him to return. It is why you have done this!"

"Are you going to keep spouting nonsense or tell me what it is I have done?" Erasmi almost shouted.

The air crackled with tension as the room became a battlefield for unspoken accusations.

"You killed Demetri!" Elijah Frost's voice resounded in the room like thunder.

Erasmi's world seemed to come to a standstill as he wondered if he had somehow slipped into some kind of a hallucination.

Standing up, he strode around the desk and asked coldly, "What did you say?"

For the first time, the old man felt a tinge of fear. He had long been used to speaking what came to his mind with the boys. While they's sometimes rebelled or even ignored him and argued but what he saw in Erasmi scared him into wanting to retreat.

Only fear for Demetri kept him from moving away his wheelchair and all the anger seemed to leave him as he slowly handed his phone to Erasmi, letting him see what he had just received...

Erasmi's gaze fell upon the screen, and the world shifted beneath him. His hands trembled as he took the phone from his grandfather.

In the photos, security guards lay motionless, their lifeless forms a testament to the violence that had erupted. Bloodstains adorned the once pristine deck and a few masked guards seemed to be lying, dead in a crossfire. The entire deck seemed to have been painted red.

The pantry below had also been painted red and he could see footprints and marks of someone having been dragged out of there forcefully. Erasmi's fingers clenched around the phone as he continued to scroll, each image chiselling away at his emotional armour.

Elijah Frost saw the reaction and haved a deep breath. He had actually believed that it was Erasmi who had done this thirsting for revenge. But seeing him now, he was thankful that even though his grandson hated him, his love for his brother was intact.

In a broken voice, he spoke, "The security team received an alert about an hour ago. They immediately dispatched the guards, believing that the ones on board would be able to handle until they reached.

However, whoever it was who did that was well prepared. It took them barely thirty minutes to wreak this havoc and disappear."

"Demetri and Nora were onboard?"

Elijah Frost hesitated but then decided to tell the truth, "They were both on board. A guard who was alive when re-enforcement reached said that the people who attacked took Nora away, but they left Demetri because..."

"Because?"

"Demetri had been shot. And they seemed to not be worried about hurting him. The guard said their target was the girl and they were only interested in taking her away safely. But when the reinforcements reached the pantry, they could not find Demetri. The guard was injured and does not know if they did anything to Demetri or not."

Erasmi sucked in a sharp breath. He needed to go to Demetri. Just then Ian and Sebastian also rushed in, their eyes wild with fear and worry. "Erasmi..."

Erasmi sucked in a sharp breath as words of denial came to his lips, "I did not attack Demetri."

Ian and Seb both paused and frowned in the middle of what they had been about to say.

They then paused and glanced between the two men and exchanged looks. With a deep breath, Ian spoke, "We already know you've not done anything. I came to tell you that we've already ordered the plane to be readied. Let's go."

Erasmi gave a gratified glance to his brothers before nodding with a firm look and marching out of the office, "Let's go. We need to find Nora and Demetri before...We need to find them."

Elijah Frost watched his three grandsons leave the office and bowed his head in a prayer as tears came to his eyes. Whether they were tears of regret or fear, no one would know.

Chapter 194: Worry

Gabe's heart raced frantically as he searched the entire farm for Arabelle. Where could she have gone? The worry for her safety mingled with the growing anxiety that she'd returned to her former self.

He'd already every corner of the farm and every inch of the sprawling land looking for some sign of her. She'd been fine when they'd fallen asleep last night. And then, when she'd bid him goodbye to go for her daily strolls. Could she have spotted something on the way that might have triggered her?

Gabe ran a hand through his hair, his guilt eating at him. He really had done something thoughtless. Arabelle wanted a normal relationship with him and instead of being in such a relationship with her, he'd been trying to keep things platonic. And now he was left here wondering if he'd made a mistake in not being with her.

The surveillance videos showed her to have walked towards this area and he could not help but wonder why she would go here. This was the furthest from their house and mostly avoided due to the wilderness. Could she have encountered something here?

Worried, he raced towards the tall grassed, calling out her name as he did.

As his mind raced with thoughts of guilt and worry and his voice turned almost hoarse with shouting, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Irritated, he pulled it out, ready to dismiss any call that wasn't about finding Arabelle. However, the caller ID revealed it was Ian.

Pausing, his finger hovered over the screen, knowing that would definitely recognize something was wrong as soon as he heard him. Decisively he declined the call and cut through the grass calling out her name.

As he walked a bit further, his phone continued to ring persistently. Worried that something might have happened, he answered the call with an irritated, " Ian, what is it? I am in the middle of something."

