

Benefits 211

Chapter 211: Frustrating

Evangeline Sterling stared at her phone for the hundredth time, tapping her perfectly manicured nails as she waited for the man who was supposed to be here ten minutes ago. Most people had enough common sense to arrive earlier than the allotted time and wait for her.

She was a royal, not some peasant that the man dared to make her wait.

Just then, her assistant brought a cell phone to the table and Evangeline glared at it then the assistant, "If I wanted to talk to him, I would have answered his call myself."

The assistant shrugged apologetically while trying to hand the phone to her, " I cannot refuse him..."

As she was about to refuse, the voice from the loudspeaker spoke, "Take the phone my little princess. Don't make things difficult for your assistant. It is not her fault."

Evangeline frowned and took the phone, taking it off the speaker as she put it to her ear, " I am not happy with this. You are responsible for my suffering, you know."

Alexander Sterling clucked his tongue and coaxed his daughter, " Come on, child. You are good at negotiating as well as the only one I can trust with this task."

Evangeline looked at her nails and then lowered her voice, " But I don't understand why she needs to be here. You and I both want her gone but yet you insist on pulling this farce...to make her stay here."

Alexander Sterling shook his head and frowned, " We need to do this not to make her stay here but to make sure that she does not try to take the throne that does not belong to her."

"But you said that it is possible that she won't want it and she would agree to give up her right."

"That was before. And even then we were not too sure. But right now, we are even more unstable. Rumors about her have already been circulating among the masses. This time, the threat is not just

about her taking the throne but there is also the fact that someone might use her to try and get rid of us. So, we need to make sure that Eleanora leaves Estana, securely with Augustus. Once she is with him, she will have no right to the throne."

"Papa! I really don't think that she is going to fall for Augustus. I did praise him in front of her when grandmother was scolding her but really, that man is too..."

"Evangeline, you don't worry about that. I already have a plan. I simply need you to handle this..."

"I've already spoken to the woman, Papa. But Eleanora's ex-fiance is late and has not arrived yet."

"You need not be concerned. If he doesn't come, he'll suffer the consequences. Also, you need to be more careful than ever Evana, the time is crucial and the future of Estana is now in your hands."

Evangeline hummed in response before handing the phone back to her assistant. Even as she wondered how to make this tardy person of use, she stiffened as she wondered if her eyes were playing tricks on her.

But as she slowly turned her head, she could see the person who had just arrived at the bar... It had been so long since she had seen that man. To see him here, was a coincidence...

She stood up, eager to go and talk to him again when the man she had been waiting for arrived. Her eagerness turning to disappointment, she sat back down, coolly studying the man who had just arrived.

As he extended his hand for a greeting, she couldn't help but notice that his handshake was not very good and spoke of a poor character.

Suppressing her disdain, Evangeline shook his hand with a forced smile, wondering what Eleanora had seen in such a man. Her taste had been too poor. At least she'd had the good sense to jilt him in time before she ruined herself.

Though if she had married this man, it would have made their job so much easier, since it would have been a piece of cake to bend him to their will.

Before she could even say anything, the man looked away and tried to explain, "Apologies, Your Highness. Unexpected traffic."

Evangeline raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Time management is a skill even teenagers possess, I believe. Nonetheless, we have matters to discuss. Let's get to the point. You are Antonio, who was engaged to Nora Williams and then Sara Anderson?"

Hearing the names, Antonio nodded his head quickly and explained, "I was in love with Nora and we almost married but then Sara ruined our relationship..."

Evangeline could not help but shake her head. She hated people who would pass the blame for their own misdeeds to someone else. And this was even worse when they blamed the dead who could not come and defend herself.

Evangeline had actually met Sara a couple of times. And though she would not say that she had particularly liked the younger girl, she knew her enough that she would not have chased this man if he was totally unresponsive. He'd probably led her on...

Hardening her eyes, she glared at the man and spoke threateningly, "Mister Antonio, before we proceed, let me warn you that if I ever hear you say a word about loving Nora again, I will make sure that you are unable to speak again. You will meet her as an old friend who had tutored her and that is else. You try to give her a hint of your past relationship or rekindle those feelings, you will regret the day you were born..."

Evangeline watched in detachment as the man turned pale and nodded his head. Her lips kicked up in satisfaction. This man was easily handled.

From the corner of her eye, she kept tabs on the man she'd been about to go and meet while she explained to Antonio his part in the plan and everything that he was required to do.

And finally, once she had Antonio's agreement and understanding, Evangeline quickly stood up to go to the man at the bar...

Chapter 212: Lucien

Evangeline stared at the man with giddy eyes as she walked towards him. He still looked the same. She'd never imagined that she would find him so suddenly. He was the one who had gotten away.

Lucifer, he'd called himself. Like the fallen angel. And she'd always thought that the name suited him. He seemed to be engrossed in the amber liquid before him. As she walked even closer that he did not have a lip ring anymore. She felt regret for a moment. That cold metal against her lips when he'd kissed her...

Before she could reach the man, her assistant walked over to her, "Princess? Are you ready to leave?"

Evangeline looked at her assistant with irritation before taking a deep breath to calm herself. There was no point in creating a scene. "Tell everyone to retreat. I'd like some time to myself. I need a drink."

The assistant nodded in understanding while confirming, "Only one security guard will..."

"No security. I am not leaving the premises. You can all retreat. I'll be coming up soon."

This time, before the assistant could protest, Evangeline dismissed the woman, expecting her orders to be followed.

A hopeful smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she slid onto the stool beside him. The only person who had helped her while asking for nothing in return.

"Excuse me," she began, her tone careful unlike the business tone that she usually used, "but you look so familiar. Have we met before?"

The man turned to her, his expression guarded. He sized her up with a quick, appraising glance before shaking his head. "I don't think so."

Even though she felt a twinge, she was undeterred. Leaning forward, she cocked her head to the side, questioning him, "Are you sure?"

The man's eyes narrowed as he looked at her, a mix of irritation and something much more dangerous. With a single move, his hand reached out and pulled the stool she was sitting on towards him as he said, "Let me take a closer look..."

