

Chapter 173 Echoes of a Forgotten Past

Isabel gritted her teeth subtly. She'd guessed he would throw her question back at her, so she had a plan ready.

"I'm not that hung up on the emerald guardian angel pendant," she said casually. "I'm just curious, who was the girl who gave it to you? It's rare to see you care so much about something. Besides, Rachel lost her cool over it just now, making me wonder if there's some hidden story behind this."

Xander could tell she was fishing for information, but he let it slide.

"Oh? And why do you think a girl gave it to me?"

"Because, traditionally, guys wear emerald guardian saint pendants, and girls wear emerald guardian angel pendants. Plus, if a boy gave it to you, then, well, that'd be interesting," Isabel teased, trying to distract him.

Xander chuckled and shook his head. Her playful side always made him feel helplessly captivated.

"You're right; it was from a girl," he admitted, looking her in the eyes. "Does that make you jealous?"

Isabel raised an eyebrow. Jealous? That hadn't even crossed her mind.

She'd seen a girl in her dreams who gave Xander an emerald pendant. She couldn't make out her face, but the girl felt familiar and warm, almost like she was a part of herself.

"So, who is she to you?" Isabel wasn't about to follow his lead and get sidetracked.

Hearing her question, Xander's face softened with a hint of indulgent amusement. His little troublemaker sure was a handful.

He held his hand out to her, and after a moment's pause, Isabel understood and placed the emerald guardian angel pendant into his large palm.

Xander looked down at it, his normally stoic face showing a rare trace of sentiment.

"Her name was Leslie. She was the daughter of my parents' close friends. Our families were tight-knit, always visiting each other. At one point, our parents joked about having us marry someday. She gave me this emerald guardian angel pendant when we were kids, saying she'd marry me when we grew up."

When Xander finished speaking, he noticed Isabel had gone entirely silent behind him.

Curious, he turned to look.

Isabel was lost in thought. Her memories, once hazy, were now coming back into sharp focus because of what he said.

Images flashed through her mind like a slideshow.

Leslie.

"Leslie." A gentle voice called out to her.

"Leslie!"

"Come to Mommy, Leslie."

"Leslie, wouldn't it be nice if Mrs. Bennett became your mother-in-law someday?" The speaker's face was slowly becoming more apparent.

Almost there.

It was her!

It was Ivana when she was young.

"Isabel? Isabel?" Xander's voice, tinged with worry, called out to her twice.

Isabel kept straining to remember. Just when she was on the verge of recalling everything, flames erupted in her mind, engulfing every image until they were all burned away.

"Ugh." Isabel raised a hand to her temple, a wave of searing pain hitting her.

Her face turned pale from the ache, and her lips pressed so tightly that they turned blue, even drawing blood.

Suddenly, she felt her body lift off the ground, snapping her back to reality. Xander was carrying her toward the villa.

"Get the doctor! Call the doctor!" He shouted urgently.

As her senses returned, she looked up to see his worried, tense face, and her heart felt a sudden warmth.

Of course, there was a better time to be moved.

"Put me down; I'm fine," she said quickly.

Xander stopped and examined her closely. "You were acting really strange just now."

"I swear, I'm fine. Maybe I didn't sleep well last night, so I got a bit of a headache."

Isabel tried to sound casual, lying smoothly without a hint of hesitation.

As for what just happened, those memories were both vivid and elusive. She couldn't make heads or tails of it herself.

But one thing she was sure of: her headache was triggered by hearing the name Leslie.

She was almost sure there was a strong connection between them. She'd need to ask Beowulf to dig into the Nelsons later. Any family with ties to the Bennetts would be no ordinary one. Even if the Nelsons had vanished without a trace, she didn't believe a family that big could disappear without leaving some clue.

"You're really okay?" His deep, rich voice sounded in her ear.

That low, masculine tone was already intoxicating. Still, he stared down at her with that ridiculously handsome face, looking worried. Seriously, how could anyone resist?

Thump, thump, thump. Her heart started pounding like a drum.

"I'm really fine. I know medicine; I wouldn't mess around with my own health. I'm ... yawn."

Isabel faked a yawn. "See? I'm just tired."

Xander stared at her for a good ten seconds before finally relaxing.

"I'll take you upstairs so you can nap. I'll call you when the food's ready."

With that, he continued carrying her toward the villa.

Isabel blinked, a little stunned. "Wait, put me down. I can walk."

"We're almost there." He had no intention of letting her go.

Isabel felt awkward being carried like this. Every time he held her like a princess, it made her feel delicate and spoiled, like he cherished her above all.

What if she got used to this treatment and couldn't return to self-reliance?

The truth was, she didn't like depending on others. Her most incredible sense of security came from herself. She feared that if she became too comfortably relying on Xander, it would hurt all the more if he ever betrayed her.

This was why she struggled to open her heart. Growing up alone, she'd learned to be self-sufficient.

Even those two brothers she once trusted betrayed her.

Friends were one thing. A partner was even riskier. So, she had to be extra cautious about who she gave her heart to.

Sitting in the living room on his phone, Samuel looked up when he heard the commotion by the door.

"What happened? Isabel, are you okay?"

Before she could respond, Xander answered for her. "She's just tired. I'm taking her to her room to rest."

Hearing that, Samuel's mouth formed an "O."

Tired?

He thought she might have some severe illness.

But she was just tired.

And she was getting carried back to her room because of it?

Samuel took a deep breath. Was Xander spoiling Isabel too much?

Then again, it wasn't his business how Xander treated Isabel. Let him pamper her however he wanted.

"Ugh," Samuel muttered, watching them disappear upstairs. "When will I find someone myself?"

Once he had someone, he'd never have to be the third wheel around his brother and Isabel again. In fact, he'd make sure to flaunt his own relationship just as much.

In her room, Isabel lay in bed, pretending to be asleep. She wondered why he still hadn't left.

Sure, she thought her fake-sleeping act was pretty convincing, but she might slip up if he stayed too long.

And something told her he was watching her closely.

What was he staring at? It's not like she was special—just a pair of eyes and a mouth. Surely he'd get tired of looking?

Just as she was thinking this, she heard the faintest shuffling sound.

Was he finally leaving?

But before she could fully celebrate, she felt warm breath against her face, moving closer and closer.

Her heartbeat started racing uncontrollably.

What was he up to?