Before he could disconnect the call, Ian announced without any ado, " G, Demon and Nora are missing. They were on a yacht and were supposed to return today. Someone attacked the yacht. Nora was kidnapped and there is no news about Demetri. We are on our way to country N to look for them. I've sent you the file."

Gabe's heart sank further. The news about his missing brother and the possibility of Arabelle being involved in his disappearance flooded his thoughts. He struggled to maintain composure as his mind veered between worry for Demetri and Nora and his anxiety about Arabelle.

On the one hand, he denied without a doubt that Arabelle could not have been involved in this. She was so far away from country N and she could not have known where Demetri and Nora were. But on the other hand, his fear that she was quite capable of orchestrating something like that made him feel paralysed. She'd been missing for a few hours now. Was it possible that Arabelle had played him from the beginning and taken this chance to sabotage him?

Gabe fell to his knees, feeling crushed under the weight of his own guilt. If something were to happen to Demetri or Nora because of Arabelle, he would not be able to forgive himself.

Shaking his head, he tried to move quickly. His guilt would not help him in rushing to join the search party. And if Arabelle was involved in this incident, the path ahead of him would be painful but also clear. Just as he had made the decision, he heard a faint noise.

Gabe turned to see Arabelle emerging from the edge of the property, her expression a mix of confusion and fear. Relief washed over him even as the turmoil within him persisted. Quickly, he called out Arabelle's name.

He watched as she paused, stunned before a smile washed over her face. Quickly, she ran to him, jumping into his arms as she sighed, "Gabe! I was so scared! I was chased by a wild buffalo and then I got lost! Thank the Lord you are here."

Gabe hugged her close, even as he felt her tremble all over.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, scanning her for any signs of injury.

Arabelle shook her head, still catching her breath. "No, just scared. I didn't expect a wild buffalo to come charging out of nowhere."

Gabe couldn't help but chuckle, though the worry still lingered in his eyes. "Well, you're safe now. Let's get you back home."

Once they reached the farmhouse, Gabe made sure Arabelle was settled on the couch with a warm blanket.

"I'll get you something to eat," he said, trying to hide the concern in his voice.

As he prepared a meal, Gabe's mind was still racing with thoughts about the call from Ian. He couldn't shake off the worry for Demetri and Nora and the unsettling news about the attack on the yacht. Yet, he pushed those thoughts aside for the moment, focusing on caring for Arabelle.

After ensuring she had eaten and was comfortable, Gabe walked her to their bedroom. He tucked her into bed, a gentle smile on his face.

"I need to go away for work for a few days but I'll be back soon. You rest and take it easy, alright?" Gabe spoke softly.

Arabelle pouted, her eyes reflecting a mix of fear and reluctance. "Work? Can't you stay with me? I was so scared, Gabe."

"I know, love. But I need to take care of something. I promise I'll be back before you know it."

As Gabe stepped outside the bedroom, he pulled out his phone. "Listen carefully," Gabe instructed. "I need you to comb through the tall wild grasses around the property. Look for anything unusual or untoward. Keep a close eye on the surroundings. Check for any signs of someone visiting or trying to use the place. Use the Dogs. Also, keep a close eye on Arabella."

As Gabe ventured into the unknown territory, the weight of responsibility pressed heavily on him.

Chapter 195: A Clue

As Erasmi walked out of the airport, he questioned the investigator, "Have you found anything new?"

The man walked along hurriedly as he answered, "Not much, sir. But we do have a clue."

"What is it? It's been more than twenty-four hours and you've only found a clue? Do you need me to teach you to do your job? By now, you should have found Demetri and Nora!"

The man shuddered, already disconcerted at looking at this man who looked exactly like the person they were looking for and spoke slowly, "Sir, those men were a mixture of professionals and mercenaries. Those people used the mercenaries to attack Mr Frost and his guards and while the two sides were engaged in fight, they abducted Mrs Frost.

But they were careful with other things. Instead of leaving behind clues, once they had captured Mrs Frost they got rid of the mercenaries as well. By the time we boarded the yacht they'd been gone. One of Mr Frost's guards was able to give us some information but then he succumbed to the injuries. However, we did find someone later. He's a mercenary. Tells me he hid when he realized that these people were killing their own people as well."

"And what does this man want to say?" Ian questioned sharply.

"He refuses to talk to us unless..."

"He wants money? Tell him we are willing to give him whatever he wants." Ian continued the conversation.