Evangeline blinked at the sudden movement, feeling shy and unsure. He was still the same, taking liberties with a person while she had never been treated like this. While she was lost in thought, the man moved back and said, "Nah. I don't think I know you."

"We met at a party a couple of years ago. You saved me from being pushed into the pool."

Instead of acknowledging her, he swirled the glass in his hand and stared at her with curiosity, "Did I? And what did I do then?"

Evangeline opened her mouth to blurt out that he'd kissed her before stopping, feeling extremely shy.

As he watched, his mouth kicked up in amusement and he leaned close again, his face close to hers. His eyes focused on her lips and his hand slowly came up, cupping her face. Evana dared not to even blink as his thumb traced her lips, rubbing off the lipstick.1

As she blinked up at him, he pulled back his hand and nodded, "Hmm, you've got quite kissable lips. So, I can guess what we did. Do you want a repeat of that? Sorry sweetheart. I am not in the mood otherwise I would definitely give you my keycard..."

This time Evana could almost feel her eyes pop out. If it had been anyone else who had made such a comment for her, she would have had them thrown out onto the street. Raising her chin, she said, "We did not sleep together that night."

Lucien cocked his head to the side, amused at her agitation and commented, "So you are looking to rectify that?"

Evana shook her head at the insolence of the man, "I am not trying to sleep with you!"

Unfortunately for Evana, her agitation got the better of her and she spoke the words in a loud volume, almost announcing it to everyone in the quiet place.

While she was mortified, Lucien laughed out loud and shook his head, "You are quite unique. I am sure, everyone here is relieved that you are not trying to sleep with me."

"Will you please stop doing that? I was only trying to ask you out for a meal because I did not get to thank you properly in the past! Why did you have to be such a jerk?"

Lucien smiled and tapped her lips as he said, "Then you should have said so in the beginning! Why were you talking in circles?"

Evana was tempted to point at herself and question the man, 'She was talking in circles? He was the one who was coming onto her saying things and doing things that were inappropriate...'

"Sure, I'll take you up on the coffee offer. But not before you tell me your name. I seem to remember the feel of your lips but I don't think we introduced ourselves. So, what is the name of this damsel in distress that I saved?"

Evana smiled and quickly introduced herself, "I am Evangeline."

"Ahh. Angel. Quite a match. I am..."

"I know, Lucifer." Evangeline answered him. "I am an angel while you are a fallen angel." It was how he had introduced himself that night.

Even though he was exasperating, Evangeline could not stop the butterflies in her stomach as he got off his stool and helped her get off from hers.

"So, where do you want to take me, Angel?"

"Now?" Evangeline asked confused.

"Well, it is almost dinner time so why not?" Lucien answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

Evangeline nodded and quickly tried to think of a place where she could go without alerting the security.

"Why don't we go to my room for a meal? Just a meal. Nothing else." Evangeline quickly clarified, seeing that his expression had just turned naughty again.

The man shrugged his broad shoulders and casually placed his arm around her waist, "Sure. A meal is a meal. Though I do think it is a pity that you are not trying to sleep with me..."

My lovelies! I know we have transfer-proof lipsticks these days but then they are no fun in this so please excuse.

Chapter 213: You Dog

Seb: Lucien Frost! You old dog! I can't believe that you straightaway went to her room!

Seb: You are a Dog! I used to think you were a sheep but you are a wolf.

Ian: He's showing his true colours now.

Ian: First, that bad boy thing that he had hidden from us and now these quick moves! Wow! All that theatre he did as a kid, he's been putting his acting skills to use now!

Erasmi: Lucien, your name means light and yet, you've gone on to the dark side... I'm disappointed...

Gabe: He is in his mid-twenties. You would be more embarrassed if he did not know anything.

Ian: Look who is talking! You betrayer of the brotherhood pact! How could you keep a secret like this from us?

Erasmi: Now I need to self-reflect. I had hoped that he was less experienced than me but now... I feel old and young at the same time.

Seb: We told you to come with us! We'll help you gain some experience.

Ian: More like you want to use him as a wingman! Don't go with him. He has weird fetishes.

Gabe: And you know that because of all the orgies?

Ian: A gentleman never kisses and tells.

Seb: It is safe to say that we did more than kissing.

Erasmi: Be quiet guys! You are bordering on ince*t territory here. I just had lunch! I don't want to throw up!

Ian: Eww. I'd never sleep with Seb! He is ugly. Now if it was you, my dear big brother...

Seb: Hey! I would never even talk to you if you were not my brother! How dare you insult me and refuse to sleep with me?

Gabe: Sh*t up. We do not want to know your antics. Do you guys think Lucien will succeed?

Ian: I would have bet my bike that he won't. But I am not too sure now. Let me quote this, Lucien Frost is a black sheep!

Seb: He is a black wolf in black sheep clothing.

Erasmi: I want to know what else he has been hiding. I'd become sleeping beauty but the rest of you were all awake and he still successfully hid his alter ego from you all.

Gabe: Lucien Frost, you are a R18 disguised as PG 13!

Lucien: Dam* guys! I was not even here and you are all firing things my way and roasting me?

Seb: Well well! So you still have the courage to look up and answer back! Haven't I been telling you that he needs to be taught a lesson?

Lucien sipped his wine slowly as he watched the elegant woman in front of him. She came across as shy and sweet but she was a strong woman who held many secrets. And even as she pretended to be sweet and even submissive with all those blushes, he knew that she was as cold as he'd been told. And she was a good actor.

In fact, he would have fallen for her act, if he had not heard the entire conversation, that she'd had with Antonio. After hearing the ruthless way she planned to deal with Nora, Lucien did not feel even a sliver of guilt that he was about to use her to reach his goal. It had taken all his concentration to not curse out loud and tell her to drop the act.

He didn't mind if a person was cold or even ruthless, as long as they were direct and honest about it. But he hated hypocrites. She pretended to be kind and benevolent as she told him all about the good deeds she did in her time as part of her royal duties.

Finishing his meal, he placed down his glass and stood up, " Thank you for the meal, Angel. I should take me leave now."

Evangeline smiled hesitantly and stood up, " The pleasure was all mine. Thank you for..."

