# Billionaire’s Redemption

*Business Battles to Bedroom Whispers*

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# Chapter 1

The Encounter

Eliza

The hushed hum of anticipation hangs in the air as I step into the glittering ballroom, my heels clicking on the marble floor like the beats of an impending storm. Tonight, I was here on a mission. As a prevailing businesswoman, I had gotten used to the glitz and glamor of my world. People often thought the corporate world was just about business meetings and dealings, but what they didn’t know was that it wasn’t just the professional world that one had to indulge in. No, the corporate world was all about appearances and contacts.

Balls, charity events, and parties are platforms for people to make contacts and connections that sometimes last a decade. The business world is built upon socializing and keeping in touch with the world. You need to always know what’s going on, just in case you find anything, any weakness, any favor, or any benefit that you could work to your advantage.

The room, adorned with crystal chandeliers and filled with the city’s elite, buzzes with excitement as I make my way to the bar, my midnight blue evening gown glittering in the soft glow of the chandeliers lining the ceilings. I notice the few appreciative glances of men thrown my way, but I ignore them. I never mix business with pleasure, a seemingly disastrous mix that I intend to avoid no matter what.

As I reach the bar, I take a seat next to a group of females who are huddled together, discussing something that seems extremely important and interesting.

“A gin and tonic, please,” I tell the bartender as he turns to me, and he nods before he turns away.

I settle in my seat and run my eyes over the place, scanning through the sea of faces to see just how many I can recognize. I catch sight of a few friends and a few people I intend to socialize with today when the bartender interrupts me as he slides the glass toward me.

“Here you go, Ma’am,” he said, and I nod at him in thanks when the excited squealing from the group of ladies beside me snags my attention.

“Oh my god! You really went to his house?” One of them exclaims as the rest of them gush.

“Well, he said it wasn’t his house, but I think it was. I mean, I understand why he wouldn’t want to broadcast his information. You know how private he can be,” the female who seems to be the center of attention explains. I try my best not to roll my eyes at her words, unable to believe that someone could be this stupid.

“But are you going to see him again?” another one asks, completely invested in the tale.

“Of course,” the girl replies confidently, and the others around her squeal.

“But James doesn’t seem like the kind of person who sticks around with one girl. In fact, I haven’t seen him with any girl in a long time, not even you, Ashley,” one of the girls says, smirking at the girl.

“You know how private James is. He isn’t some random guy, Mary. He is a billionaire. Of course, he is not going to let you into his personal affairs. But I know soon enough, everyone will know that he has been taking an interest in me,” she throws back defensively.

The name instantly registers as I realize who they are talking about. James Montague, the charismatic CEO whose name sparked both admiration and scepticism in the corporate world. It wasn’t new to hear his name in a setting like this. The guy was as famous as any celebrity. Every girl wanted him, and every guy wanted to be him.

Not only was James Montague the CEO of the most successful companies of all time, but he also managed to break the most records in his prime. He had become the youngest billionaire of all time without taking anyone’s help.

I had to admit that I understood his appeal to the women standing beside me. He was the complete package. From the few pictures I have seen of him, I was surprised to see just how good-looking he was despite his age. He had the looks, the money, and everything else a girl wants.

I wonder if the business mogul will be making an appearance tonight. I am sure he is invited, but considering how famous and successful he is, I doubt he attends many parties. I have never met him, but I have heard so much about him that now I want to meet him once just to understand what the hype is about.

As I sip on my drink, tuning the gossip of the girls beside me, my eyes continue to scan the crowd, seeking the familiar face of my friend, Lana, who still hasn’t made it to the event. Lana and I met on my first day of work and instantly hit it off. She is my closest friend and the only person who keeps me sane on days when work drives me crazy.

A few minutes pass until I notice someone waving at me. I focus my attention and realize it’s my boss. Quickly finishing my drink, I get up and make my way over to him, curious to know why he is calling me.

As I navigate through the sea of tailored suits and elegant gowns, I overhear snippets of conversation that fuel my intrigue. “James Montague has a way of getting what he wants,” one woman whispers to her companion. My curiosity heightens, even as my steps quicken.