"Of course, I know that, sir. But that man is also asking us to help protect him and promise him that we will allow him to leave without any harm. Once he is safe, he is willing to recount everything."

"If in his eagerness to negotiate we lost the opportunity to save Demetri and Nora then tell him that we can promise him a safe departure from this world! So he better open his trap and start talking." Ian growled.

Erasmi stopped the man and spoke in a deadly voice, "I'll go."

The man inside had been chained to the wall and as he heard the door open and close, he spoke harshly, "You can torture me however much you want but I won't tell you anything until....AHHHHHHH."

The man screamed in horror as Erasmi walked closer to him, his eyes wide in fear, "GH...Ghost!" Soon he started to chant a prayer for protection from evil while making a sign in front of him as he stared at Erasmi in fear.

The actions would have amused Erasmi if not for the meaning of what they meant. This man was assuming that he was Demetri's ghost. That meant according to the man Demetri should have been dead.

Erasmi stopped directly in front of the man and looked down at him, "This is not going to help you, you know. The lord does not help evil like yourself. Now, where is Nora? What did you want to talk about..."

The man gulped and spoke, "You survived. The lord must bless you. Two gunshots and drowning in the sea and you survived! I'll tell you everything I know. I promise I did not mean to kill anyone."

"We were told that we had to only engage the security guards and be careful not to hurt the girl. That was a warning. So that is what we did. we only tried to injure the guards so that they would not be able to interfere. All of us were promised a million dollars each and yet those people started killing us the moment they had her. They were the ones who made sure that all the guards were dead as well. I'd slipped and fallen under another guard which is how they missed me and took me for dead or I would not have survived either."

"What did you see?"

The man did not think why Erasmi would want to know what he did but he continued fearfully, "I saw you kill that man and then throw him into the sea and then you jumped off..."

Erasmi nodded, "Is there anything else you can tell me about them?"

The man nodded quickly and spoke, "I heard them talking. They were planning to take her to another country. But they were very careful of her when they handled her. It was almost as if they were being reverent..."

Erasmi raised an eyebrow at this and turned to go back. He'd already noticed from the pictures of the yacht that the lifeboat had been missing. Demetri must have tried to follow those people who had taken Nora in the lifeboat. And he was severely injured.

Walking out of the interrogation room, Erasmi quickly strode out and spoke, "Check the direction of the wind from that night and then visit all the smaller islands to look for Demetri. He was heavily injured so he could not have gone far. As for Nora, it seems they did not want to use her for ransom but something else. There is something fishy there."

"Didn't Demetri insist that Nora was in some kind of danger even after you got rid of Lara Anderson?" Ian asked slowly. "It is why he sent her to country N in the first place."

"Yes. But we don't know what the danger is. Also it seems that he'd discovered something before coming here which had reassured him that she might not be in danger. It was why he had asked the guards to relax a bit..." Seb added.

"So whoever it must be had probably pretended to back off and cooperate but had then attacked him."

"Only Demetri can give us the answers we need. Ian, Seb, lets divide the group into three parties. We will each lead a team to look for Erasmi along every island. Be careful to ask for any person who might have knowledge of medicine..." Erasmi spoke slowly as he tried to formulate a plan in his mind. Whoever these people were considered Demetri a threat and at the moment, they had probably no idea that Demetri was missing...

Chapter 196: Kitten

"Kitten? Kitten? Come here, wherever you are, or I won't give you a treat." A man stood in the middle of the garden, hands on his hips, the sun beating down on his head. After one last futile scan of the surroundings, he sighed, "Alright, you keep playing in the hot sun. I'm out of here."

With a touch of dramatic flair, he scooped up his gardening tools and turned to head back, throwing one last call over his shoulder, "Come on, Kitten! Are you going to make me worry?"

Just then, a little girl raced over there, slightly huffing and her pigtails bouncing behind her. "Mister? What are you looking for?"

"I think she's been naughty and fears that I will scold her."

The girl nodded sagely, a few delicate curls escaping her perfectly styled hair, and agreed, "Then it's right she will hide. Even if she has been naughty, you shouldn't scold her, or she will fear you."

The man furrowed his brows, looking at the girl with genuine worry in his eyes. "But if I don't scold her, then she won't understand her mistake, will she? I love her, so I must scold her."

The girl rolled her eyes with an air of worldly wisdom and spoke, "You sounded like my grandmother just now! She says the same thing when she scolds me and my cousins! 'I love you, my children, so I must scold you.' What's the logic in that?"

