

Stay

## Stay

Grace

For a week, Tristin didn't come back. I didn't contact him either.

It felt like...he was too afraid to meet me instead of the other way around.

And I?

I didn't know what to think or feel. Like an idiot, I looked forward to his return every day but he didn't come and I had to stay inside the penthouse, staring at the city view, wondering what else I should do in life.

Ethan didn't cheat on me. But like I told him, it was not only about sleeping with Lily.

He was always choosing her, putting her first, and thinking about her instead of me. Then why does it matter if he slept with her or not?

Now, I was not even mad.

I just felt disappointed in Tristin.

I would have dwelled on my disappointment even more if I hadn't received a surprising call this morning. My heart almost pumped out of my chest when I heard what she had to say to me.

I would have expected anything...

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But I would have never expected Alma to actually ask me to come over, to the Roberto Villa.

I thought about refusing but she gave me no chance, or maybe, I didn't really want to refuse.

A little part of me—the stupid part of me...

Wanted to see Tristin.

That's why I am seated on the bench in the greenhouse inside Tristin's house now. Alma is tending to her flowers, and allowing me to admire her efforts from afar.

I do have my doubts. Why would Alma call me here and not talk to me for so long?

Will she ask me to leave Tristin again?

With that thought, I look down at my hands and sigh. It's foolish that even after finding out all that...I never once thought about leaving him.

"What happened between you two?" Alma sits down beside me, making me gasp and turn to her.

This is the first thing she has to say to me after making me sit here for an hour?

Alma looks down at the basket in her hand. There are fragrant, small white flowers in it.

I don't know the name of those flowers—I have only ever known red

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roses and now, there are so many colors, so many fragrances and shapes of flowers that I feel overwhelmed.

Unconsciously, I reach out to take one flower but pause, my gaze lifting to Alma's face.

"Do you want it?" She asks, grabbing one for me.

"I do." I nod, taking the flower she offers me.

Oddly, it feels calm, to sit here, inhale the fragrance of the flower in my hand, and sense her presence beside me. She is not giving off any hostile vibes today.

"You said you will not hurt him." Alma starts, in a soft voice.

"I promised." I nod slowly, my gaze drifting to the other flowers.

"Then why does my son look so down these days?" She hums.

My heart clenches as I imagine him looking like that.

"Maybe he is worried about you and Ania." I mumble.

Alma doesn't say anything. My heart starts beating faster in my chest.

"You know...out of all my children...Tristin always had the hardest life." Alma whispers, her gaze following my line of sight.

I glance at her, noticing the sad look in her eyes. My curiosity peaks but I don't interfere and let her relive the past alone.

"His father...believed he was a backup. If Seb didn't do well, Tristin could take his place but Seb did so well in his life...that my husband

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never needed Tristin. " Alma reveals, her voice growing heavier.

I caress the flower in my hand and lower my gaze to it.

" Because Seb excelled at everything, Edward thought Tristin would get jealous and try to snatch everything from his brother. For half his life, Edward made sure Tristin never attended any event, and never... knew what it was like to be a part of the Roberto family. Seb was spared of my husband's cruelty because he was the Heir and Ania was forgotten because she was a girl but my...son...Tristin was always the one who had to endure his father's rage because...he was just a spare as Edward liked to call him. " Alma places the basket on the flower and runs her hands down her dress.

" When Edward fell sick, Seb had to immediately take over the whole empire. He was pushed around, others tried to take advantage of him, and...it was hard. To make it easy for my eldest son, even I forgot that my other son existed. " Her hands pause at her knees as she sighs and lowers her head.

A moment of silence passes between us—It's heavy but not as uncomfortable as I thought.

" Eventually, when they couldn't take down Sebastian, they turned to Tristin. Only the Roberto brothers could be each other's downfall. That's why they sent that video to Tristin and told him that Seb always knew. They wanted to isolate Tristin from the rest of the family so...they could lure him into their trap but even when my son was angry at us...he always stood by his family. Even when he found out that his mother was a murderer, he still stuck by us and— "

" What? " I breathe, interrupting Alma.

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My heart misses a beat and I clench my hands into fists. My gaze rests on the side of her face. Her eyes widen, then droop as she exhales a heavy breath.

"Why do you think Stuart, Ania's father...made that video and sent it to his cousin?" Alma whispers, her voice lowering until I can barely hear it.