Instead of letting her continue, Lucien pulled her into his arms and sealed her lips in a kiss.

Evangeline slowly kissed him back once she was over the surprise and as she felt herself heat and stepped closer to him, he stepped back, "Goodbye Angel.", he whispered in her ear before walking away.

Lucien walked off without a second glance, hedging his bet. He expected Evangeline to call out and stop him but was already wondering what he would do if she did not.

However, within a few minutes, he'd already thought that even if she did not try to prolong their meeting, they would find a way...

Just as he was about to walk out, she called, "Lucifer? You're going to be here a few more days right?"

Lucien paused and turned around with a hum, "Hmm. I'm going around enjoying my vacations and be a tourist."

"Would you mind if I accompanied you? I'm on holiday too."

"You are? I thought you were here on business." Lucien pointed out.

Evangeline frowned and tried to explain, "Yes. I concluded my business today. So, could we be together a few more days?"

Lucien leaned against the door, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned back his head and stared at her from hooded eyes. His voice dropped an octave as he questioned, "What are you offering Angel?"

Evangeline understood the underlying meaning of the words and had to forcefully suppress her eagerness to be with him. She'd been on edge all evening with this man. Lucifer had been and still was se* on legs.

But she would not give in to him directly. Raising an eyebrow, she matched his look, "At the moment companionship only... as to something else... let's see what you have?"

His eyes heated even more at this and he commented, "So you do know how to let someone chase you. Good. I'll see you tomorrow, angel."

Evangeline nodded and waited for him to leave. Instead, he hooked his finger at her, beckoning her closer. And she went to him as if mesmerized and as he stared at her, she knew exactly what he wanted. It was what she wanted to do as well... Placing her hands on his shoulders, she leaned forward and placed a small peck on his lips before hurrying back.

Chapter 214: Who Are You?

Augustus made hopeful eyes in Eleanora's direction with a grin plastered on his face. He was determined to not let her avoid him tonight. And since she refused to go out on a formal date with him, he offered, "How about a casual meal at the cafe downtown. I've heard that it's quite quaint and casual so you don't have to be dressed up. I saw the place in a magazine..."

Eleanora coolly shook her head even as she found a running commentary going on inside her head, "Yeah, the new place with the secluded booths and dark ambience... the better to touch you dear... no thanks."

Undeterred, Augustus quickly shifted gears, determined to find a location that would win her over. "How about a movie? We can watch a romantic comedy or an action one... You haven't watched one since you lost your memory, isn't it? So it will be a new experience as well."

And she could already picture him trying to use the armrest and darkness as a way to make moves on her, hold her hands, thanks but no thanks...

Eleanora stubbornly shook her head and commented, "Prince Augustus, I really do not feel like going out..."

Prince Augustus stared at her with keen eyes and suggested, "Then let's spend some quality time here. You do not have many servants or maids so it would promise some privacy..."

Eleanora shuddered at the prospect. Gosh! She just wanted to lie down and look outside...Outside... Yes!

With a smile, she said, "No! That is just boring. I have a better idea! Let's go."

Prince Augustus frowned and followed Eleanora as she quickly walked away, wondering what it was she was up to. The girl was supposed to be easy prey with her lost memory and youth, but instead, she was as slippery as an eel, always evading him. He was almost tempted to use underhanded means to get her.

Outside, he walked down the steps with a raised eyebrow, "I thought you did not want to go out? But since you've changed your mind, sure, tell me where do you want to go."

"Let's take a walk around the Queen's gardens. Dora told me that the new gardener has changed the landscape and the place is really beautiful during the evening as well. There is even a labyrinth..."

Augustus who was about to protest, stopped suddenly. Labyrinth? Was the princess trying to hint to him something? What a wild girl, she wanted to do naughty things in the wild bushes. Good enough, he did not mind a little grass and mud.

Eleanora, unaware of the downward turn Augustus' mind had taken was already marching forward, even though she felt a little skeptical as well as hopeful over seeing the gardener. Her last meeting had ended on a somewhat sour note when he had flat out refused to let her buy his little dog from him.

Of course, she'd felt insulted that he would not even consider her offer but been so directly rude about it! And then... her behavior... She was still mortified about her behaviour. She'd actually tried to bat her eyes at him and flirt with him to get the puppy! She was pretty sure that her head had been messed up that day.

And then later, when Dora had told her that he'd kept the puppy for his wife, she'd even wondered if she should go dig a hole somewhere to hide. The gardener had a wife and she had... She really needed to apologize to the man for her obnoxious conduct.

Seeing her walk ahead of him and continue to ignore him, Prince Augustus could only fume. This woman! It was as if she was trying to race away from him! No one had ever dared to ignore him the way she did! Fine! She wanted to try and escape him. Well, she could keep trying.

Speeding up, he walked up to her and caught her hand in his. She looked at him startled and tried to take her hand away but he was not about to let her go so easily, "Eleanora, we are going to be married. At least let me hold your hand, alright?"

Eleanora looked down at the hand holding hers and scowled. She really did not like this man's hands on hers. They were too soft and barely had any calluses that she could feel. She liked a man with powerful hands and wrists... as she thought of this, her very active imagination supplied a perfect image of the man who had been holding the shovel followed by the one who visited her in her dreams... and caressed her...

Quickly she shook her head and scolded herself, "One is married and the other is a figment of your imagination. Get a grip, Nora."

Since she was not trying to extract her hand from his, Augustus was satisfied and casually stepped closer to her, their shoulders now brushing against each other.

It was at this moment that he suddenly felt a malicious gaze on him. He shivered, feeling as if someone had just walked over his grave. Augustus looked around, trying to see if there was someone around but could see nothing. He looked at the girl beside him and wondered if she could not feel the danger in this place.

"Eleanora, let's go back..."

Instead of agreeing, Eleanora shook her head and sighed as she looked at the beautiful sight in front of her. Dora had been right. Gaia had indeed transformed the place into a wonderland. While the place looked pretty during the day, the evening seemed to make it alive. There was a faint fragrance in the air that seemed to beckon her...