The man chuckled, the worry lines on his face softening as he bent down and spoke, "Your grandmother sounds like a wise woman. So, are you also hiding so that you don't get a scolding?"

The girl gave the man a playful pout, crossing her lace-adorned arms. "Ha! Who would dare to scold me? I'll simply cry so much, and they'll know what it is to scold a tender little chick like me."

The man laughed, nodding along, "Of course, of course. You're so cute; no one must scold you ever.. Do you know if someone ever wants to hide, I know the perfect place. I am the gardener here. See those new shrubs over there? They're the perfect spot for hiding away from prying eyes. And they also offer protection from the sun because they are already so tall. Also, there's water near there. Plus, they're set up like a maze, once you go inside... I am the one who created that. Aren't I smart?"

The young girl listened attentively, her eyes widening with interest. After absorbing the information, she praised the man as he waited, "Wow! You're so smart! Since you helped me, I must reward you..."

The man frowned, shaking his head, "Reward me? No need. I'm only talking about my garden. It's not as if I've told you something of importance. Also, you must not give out rewards. Do you think you are the princess?"

The girl looked wide eyed at that and shook her head while the man picked up his toolbox and made a move to go.

The girl bit her lip and called out, "Mister? Do you live around here? If I find your cat, I will bring him back to you... My grandmother says that we must be kind..."

The man stopped and looked back at the girl with a warm smile, "I don't have a cat."

The girl frowned at that. The mister had been looking for his kitten just now... "Mister? Are you having a sunstroke? Weren't you looking for your cat just now? You've already forgotten? I know, its because you are so old. My teacher told me that old people tend to forget things a lot. Though my grandmother never forgets anything! Are you older than my grandmother?"

The man chuckled and shook his head, " Hey! I am not that old. And I have not forgotten anything. I am looking for my Kitten."

The girl nodded in understanding, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. The man was probably a bit dim witted and did not know that a kitten was of the cat breed. He was only a gardener after all.

"Fine. Fine. I hope you find your kitten. But just so you know, kittens are also cats."

"My kitten is not a cat..."The man replied stubbornly, a twinkle of mischief in his eye, " Wait, I'll prove it to you! Kitten, if you want a chicken treat, then come out right this instant!"

The girl shook her head in exasperation. Cats liked fish better... Just as she was about to explain this to the man, a little furry bundle of energy burst out of one of the plants a little down the way. The sun caught the golden fur of the exuberant puppy as it came racing towards them, little paws kicking up small clouds of dust.

The little girl's eyes widened in realization, and she turned to the man, her voice filled with dramatic astonishment, "Wait, your Kitten is not a cat! It's a... a... puppy!"

The man, now wearing a mischievous grin, nodded proudly, "Exactly! I told you, my Kitten is not a cat. I named this little one Kitten because it is as mischievous as a cat."

The girl burst into laughter, the realization making her laugh harder. "You're funny, Mister! Naming a puppy Kitten! That's really, really clever!"

The man smiled proudly and as the puppy continued to wag its tail at him, he fished out a treat from his overalls and fed the young pup a treat. The little girl was excited and quickly questioned, "Mister, may I pet your puppy?"

"You may not." The man spoke sharply.

The little girl frowned and was about to scold the man for his rudeness when he continued, "You are a stranger. You have to tell me your name first so that I can make formal introductions."

The girl giggled at that and said, "Okay okay! My name is Dora I am all of eight years old!"

"Nice to meet you, Miss Dora. My name is Gaia and I am not older than your grandmother. And this is my Kitten."

The girl quickly played with the little pup who was just as excited to find a new playmate. It was only as someone called her name in the distance that she bid them farewell and ran away while calling out, "If you ever need to find your kitten again, you can look for me!"

The man looked down at the dog who was now sitting quietly by his side and clicked his fingers, "Come pup."

As the man picked up his tools and ambled away, the softness in his eyes was replaced by a coldness. Yes. He would definitely look for the little girl to find his kitten...

Chapter 197: Princess Eleanora

"Princess Eleanora, you really need to wake up. The sun is so high in the sky that it will soon set before you can even go for a stroll."

The maid looked down at the young woman, who was impervious to her entreaty. The princess could really sleep. Even with the sun shining down on her face, she remained unmoved, curled up peacefully while she hugged her pillow in her sleep.

She sighed and gently tried to take the pillow from the princess, who clung to it stubbornly.

"Princess, please wake up," the maid pleaded her tone a blend of frustration and concern.