My mind fills with so many thoughts at once that I find it hard to breathe, to focus on one.

"He wanted to use Ania and me to blackmail Edward. After years of pretending to be a good brother, Stuart finally wanted power for himself and it didn't matter if it resulted in our death or something worse." She discloses, and leans back, her gaze lifting towards the glass ceiling of the greenhouse.

"So you—"

"Stuart had to go." Alma's eyes remain emotionless and I find myself gawking at her.

This is so...messed up.

"This was the real secret, the one that both my sons hid with all their might—The truth that their mother was a murderer." She mumbles, her eyes narrowing on the ceiling.

A lump forms in my throat. A wave of unease runs down my spine, making me shift uncomfortably.

"Sebastian told Lily the truth. She got her hands on the video and

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threatened him but she couldn't prove that I did anything. So, she kept threatening him. Sebastian let her get our secret slush funds, and the company took a hit because of that. Sebastian was weak for her and he realized it too late. He could have taken care of her easily... but he loved her too much to do that so in the end... " Alma straightens and glances at the floor, her hands clenched in her lap.

I swallow the lump in my throat and look away from her. My hands are turning cold.

" Lily...killed— "

" He couldn't hurt her and get anything back. He couldn't step down and let Tristin take over when he was still alive. The executives would have kept...scheming against Tristin...using Sebastian. So he made his decision. He thought of himself as a failure as the head of the family and decided that he needed to step down... " Alma trails off.

With a heavy heart, I lift my eyes to her face. Tears roll down her cheeks, regret written all over her features.

" How did he...die? " My heartbeat slows down.

" He went to the rooftop of our secluded warehouse and called Tristin over. " Alma's voice breaks. She wipes the tears with the back of her hands and sucks in a moist breath.

Blood rushes towards my head. I rise to my feet, wanting to leave before she says anything more.

Tristin's face flashes before my eyes—the face he made when he found me walking along over the railing. It was like...his heart was

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about to stop beating.

"Tristin was still angry and so he turned his back on Seb. That's when...he..." Alma can't talk more.

She hides her face behind her palms and leans down. I stand there, my eyes burning with the intensity of different emotions—anger, hurt, disbelief.

He...was genuinely panicking that night—the night when I made him relive his worst memory.

I kept wondering what actually changed Tristin's behavior towards me. Changes don't happen overnight. Changes don't happen with a few words.

Changes happen...

When someone fears something too much, when that fear takes over their senses, and they realize...they must do everything to get rid of the fear.

"Why..." I stammer, and take a step back. "why tell m—me all this?"

Alma snuffles and wipes her cheeks again. Our eyes meet, and she lowers her gaze instantly.

"I acknowledge...he was starting to get better." She lets out. "but for the past week, he's been like the old him. Silent, restless, and...just lost. He thinks you will leave him now."

"What—"

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" Luca told me what happened. " Alma says before I can finish.

My shoulders stiffen. I bite my lower lip and lower my gaze.

" Don't leave him. I know you have been hurt before, and you don't owe Tristin anything and— "

" There is a lot...I owe him. " I mumble.

" Even if you do...stay. For him. " Alma stands and grabs my hands, giving them a light squeeze. " if you just stay...maybe for a trial period, I will try my best to treat you like you deserve to be treated. I will not be a hurdle in your way or try to hurt you. "

Her glassy eyes are filled with hope and fixed on me. I want to tell her that I never planned on leaving or I would have left the day Tristin confessed that he deceived me.

But I find myself sighing. " what made you change your mind about me? "

" I won't lie. I can't help but still...see you as Lily's sister but...I want to start seeing you as my son's girlfriend now. It might take some time and it won't be easy but I want to do this for my son's happiness. I tried my best all my life, Grace and I still...somehow failed to protect my children so now, I want them to have what makes them happy. "

She says, her eyes filled with sincerity.

" Alma— "

" Just for a few days. Give us a few days if you like my son even a little bit. You won't regret it. " She interrupts in a hurry, panic swirling

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in her eyes.

My shoulders slump. I don't understand what has gone wrong with my life.

People around me have done terrible things—things no one should ever find out about but...

I can't bring myself to hate them.

It's sick. But maybe, I am just as twisted as them.

And so...what can I say to them?

"I—"

"Mom." Before I can tell Alma that I am staying, another voice joins us from behind.