Her trance was broken by the man beside her who suddenly jumped back, pulling her with her, making her almost fall on the ground with a thump, before he let go of her. As she rubbed her bottom and glared at him, Augustus paled and stuttered, "Who.. Wh... Who are you?"

Chapter 215: Insect

Prince Augustus looked at the man who had stepped out and gulped. The man had appeared out of nowhere and was now staring at him as if he was an insect. Augustus looked him over and seeing the man's shabby clothes, was enraged that a servant dared to try and intimidate him and look down on him!

As he was about to scold the man, the man moved. Augustus stepped back in fear. Even though he did not seem to be threatening, there was something about him that made him feel wary.

The man ignored him and extended his hand to Eleanora who was still rubbing her bruised bottom and questioned, "Are you alright?"

Grateful and embarrassed, Eleanora placed her hand in his and smiled, "Yes, thank you for your help."

However, instead of realizing his mistake, Augustus was enraged at this and shoved the man, "How dare you touch the princess with your dirty hands? Who do you think you are?"

Demetri still refused to acknowledge the man, as he calmly stepped back before turning his murderous gaze towards Augustus, "Your Highness, I am the gardener here. And while you may think my hands are dirty, my princess here does not seem to mind holding my hand. At least my hand is not responsible for her fall..."

Augustus, realizing he wasn't gaining the upper hand, shifted his approach, attempting to reassert his authority. "A mere gardener and you dare to talk back. Know your place and do not try to interfere with our matters." Placing his hand on Eleanor's wrist, he spoke harshly, "Come on, Eleanora, let's continue our stroll before this man ruins it further."

However, as he pulled her, Eleanora stood stiffly in place and spoke coldly, "Know your place? Let go of my hand, Prince Augustus. You seem to forget your place."

Frowning in irritation, Augustus stared back at Eleanora, and stepped close to her, "I remember my place very well. I am your fiance. You are the one who has forgotten. Now, I would suggest that you not make a spectacle of yourself and come with me. I am not in the mood for a stroll any longer. We will return to your house."

Ignoring his words, Eleanora struggled to make the man let go of her hand, however, Prince Augustus was not ready to go. Just as she was about to kick the man to make him leave, the gardener stepped forward and pinched the man's wrist, somehow making him lose his grip.

Augustus yelped as he let go of her hand and glared at the gardener, "How dare you touch me! Wait till I report this matter to the queen and my people. They will throw you into the mud so deep that you won't ever be able to come out again."

"You can do whatever you want, Prince Augustus. While you are at it, you can try explaining the bruises on the Princess' wrist also."

Shocked, Augustus looked at Eleanora's hand, only to see that it had almost turned blue and his fingers seemed to be printed on her wrist. "Eleanora, I am so sorry."

As Augustus stepped close to her, she stepped back and ordered him, "Get away from me before I call my security."

If it had been any other time, Augustus would have disregarded her words but as he tried to get close to her his way was blocked by the dangerous gardener who was waiting for him to make a move so that he could kill him.

Staring between Eleanora, who refused to look at him and the gardener who was staring at him with murder in his eyes, Augustus quickly realized that he was at a disadvantage and stepped back, "Our tempers have gotten the better of us. I'll come by to talk to you later, Eleanora. Goodbye."

Demetri watched the man rush away and tried to calm himself. Seeing that man touch her so proprietorially and then hurt her had made him see red. If it had not needed to keep a low profile, he would have buried the man right here. He had half a mind to still do it. All he needed was a big enough hole...

His anger was broken by Nora's voice who asked softly, "How did you know that I was bruised."

She knew that this man had not even looked at her when he had made Augustus let go of her hand so...

Demetri turned to her and took a deep breath to calm himself before he turned to see her bruise. "It was a guess, Princess. He was holding your hand too tightly."

Looking around, he walked a bit further away and bent down, looking for something in his toolkit. Finally, finding what he needed, he gently took her hand and slowly applied the medicine, blowing softly on her wrist to counter the cooling effect of the medicine.

Eleanora felt her heart thud against her as he carefully tended to her wounds. Looking at his downturned head, she suddenly had a feeling of *deja vu*... as if she had experienced this in the past as well. Trying to curb this unsettling feeling, she tried to joke, "Do you get hurt a lot? You are even carrying a bruising medicine in your toolkit?"

Without looking up from his task, the man replied, "My wife bruises easily and often. I usually keep this around for her."

At the mention of his wife, a wave of jealousy so intense passed through her that Nora was shaken. What did this sour feeling mean? Quickly, she snatched her hand back and spoke, "It's late now. I'll go back. Thank you for this."

"Let me escort you, princess."

"No need. I can go on my own," Eleanora burst out and quickly turned back to leave. She needed to get away from this man.

"Kitten," he called out and Eleanora stopped suddenly and looked back.

Why did she feel as if he was calling for her.

Before she could question the little pup quickly ambled over and stood there obediently. "Princess, let her escort you. In case there are any rats or other insects, she will chase them away and protect you..."

"Then, how will she come back..."

"She'll find her way back to me. My kitten will return to me on her own."

Eleanora nodded and with a simple thank you, started to walk back, letting the little dog walk by her side.

Unknown to her, Demetri's target had been not the rats but a single rat names Augustus...

Chapter 216: A Gift

"I got you a surprise gift!" Dora hurriedly climbed onto the bed determined to wake Eleanora up immediately as she held her hand and shook her. Nora opened her eyes groggily, disoriented and tried to understand what the exuberant little girl was saying.

Dora who was bursting with excitement, quickly noticed that her sister was awake and giving the girl no time to think, she quickly started to pull her hand, " Come on, come on! You have to see this quickly."

Nora, now fully awake, caught Dora in her arms and pulled the little girl into her lap as she snuggled, " Nah! You are quite a gift too. I'll see what you got later, first you have to hug me for a while."

Dora, immensely pleased with her sister's hug but not ready to show it, made a face and said, "You are such a baby, stealing hugs and all. I'll hug you later, come on, let's go!"

Eleanora smiled as the little girl's thin arms tightened around her, even as she protested the hug and answered, " I don't want to go yet. Let me sleep some more while I hug a sweet little pillow like you."