The young lady slowly opened one eye, her gaze locking with her maid's. "So, what if I sleep the day away? It's not like I have any work to do. I already finished my homework, didn't I? I don't feel like taking a stroll today or practicing dancing or whatever. I am just going to sleep today and make it disappear. I'll wake up tomorrow straight away."

"Princess, you cannot do that!"

"I am a royal! I can do whatever I want," the princess retorted with a pout, giving an assertive jerk to the pillow, attempting to pull it closer to her.

The maid persisted; their hands engaged in a gentle struggle over the coveted pillow. "But Your Highness, the queen will be furious if she finds you sleeping like this! It's not fitting for a princess."

The princess huffed; her playful defiance evident. "Let her be furious. I'll deal with it later. Now, let me sleep in peace." Another tug at the pillow ensued and this time the princess won and quickly turned over with the pillow still secure in her arms.

"Princess! Your fiance is going to visit you tonight to take you out! You have to be ready for that. And the queen wants to talk to you about that so she is coming over to visit you for lunch. Please princess. Everyone is already in a frenzy about the two VIPs visiting. Please have some mercy on all of us..."

Princess Eleanora quickly sat up in bed and stared at her maid with wide eyes, "Who did you say is coming?"

"The Queen, your grandmother... she is coming over for lunch!"

"No. Before that."

"Before that you have to get ready princess."

Eleanora sighed and looked at her maid in exasperation. Was the girl deliberately misunderstanding her?

"Did you say that my fiance is coming over?"

"Yes! He will be here to take you out in the evening for a date."

"Who decided this?" Eleanora asked, crossing her arms in front of her. "Do you think I am free all day with nothing to do? Any Tom, Dik and Harry can come to take me out? Cancel the date. I am too busy..."

The maid blinked at that. Hadn't the princess not just complained that she had nothing to do?

Sighing helplessly at the whimsical royal, the maid shrugged helplessly, "I am sorry but I cannot do that, Princess. The date has been approved by the Queen."

"Ha! Then tell my grandmother to go on a date. I am not about to go on a date with someone whom I do not know at all. I don't even remember his name, let alone in his face. Also, I told my grandmother to cancel the engagement. What kind of a fiance does not even visit his betrothed when she has met with a severe accident and instead comes after months and months to take her out on a date? Even if this is a political match, there should be some respect!"

"The queen has already spoken to them about this matter, your highness. And they have also apologized. They said because they did not want to disturb your period of rest and recovery. Now, please help me get you ready princess. The queen has already warned us all that if you are late this time, our pay will be deducted."

With a sigh, Eleanora sat up in bed and watched as the maid blustered about the room, readying the clothes for her to get ready. Looking down, she bit her lip and whispered, "I don't think I am quite ready to meet this strange man, Lily."

The maid looked at the young princess and felt a pang in her heart. It was such a shame that the princess had to suffer so much at such a young age. "It's alright to be scared princess. Since you do not have any memories and do not remember how much you loved him, you are feeling scared. But everyone tells me he is a great and honourable man. Maybe once you meet him and get to know him again, your memories and love for him might return...I'll go and run your bath."

Eleanora looked down while the maid quickly raced to the ensuite bathroom to fill a bath for her. As the door closed behind the maid, Eleanora quietly stood up and walked to the gilded mirror in her room.

But her intention was not to look at herself. Instead, she lifted up a gloved hand and gently moved aside the lapel of her nightgown, caressing the words on her skin- 'Only his'. Every morning she looked at them, wondering if they would disappear. She'd gotten the words inked onto her skin. It meant that she wanted to always remember that she belonged to him.

But who was this man? She'd never shown this tattoo to anyone but she knew if she had, they'd all simply tell her that she must have gotten this for her fiance. However, could she have really loved a man so much? And what would that say about this love? That she would even put this on her skin but he would not even visit her when she had almost died?

The maid returned and she quickly pulled back the gown and smiled, " Go Lily. I'll hurry up and get ready myself."

"Are you sure princess? It is my duty to help you, you know? But you never..."

"I can dress myself, Lily. Go."

Chapter 198: A Family

Eleanora descended the stairs to her opulent mansion slowly, not looking forward to the day ahead of her. Even though she had been living here for months on end, and yet she did not feel as if this was her own house. The entire place screamed of only professional designers and held nothing that might have personal memories or even a personal touch. She felt like a guest in her own house.

Every time she walked down these stairs, she'd imagine having a wall full of plants in the small courtyard outside. How soothing the greenery would be and yet the designer had vetoed the idea.

Lost in her own thoughts, Eleanora froze mid-step as she realized she had a few guests waiting for her-uninvited of course.