Dora giggled at this, enjoying her sister's doting but shook her head, " No no. My gift can't wait that long. And besides if grandmother was to find out... you have to come now."

Falling back on to her back, with Dora still in her arms, Eleanora sighed, " I am not getting up. You can get the girl here. We'll unwrap the present in bed today."

"No! You have to get up."

"I am not getting up."

"Get up."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

Dora pouted at her older sister, totally angry that her sister would not listen to her and quickly stood up, "Fine! You are a very lazy girl. I got you a present when you don't get me anything ever. And instead of saying thank you... I'll go get the present. Next time when you get me a present, I am going to do the same. Also, don't get me any random present. I want the scooter, you know. The kind everyone has...like the skateboard but with bicycle handles. Got it? When you get that for me, I will also laze around in the bed and refuse to come out to see it."

Eleanora laughed and watched the little girl race away, her pigtails bouncing behind her. Of all the people in the Sterling family, the person she liked the most was little Isidora. This is how young sisters should be. Cute and cuddly. Not like Sara...

As Eleanora closed her eyes, ready to pretend for Dora that she'd fallen back to sleep, the smile on her face suddenly stiffened. Who was Sara?

However, before she could think too much on that an enigmatic voice spoke, "Are you sure you want to unwrap me in bed, princess?"

Eleanora's eyes snapped open and she looked at the man standing there, leaning against the doorframe. Her eyes widened in shock at the unexpected appearance and she was pretty sure that she looked like a complete lunatic.

"What are you doing here?" Her cheeks flushed crimson and she quickly sat up in bed as she tried to process. Was she still in some kind of a weird dream? She had not been able to sleep peacefully because this man had taken over her dreams and now he was appearing at the door of her bedroom.

She watched as his eyes roved over her slowly and realized that she was only in her flimsy nightgown... Pulling the blanket to her chin, she tapped the back of the bed and called out, "What are you doing here?"

"Dora said that you wanted to unwrap me in bed. So here I am? Where would you like me to get on... I mean which side..."

Her sleep-fried brain finally started to work and she incredulously asked him, "You are my present?"

"And your past and future..." The man said, totally confusing her.

Seeing her look, the man could only smile as he said, "I'm just playing with you, Princess Eleanora. Princess Dora asked me to come here to help you design a wall of indoor garden plants. I'll wait downstairs for you."

Nora watched the man turn and leave while she buried her face between her hands. What sort of luck did she have to always end up making a fool of herself in front of this man? How was she supposed to know that Dora would get her a man as a present.

"Well, he does make a good gift... and unwrapping him might be a fun too", a sinister little voice spoke in her head, even providing images for her encouragement...

Shaking her head to get rid of her dirty thoughts, Eleanora quickly raced to the washroom to freshen up and face the music while reminding herself that the man was not her gift but his excellent gardening services...

"Services...mmm that would be nice. Did you know that the women in Victorian referred to their s*x life with gardening examples..."

Eleanora rolled her eyes at the voice and was tempted to bang her head against the wall. What was she supposed to do with her naughty self? And why did that side seem to like the gardener so much? She was even lustng over him and providing her with dirty images...

"Hey! I am you. You are the one who wants to use the gardener... Not me... I'm just telling you what your subconscious likes. Don't blame the messenger..."

Focus. She needed plants. She already had something in mind but it would be good if the man could help her create that. She had seen his work and it really was good so maybe he would be able to bring her imagination to life...

"Which imagination are we talking about? The interesting one or the boring one?" the voice piped up...

The boring one of course, Eleanora snapped at herself before facepalming herself and reminding that getting plants was also interesting... and not boring. Also she did not want anything to do with the gardener...

Chapter 217: A Discovery

Eleanora stared at the large balcony outside the studyroom, which was now covered with potted plants of various sizes... Gaia was a genius landscaper. She should have expected that from a man who was the 'Head' of the Queen's mansion since the Queen's gardens in Estania were already famous, but she was still surprised.

She'd hesitantly tried to explain her vision to the man, fearing he would scoff at her for asking for the impossible. However, he had simply nodded his head while she had wondered if he'd even understood a word. But then, an hour later, the plants he had brought to her were exactly as she had said. It was as if he could read her mind.

"Princess Eleanora. Do you like it or do you need me to change anything?"

Eleanora shook her head and looked at the man with shining eyes, " Mr. Gaia. This is just perfect. Thank you."

"I'm glad you like it, princess. If I may..."

Eleanora sighed as the man then extended a plant," This is for you."

Eleanora looked at the little rosette-like blue-green plant and widened her eyes. It was so beautiful...
"What is this?"

"This plant is called the Blue Elf or the happy plant. I think this would make the perfect center piece for your little garden... and I hope looking at this plant will only ever make you feel happy."

"Thank you, Gaia." She smiled and happily accepted the plant even though looking at it, she somehow felt sad. The plant seemed to be telling her that she was forgetting something.

As her hand brushed against his, her eyes caught sight of ink on his wrist. Surprised, she looked at him, "You have a tattoo?"

The man looked at her as he said, " Hmm."

She looked at the tattoo and frowned. "Nora's?"

Gaia looked at his wrist before nodding his head, " Its my wife's name."

Eleanora looked away thinking of her own tattoos. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Gaia looked at her and answered readily.

"Why did you have her name tattooed on your hand? I mean how do you trust someone so much that they will forever stay with you?"

"Princess Eleanora, trust is the foundation of any relationship."

"Where is your wife now? Does she like the tattoo?"

"She is far away from me... for now. And I never had the chance to show her. When she comes back, I will show it to her. I am sure she will be happy."

"Where is your wife?"

"She is..."

Before Gaia could say more, a little girl came in angrily, "This is what I get for being thoughtful? Now that you have your little garden, you've forgotten all about your little sister? Are you not even going to feed me? I am hungry!"

Eleanora shook her head and asked mockingly, "Little Dora, has your stomach been replaced by an endless pit? You just had dinner."

"But I did not have dessert! I need something sweet."

"Fine, tell me what you want and I will have it delivered."

Dora was immediately pleased and quickly rattled off a variety of sweet dishes before finally saying, "I'll have only these. And you can order for yourself, whatever you want! Gaia, will you stay for dessert? It will be fun! I might even share some of my desserts with you. Though you cannot tell anyone that because I never share it with anyone else. "

"Thank you, Princess Dora. I appreciate your generosity. Unfortunately, I have to leave and would not be able to join you."

"You're going?" Eleanora and Dora both asked in a sad tone.

The man looked between the two and nodded his head, "Yes. I have to meet someone."

"Can't you cancel?" Dora asked the question that was in Eleanora's mind.

"Not this time. It is really important."

"How can it be more important than having dessert with a two princesses?"

"It is when I have to go to meet the man who is the father of one princess and the uncle of other."

"You're going to meet my father?" Dora asked in astonishment. "Why?"

"I don't know. I think he wants me to create a small garden for him as well."

"Alright alright. Since you have to meet that old man, I won't stop you. But next time, you have to stay and have dessert. Of course princess Dora."

As Demetri left the two girls, Dora continued to be her happy self but Eleanora was lost deep in thought. She did not believe the reason that Gaia had given him. What would Alexander Sterling care to talk about with a gardener?

"Dora? Can you tell me something?"

"Hmm?", Dora played with her phone as they waited for the dessert while waiting for her sister to question her.

"You, Evangeline and I have titles before our names. And so does our grandmother. But my uncle, your father, he does not have a title. Why?"

When Dora did not answer for a few moments, Eleanora assumed that it was because the girl did not know. But then suddenly Dora spoke up, "Its because of your father."

"My father?" Eleanora asked in astonishment.

"My dad says that your father did not want to be King so he gave up his right, his title, etc to go and live in another country. This hurt our grandfather deeply. My father was his half brother and the king

thought that it was because of him that Uncle gave up his rights and to appease grandmother so that she would be happy that her own son was going to inherit."

"Even though grandfather never said anything, he was deeply troubled. So, when your father had a daughter and Evangeline was born, my father proposed that since there was already someone who could inherit the throne in the future, he should also give up the right to the throne. So, my father decided to give up the title and serve as only a Lord and nothing more."

Chapter 218: The Past

"Princess Eleanora! Please wake up."

Eleanora opened her eyes slowly and turned her head to look at Lily, who was almost ready to jump. Sometimes, she found the girl's energy tiring to even look at. Today was one of those days. She'd barely had any sleep and woken up with no memory of nightmares only her wet face left behind by tears. So, it wasn't enough to know that she was crying but she had no idea why she had been crying.

Eleanora studied the maid's face and sighed inwardly. The last time she had bee this excited, she'd had to endure a date with that Prince Augustus. What was it going to be this time?

"Lily. You have to stop waking me up every time I try to sleep."

"But Princess, you won't believe who has come."

Eleanora rolled her eyes at the maid and shook her head, " If it is Prince Augustus, then tell him that I have the pox and so I am unavailable to meet. And since its just started so the disease will probably last all month."

"You have the pox, princess?" Lily squeaked out in a high voice. Eleanora watched in amusement as the maid tried to see her face and body for signs of the disease while at the same time deciding whether she should come close or not.

Eleanora shook her head at the maid's silliness and groaned, " Just tell him that."

"It's not Prince Augustus ma'am. Its someone called Mr Antonio. He is a friend from your high school I think. But I'll refuse the visitor for now and summon the doctor."

As Lily turned to hurry around, Eleanora quickly called out, "Lily wait! Who did you say it is?"

"Its someone called Mr. Antonio. He took the Queen's permission to visit you. He says that he was a good friend of yours."

Eleanora tested the name and tried to think of this person, hoping that the name would jog her memory and maybe she would be able to think of a face, but it was useless. "Lily, welcome him to the drawing room. I'll come down soon."

"But Princess, your pox... it is not safe..."

"Relax, Lily. I was only teasing you. Now go and invite him in quickly."

As Lily nodded and walked away with a confused look on her face, Eleanora took a calm breath. She really needed to calm the flutter of excitement and curiosity.

Quickly she raced down the stairs, stopping at the entrance of the drawing room. She crossed her fingers behind her back. Hopefully looking at someone from her past might trigger her memories to return.

The man looked very young. Something she should have expected considering that she was twenty and he was from the same school as her. He had what one would call a 'boy next door face'. He was not classically handsome but still he seemed to have a good demeanour. And unfortunately, as she stood there observing him, her mind continued to remain a blank canvas, not recognizing him.

Carefully, she called out, "Mr Antonio?"

The person looked up at her, carefully studying her while she did the same. However, the way he was looking at her suddenly made her feel a bit weird. "Hi. I am so sorry, but do I know you really? Are you a friend?"

Antonio smiled and casually walked to her, kissing her cheek, "No... Eleanora, it's been a long time."

Eleanora felt a shiver down her spine and had the urge to wipe her cheek where the man had kissed her face. Stepping back, she gestured to him to sit on the couch, and carefully walked around, making sure to keep the table between them.

Antonio noticed her care and smiled at her warmly, "Eleanora, I heard about the accident and your loss of memories. I am so sorry about that."

"Why are you sorry? Did you cause the accident?" Eleanora asked, her head cocked to the side.

The man stopped what he was about to say and looked at her with a scandalized frown on his face. Hmm. So, maybe she did not have this sarcastic side before she lost her memory. Otherwise, as her friend, he would have understood that.

"I didn't cause the accident. I meant that... if I'd known that the reason you never contacted me again was because you had no memory of the past, I would have called on you earlier. I'm just thankful that your grandmother reached out to me for help. So I even brought some pictures for you to see. Actually we were classmates throughout high school. And you were really bad at Math, so I used to teach you that..."

Antonio carefully took out the photo album that he had brought and placed it on his lap, expecting her to come and sit next to him but she simply extended her hand to him. Hesitantly, he handed her the album and she browsed through it.

Eleanora looked at the first picture of her young self and could not help but frown. Why did she look so malnourished and weak? Had she been sick at the time?

"This is from your sixteenth birthday. You'd caught a stomach bug...and threw up right after this picture was taken."