The queen stood there along with Lady Cordelia and the precious Princess Evangeline. The three women were dressed to the nines as if they were going out for a formal gathering instead of barging into her house.

With a grimace, that she hoped looked like a smile, she questioned them, "Welcome? What brings you here on this fine morning?"

The queen did not deign to reply and instead looked her from head to toe with a disapproving gaze. Eleanora almost rolled her eyes at the look. The queen should be used to it now. What was wrong with wearing ripped jeans and a printed t-shirt when she was at home?

Lady Cordelia glanced between the two people and quickly intervened, "Good afternoon Eleanora. We just thought that we'd visit you for a while. It has been so long since we've had a meal together."

Eleanora raised an eyebrow at that, "A meal? Sure sure. I have not yet had my breakfast yet, so I'll just ask the kitchen to bring some extra pop tarts... Do you have any flavours you prefer?"

The ever-polite Lady Cordelia was also unable to stop a grimace at the mention of the juvenile and peasant breakfast and declined quickly, "No. I was thinking of Lunch together. Anyway, since you haven't eaten yet, we'll just accompany you for now."

"And give me indigestion..." Eleanora muttered under her breath before she shrugged and went down the rest of the stairs.

Finally, when Nora had descended the stairs, the queen spoke up, "Eleanora, you are a princess, even if you have been raised outside the palace. It has been more than a year since you have come back, can you not dress properly and behave with decorum? No one in the royal family dresses like this!"

Eleanora shrugged and sat down on the large table as she grabbed the box of strawberry tarts and started to munch on one, "Well, what is the point of being a princess if I cannot even dress for comfort? I'd rather live outside in poverty with my freedom..."

The queen sucked in a sharp breath while Princess Evangeline smirked and spoke up for the first time since coming to the place, "I am sure you would feel right at home in a poverty-stricken place. I've already told grandmother multiple times that you are not used to all this opulence and she should move you into a servant's quarter so you would feel more at home..."

The queen directed a sharp glance at Evangeline while Lady Cordelia scolded her, "Evana, don't be snarky to your cousin."

Eleanora paused, a thoughtful expression crossing her face as she looked at Evangeline. Setting aside her half eaten strawberry tart, she met the woman's gaze with a calm demeanour.

"You know, Evana," Eleanora began, her voice soft, "I appreciate your concern for my supposed discomfort in this 'opulence.' However, I find it amusing that you seem to have so much knowledge about servant's quarters. Perhaps it comes from a more hands-on experience than one would expect from a precious princess."

Lady Cordelia directed a look back at her Eleanora before looking to the Queen for help. These two just could not stand each other.

"Eleanora, please stop attacking your cousin for no reason. She has been trying to help you adapt and has only met with defensive attacks from you. No one is blaming you for coming from poverty but now you represent the Royal Family of Estania and these jeans and leather gloves are unbecoming of you. You look like a street thug than a princess."

Eleanora sighed and shook her head, giving up on the idea of a peaceful breakfast, "As far as I know my uncle has given me this house. So it belongs to me. And I do not need anyone to tell me what to wear and what not to wear in my own house. And what is all this talk about me representing the royal family? No one even knows of my existence so how am I supposed to bring shame to anyone?"

While the queen looked ready to blow steam, Lady Cordelia quickly intervened, "Eleanora, we have not yet made a public announcement out of concern for you. You've suffered so much damage in that accident. Physically and mentally. You have no memories, and you still have to wear gloves to keep your hand's hideous injury covered all the time. We just hoped to protect you from the prying gazes. But you are going to be twenty-one in a few months so we hope to announce your presence soon. If you keep

dressing like this with all your imperfections, the media will attack you and your late parents. We wish to protect you."

Eleanora's leather-gloved hands clenched, wanting to punch this woman in the face for trying to make her feel guilty about her dead parents. How was she supposed to be filial to her parents when they were already dead? Dam* it! She needed to escape from here at the earliest.

Straightening, she coldly spoke, "I need to be somewhere so if you are done with your family time, you can leave."

"Not yet. We need to talk to you about your fiancé." Queen Rosalind finally spoke directly.

Chapter 199: A Fiancé

Eleanora's eyes narrowed at the mention of a fiancé. She leaned back in her chair, an incredulous expression on her face.

"Fiancé?" she repeated, her tone laced with disbelief. "I don't remember meeting any fiancé. Have you found me a phantom to marry, Queen Rosalind?"