Nodding, she leafed through the picture and was slightly relieved as well as worried. She looked better in the other photos but not much. Even as Antonio related the anecdotes related to the pictures, she felt

no connection to the girl in them. For one, she looked too sad as she stared into the camera. Despite the smile on her face, her eyes looked melancholy. Did she have a depressing personality?

She did not want that. She'd like it better if she was someone who could speak her mind. It took an hour for her to finish the album but instead of satisfaction or even happiness, she felt as if she was looking at a stranger. There was nothing that...

Just then, the last picture caught her attention. She wasn't looking at the camera directly, but somehow, she looked happy. She'd even put on a little weight. This girl could be her...

She waited for Antonio to tell her when this picture was taken but the man suddenly seemed to have quieted down. "When was this picture taken?"

"This... Uh.. this was taken some time after we entered the university. I think you'd just aced the Math exam and vindicated yourself in front of the professor." As she heard the anecdote where the Mathematic professor had tried to shame her by claiming that she was weak in math, she could not help but grin to herself. Yes! That sounded just like her.

Closing the album, she sighed and looked at her friend," Thank you, Mr Antonio, for sharing this. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't call me Mr. Antonio, No... Eleanora. You used to call me Antonio or Toni in the past. Even if you do not remember me, I hope you know that you will always have me as a friend."

Eleanora smiled and thanked the man, warmly inviting him," Mr Antonio, this has been a pleasure. If you don't mind, may I invite you to a meal tomorrow? And I'd like to keep this for a while if it's okay."

Antonio stood up and nodded," Of course. I'll call on you tomorrow."

As the man extended his hand to shake hers, he glanced down at her gloved hand. Feeling conscious, she clenched her fingers and looked at the man carefully...

Over the course of the morning, she had felt this man's gaze on her repeatedly. Could it be that Antonio was the man... who she called Mr Husband? Was she only his?

She tried hard to think, before clenching her hands. Maybe she should ask him directly... But that would make things awkward for them if the man was really only her friend...

Finally, she bid Antonio goodbye and opened the album again, browsing through it absently. Most of the pictures seemed to be taken at the same place, some cafe. Why did they study at a cafe? Why not her home or the library? And even though she seemed to share closeness with Antonio, she did not seem to be looking at him like a lover would.

As she continued to turn the pages, someone's side profile caught her sight in the background. This person looked familiar. As she peered closer into the picture, she frowned. Who could this person be?

Suddenly, a name struck her. Dam*! This person looked almost like Gaia did from the side. They seemed to have the same nose and chin. How was that possible? What kind of a coincidence was this? She tried to search through the other pics but there was only one pic of this man... sigh! Her brain seemed to have become possessed by the gardener. Why else would she think a random person in another country resembles Gaia. But maybe she should show him the picture. That man could easily pass on as his cousin!

Chapter 219: How did you?

Eleanora did not question herself or even think to why she would approach the gardener for something this menial. It was a coincidence and did not need any approach.

However, her thoughts were focused on seeing the man and sharing this with him. It was only as she reached the empty gardens that she realized she was treating the gardener like her friend. Was she so starved for friendship?

Unsure, she turned to go back to her mansion. Gaia was not her friend or even an acquaintance. The only connection they had was that of an employer and employee.

Her shoulders slumping, she started to slowly trudge back to her house. Just then, she heard a bark and looked down to see the lively Kitten bounding around her feet.

Smiling at the dog's antics, who was going around her in circles, she quickly picked up the pup and cuddled him, " You are so cute like always! How did you find me so quickly?"

"Kitten. What brings you here?"

Eleanora looked up and met the man's eyes, suddenly feeling shy and confused. I was just strolling through the gardens. You've made them so pretty."

"Thank you for your generous compliment. I've made some new additions to this place. Would you like to see them?"

Eleanora nodded eagerly. This man was a genius at his work! She did not even know why he stayed here instead of starting his own landscaping business. He could turn a fortune.

"You should do your business, you know. I think you would be really successful. Why do you slave away here?" Eleanora said casually. Every time she visited this place, there was something new and interesting to see.

Gaia smiled in her direction and said, " I am already a successful CEO, a billionaire truth be told, Princess. But I am slaving away here for my wife."

While she did not take the first part of what he said seriously, she was extremely irritated at the second part. However, she could not help but ask, " I've heard you mention your wife so many times, but where is she? Does she live here on the estate with you?

"Hmm. She lives on this estate, but she is not home currently..."

"Oh... Where is..." Before Eleanora could question him about his wife's whereabouts, he asked her, " What do you have in your hand? Is this a picture?"

Before Eleanora could hide or refute, the man took the picture from her hand. She did not know why she felt guilty as he looked down at the picture, but she suddenly had the urge to shuffle her feet and look down away.

He too seemed to have become frozen as he saw the picture and wondered if he too had spotted the man in the background who looked so much like him....

Trying to distract herself, she said, "You see it too, don't you? The resemblance?"

Suddenly, Eleanora could feel a chill in the atmosphere. She looked up at the sun shining brightly above her head and wondered why she felt cold. Was she having some kind of a weird heat stroke?

"I see it. Where did you get this picture?", he asked after a long silence.

"I...uhh..." Feeling reluctant to share the details now, Eleanora tried to find a way to escape, "I need to go somewhere. I totally forgot about it! I'll see whatever changes you've made later. See you soon. Bye."

Snatching the picture out of his hand, Eleanora raced out of the garden trail, feeling hot now. Was she really coming down with something? Feeling cold one minute and hot the next. Hopefully, she had not jinxed herself into getting the pox.

Demetri watched Nora race out from there and shook his head. The girl's instincts were still intact. But someone else seemed to have forgotten their lesson.

The last time, he had let Antonio walk away, believing the boy to be foolish and that he had already received his due punishment after what happened with Sara. But the man seemed to have forgotten his warning.

Clicking his fingers, he called the little pup to his side, "Come kitten. Let's go. Its time to catch some mouse."

Did they think that they could use her vulnerability against her? It was a good thing that Nora had spotted Lucien in the picture and come to him to show him the resemblance or else he would have been left in the dark...

Just because he was quiet, all of them seemed to think that he was no threat. Very good. Let them underestimate him.