Queen Rosalind sighed, exchanging an exasperated glance with Lady Cordelia. "Eleanora, don't be difficult. You are engaged to Prince Augustus. I believe I have already made you aware of that! This is a significant alliance for the kingdom. This union will strengthen our ties, and you should consider the responsibility it entails."

"Yes. Yes And I've asked you multiple times where this prince is." Her lips curled into a mocking smile as she continued "Responsibility? You mean I can't wear ripped jeans to the royal wedding? What a tragedy that would be."

Queen Rosalind's patience wore thin. "Eleanora, enough! This is not a joke. You will meet Prince Augustus with the respect and decorum befitting a princess. Any misstep and there will be consequences."

Eleanora leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with defiance. "Consequences? What are you going to do, take away my pop tarts? Ground me from the kingdom? I'm shaking in my non-royal, rebellious boots."

The queen's face flushed with anger. "You will adhere to tradition and protocol. This is not negotiable."

"Let me get this straight. My mother and sister passed away about eighteen months ago. And then I returned to Estana and fell in love with this phantom prince who fell in love back. After which all of you immediately declared us engaged. And then I went and fell into the ocean because of an accident of course and the man that I am so in love with disappeared for months on end? Are we talking about that fiance? I don't need a man like him, Queen Rosalind. You can tell him that he need not come."

While the Queen glared angrily at the impudent girl and Cordelia tried to think of a way to diffuse the tension, Evangeline burst out angrily, "Grandmother! I've already told you that she is not worthy of Augustus. I don't know what he saw in her. Please call off this engagement."

Eleanora directed a look at Evangeline, realizing that the girl was probably in love with this Prince Whatever his name was. Ooohh. That was interesting. No wonder the girl always glared at her when she entered a room. Falling for your brother-in-law-to-be... Classic.

Well since Evangeline liked him, Eleanora decided that she would definitely check him out. Maybe she'd really fallen for this paragon of virtue. With a shrug, Eleanora directed a challenging glance at Evangeline and slowly agreed, "Fine fine. Stop frowning so much, Queen Rosalind. Your Botox will stop working. I already received your message about the date, and I'll be on my best behaviour."

Evangeline looked as if she wanted to speak something but was quickly silenced by her mother who sent her a warning glance.

Queen Rosalind stared at Eleanora with narrowed eyes, trying to see if she was really being serious. Seeing that the woman was not trying to pull a prank, Queen Rosalind nodded and answered, "My maid will be the chaperone for the two of you tonight. Prince Augustus will be here at Seven sharp and my maid will be here at 6.30. You will learn to respect your position, Eleanora. Do not forget who you are."

Eleanora nodded serenely and waved the three women goodbye before making a face at them. Chaperone. More like the woman would be there to keep an eye on her. Never forget who you are... What a thing to say to someone who had no memory of who she was before an accident took it all away. And the woman they seemed to want her to become made her cringe and want to rebel.

Maybe that is how she was. Rebellious and independent.

Eleanora sighed. She really did need to find a way to get out of this place. Even though she was the princess here, she felt more like a prisoner. There was someone keeping an eye on her twenty-four-seven. She was not allowed to go anywhere alone. And then there were her dreams...

She wandered through the vast halls of the mansion, her mind tangled in a web of confusion, feeling like a listless ghost. The weight of her royal responsibilities felt suffocating, and the impending meeting with this mysterious Prince Augustus added another layer of discomfort. As she strolled, the grandeur of the mansion seemed to close in around her, echoing with the whispers of her own unease.

She meandered out of the house, wanting... needing to escape. Quietly, she walked to the huge garden outside, the place that she considered her haven. Her therapist repeatedly told her that she needed to let go of the past memories which had been erased. It was a good thing she did not remember how her parents doted on her. This way she would not miss them too much.

But Eleanora had a secret that she had kept hidden, even from the therapist. That it was not her parents she saw in her dreams each night. It was someone else. Someone who confessed his love to her in a hushed whisper, his voice like music to her ears. She wanted to believe that this man was a figment of her imagination, but she knew he was not. The tattoo over her heart was proof of that. Even now, she could feel a flutter over there, as if he had just kissed her.

And yet every time she tried to think of him like this, in her waking moments, her head threatened to burst with pain. Every time he whispered those words in her dreams, all she saw was blood covering her hands. She'd already lost her memories but she felt as if she was losing her mind.

She would meet this fiancé of hers tonight. And she was scared and yet she was hopeful. She feared that Augustus was the man she dreamt of and she feared that he wasn't the man of her dreams.

Chapter 200: Meeting A Fiance

Eleanora stared at herself in the mirror one last time as she walked out to wait for the arrival of her so-called 'fiance'- Augustus. What kind of a name was that? Who named their child after a month of the year. She knew that the founder of the Roman empire was named Augustus but could they be any more pretentious?

"Princess Eleanora, you should not make that face. It is unbecoming of you."

Eleanora blinked at the quiet reprimand from the queen's personal maid and cocked her head with a challenging smirk as she retorted, "Unbecoming you say? And it is quite becoming to be forced to marry a human calendar, is it? And just for future reference, I'll make any face I please."

The maid's eyes widened, clearly taken aback by Eleanora's sharp retort. No wonder the queen was always fuming when she returned after meeting this young princess. The girl was too uncouth and blunt. Her poor queen. Unaware of the thoughts going around in the maid's head, Nora glanced at the large clock in the foyer.

Another minute and it would be 7.05 pm. And then she would definitely walk out of here on the grounds that the calendar man had ditched her.

Unfortunately for her, Lily soon came running out of the kitchen with wide eyes and announced, "Prince Augustus is here. He is here."

Eleanora grimaced and stood up to look outside at this paragon of virtue who was probably her husband. The man had already been escorted inside but looking at his flashy sports car, she could not help but be dismayed. She hated people who showed off. Maybe she should surrender and hand over the calendar to Evangeline.

However, she did not leave this chance to mock the maid, "It seems you might have to sit on the roof of the car if you want to chaperone us..."

Just then, a man dressed in royal blue entered and announced formally, "His Highness Prince Augustus Octavius Thurius Tiberius is arriving."

As soon as the announcement was finished, a young man entered the room, sharply dressed in an army uniform. Eleanora looked at the man in front of her and then started to search behind him.

The young man flashed a smile in her direction, covering the distance with swift strides. He extended his hand, reaching for hers, and with a formal grace, he bent slightly, pressing a kiss to the back of her gloved hand. Eleanora flinched at the unexpected gesture, quickly snatching her hand back.

Prince Augustus raised an eyebrow at the gesture but did not react more than that as he watched her continue to look behind him.

"Are you also waiting for someone else, Eleanora?"

Eleanora turned her head back to him and asked innocently, "Well, where are the others?"

"The others?"

"Uh huh." Pointing a finger at the person who had walked in just now, she continued, "There is someone called Octavius, Thirunus and Tiber... someone also coming here..."

Prince Augustus stared at Eleanora in stunned silence before he chuckled softly as he shook his head, "And here everyone told me that you'd lost your memory! Yet you still have your sense of humour intact."

Eleanora blinked at the words and at the man. His smile transformed his face, making him look quite handsome.

Augustus smiled and easily moved to hold her hand, while quickly threading it through his elbow, "I cannot tell you how relieved I am to see you standing here safe and sound. When I heard you were in an accident, I wanted to abandon everything and fly to you. I know you are angry about that and rightfully so. But I hope you won't hold it against me and understand."

Eleanora gave him a look and nodded in understanding, making the Prince smirk. And here everyone had been warning him that the Princess was difficult to handle. She was like all other women, charmed by his looks.

"Of course I understand. After all, you are not a vampire who can turn into a bat and fly to me at will. So I understand that you could not fly to come and be with me."

Prince Augustus jerked to a stop and looked at the woman incredulously. What did she just say? She looked back at him innocently, making his doubt his own ears. Finally, he decided to let the words go and proceed according to his own plan.

Once outside, he watched as the girl scrutinized the car and waited for her to fawn over it and compliment him. After all, it was a limited edition. But she continued to stand there so he could not help but add, "Do you like the car? I think it makes a statement."

Eleanora cast a glance at the man who was dressed as shinily as the car and sighed under her breath, "I suppose subtlety is overrated." Loudly, she spoke, "Actually I do not understand car language so I have no idea what statement it is making. Lets go, I am hungry."

With that, Eleanora opened the car door and slid into the low car without much ado, leaving the prince standing there wondering what was going on. Even though Eleanora had not said anything that could be directly construed as insulting, there was something about her that rattled him.

As he watched the girl sitting in his car without an expression, Prince Augustus narrowed his eyes. It seemed Uncle Alexander had been right. She was a handful. Good. Very good. It had been so long since he had enjoyed a challenge.

It would be fun to take Eleanora on and mould her to suit his taste. There wasn't a woman who had not fallen for him and Eleanora was not going to be any different. By the time she walked down the aisle, all she would be able to think of would be being with him.

With a charming smile, he walked towards the car and got into it. He was going to have a lot of fun with this little rebel.