Taking out his phone, he first made a call, "I do not like being double crossed."

The man on the other end seemed to pause at this and asked him cautiously, "What are you talking about?"

"Did you think I would not discover Antonio? What kind of a sick game is this? the doctors have already warned you that she has suffered a shock and her memory will only return once she is ready. Even I have not dared to pressure her. And yet, you think to use a man who was as good as her enemy and bring him close to her?"

"I was doubtful of this at first as well. But Mr. Frost, if we were to believe you, you are the most important man in her life. And yet, her memory was not affected when she met you. So meeting someone unimportant is not going to be too hazardous and won't make our enemies suspicious."

"Keep the platitudes to yourself. You have twenty-four hours if I see that man anywhere around my Nora, you won't be able to find him even if you turned the entire of Estania upside down."

"Mr Frost!"

"I believe I've already warned you. If you still don't believe me, you can ask Prince Augustus what happens to those who dare to hurt my wife. I believe he was rescued from inside a well yesterday. Poor man fell there and had to stay there for days on end before anyone was able to find him... would be a shame if someone else ended up being stranded there."

Chapter 220: An Uncle

"Princess Eleanora is arriving."

As the herald made this announcement, a room full of old men leaned forward, looking to see the girl they had been waiting for.

Eleanora walked into the room hesitantly and glanced at the new faces around her. It seemed that the time she had been given as a reprieve after her accident was now at an end. She looked at the Queen sitting at the table and smiled, only to receive a cold look.

It was only her uncle who stood up and smiled, "Eleanora, please come on in. I understand watching us all staring at you is a little disconcerting but don't worry."

She smiled at the man gratefully. Alexander Sterling was truly a wonderful man and she could understand why he was considered a diplomat. He was really good at making people comfortable. She'd met him soon after her accident and if not for him, she would have been at a loss in adjusting to the Sterling family.

It probably helped that little Dora looked a lot like her father...She smiled nervously at the man as he guided her to an empty seat, his reassuring smile a stark contrast to the stern expression of the so-called ministers.

An elderly man with a long white beard cleared his throat and addressed Eleanora, "Princess, we have gathered here today to discuss a matter of great importance. We understand that your health has taken a hit but we cannot delay the matter too long. It has been almost two years since the King passed away and no one has yet ascended to his rightful place. This is giving others a chance to spread rumours and unrest."

Another man with a bald head and pot belly chimed in, "We believe, Princess, that the rightful heir to the throne should be determined through a fair and just process," With his eyes fixed on her, he continued, "There are those among us who believe that you should contest for the throne."

Eleanora's brows furrowed in confusion. "Contest? But I thought my cousin—"

The older interrupted, "Your cousin's claim is not without dispute. Some members of the council believe that a fair competition would be the best way to ensure a just ruler ascends the throne."

Confused, Eleanora turned to her uncle. As far as she was aware, Evangeline was the rightful heir... Her uncle leaned close to her and, " You are my older brother's daughter. He was the crown prince and before me in line to the throne. In that sense, you gain seniority over Evangeline even though she is older. So, you are the first in line."

"But I don't even remember who I am forget about taking on the responsibility of an entire country. And Dora has told me a lot about Evangeline's achievements..."

Alexander Sterling looked at his niece carefully, trying to judge if she was only pretending to be against the idea or if she was serious and really disinterested in the throne. However, he only saw the honesty in her eyes.

Another lady minister with a slightly frowning face added, "We understand that this is a lot to take in. However, your presence here is crucial in deciding the fate of the Estania."

"This is preposterous! Evangeline has already done so much for the country and now you want to hand this country's future to someone who has grown outside the country?" Queen Rosalind.

Alexander cleared his throat, trying to gesture to his mother to calm down, but before the queen could say more, Eleanora nodded, "I think Queen Rosalind is correct. My cousin really has worked hard and earned the love and trust of the people of Estania. If I try to take her place, it would not be fair to her..."

"Princess Evangeline has done well over the years but she was given the opportunity to and training to do so. On the other hand, we would also like to offer you the same opportunities. It is only fair to Estania that both the princesses be given equal opportunities."

Eleanora opened her mouth, ready to protest when Alexander Sterling caught her hand under the table to stop her. She looked at her uncle in confusion but did not speak a word. However, she did not need to.

The ministers were already shouting at each other, "Princess Evangeline is also being wronged in this."

"This is preposterous. No one is saying that she shouldn't. We are just saying that Princess Eleanora also deserves a chance."

"But there is no need. Evangeline is already perfect. Why do you want to challenge that?"

As Eleanora looked at the room which had erupted into a heated discussion, she could not help but look around in confusion. These people invited her here to join in the discussion but were not shouting at each other like monkeys. Did they even look like respectable ministers? She almost expected them to start scratching at each other at any moment.

While everyone was busy shouting, Alexander Sterling whispered to her, "Eleanora, for now, tell them you are open to their suggestions but since you have been sick, you need time to familiarize with the kingdom before you can even consider becoming their leader. Convince them to give you some time..."

"But..." Eleanora protested but before she could say more, her uncle had already leaned away from her and banged a gavel on the table calling for silence.

With a frown, Eleanora stood up and spoke quietly, "I understand all that you have said and thank you all for your trust in me and your consideration. May I suggest a compromise? Like you all know, Evangeline has been trained for this and understands the responsibilities and duties that come with the throne. But I am unaware of them. So before I even consider contesting for the throne, I ask you that you give me some more time to understand this?"

The queen snorted and snidely spoke, "You really are like your mother. She too could not resist and offer for power or money."

Eleanora frowned while her uncle sent a hard glance his mother's way.

"Princess Eleanora, we understand this, but we cannot leave the throne empty endlessly..."

Eleanora nodded and proposed, "But my uncle has been acting as the Prime Minister for some time and I don't think the country has suffered that much. He is much more experienced than me or my cousin. So, he can just act as the Regent for the time being..."

As Eleanora sat down, Alexander Sterling looked at his niece with surprise and a hint of respect. He had not expected her to be so clear-headed about this...However, even as he understood this, he knew that the few people who were trying to gain their own motives, would not be happy about this..."