As I finally come closer to where he is standing, I realize he is standing with a group of people who look like foreigners. When my eyes connect with my boss, Mr. Derek, I find the familiar glint of excitement in them.

Still a little confused, I approach him, smiling politely at him and the group of men he is standing with.

“Oh, Eliza, there you are,” Mr. Derek exclaims as I come within earshot.

“I was just enjoying the amazing party; after all, you have exquisite taste when it comes to events like these,” I tell him, and he laughs at that.

“You really know how to flatter a man. Come here. Let me introduce you to a few friends of mine,” he tells me, and I turn my attention back to the foreigners who eye me with intrigue.

“Eliza, meet Mr. Wei Chen Ming,” he gestures toward a Chinese man who gives me a small smile, which I return. “Mr. Nikolai Sokolov,” he moves to the next person, who has a stoic expression on his face that doesn’t change when I give him a small smile, too. He finally turns to the last person, “And this is Alexandre Beaumont.” he says, and I instantly recognize the name, and everything syncs in quickly.

I look at Mr. Derek subtly once for confirmation, and his pleased smile confirms my suspicion. For the past two weeks, Mr. Derek and my team have been working together to score a deal with an international company from France. Alexandre Beaumont is the most well-known name in France, known for his luxury products and offering only the best to his customers. The entire world knows how picky and selective he is about the people he works with, demanding nothing but the best from people.

But, when Mr. Derek found out that he was working on a worldwide project that required him to find one company from each country to work on his new product, he jumped at the chance. We are all determined to score this deal, even though we know how tough the competition will be.

“It’s really nice to meet all of you. I have spent years hearing about the success of your company,” I tell them, and the Chinese partner, Mr. Wei Chen Ming, smiles appreciatively while the others just nod, but it is Alexandre who speaks up.

“When you want to be on the top, you have to be the one making stories before someone else takes over and makes them for you,” he tells me, a glint of challenge in his tone, but I don’t back down.

“You are right. I expect you would know all about that, Mr. Alexandre. After all, you have been the one making the stories for a long while now.” I tell him confidently, and he raises his eyebrow in surprise at my response.

“I like her,” Nikolai speaks for the first time.

Mr. Derek laughs as he pats my shoulder. “Eliza is one of our best. She has been working with me for years and has never disappointed me. If I want something done, I always leave it up to her. She doesn’t give up until she has what she wants. She is a force to be reckoned with, and I knew that the first time she came to me for an interview.” Mr. Derek praises me, and I can’t help but feel proud.

I can tell that they are impressed, and I feel a slight weight lift from my shoulders. Things are good for now. The odds of us getting the deal aren’t bad. I linger around chatting with them for a few more minutes when I finally see Lana waving at me. I excuse myself and rush through the crowd to reach her when I bump into someone, making me stumble back and their glass slip.

“Oh, I am so sor-” I start to apologize as I look up only to find the last person I expected standing there.

Standing in front of me is none other than James Montague, his nostril flared, and his jaw clenched. The man whose reputation precedes him. Whispers about James—his sharp mind, his ruthless tactics, and his arrogance that rivaled his success—echo whenever I come across people. The murmurs paint a picture of a man with charm as dangerous as a double-edged sword.

The air crackles with tension as we both stand there, with fury evident on his face. “I will never understand how people as incompetent and clumsy as you find a way inside places like this where you clearly don’t belong here,” he finally grits out, and my mouth opens in disbelief. What the hell?

“Excuse me?” I say, completely taken aback by the hostility in his tone. Who the hell does he think he is?

“Excused. Now get out of my way before I call the security and get you kicked out,” he tells me, and my blood reaches a boiling point, having heard enough.

“Now you listen here. I don’t care who you are or what you are capable of, but you will do well to remember that you are no one to me, so the next time you talk to me like that, you will quickly realize that you aren’t as untouchable as you think.” I snap, and without waiting for a response, I walk away, slamming my shoulder with his.

I near the VIP section, reserved for those whose influence surpassed mere success. Lana waits for me there, her eyes wide and her mouth open as she gapes. I can tell that almost half the room’s attention is on me, but at the moment, I really can’t be bothered. My blood is still simmering with rage at the tone of that man, and I am tempted to turn around and strangle him for having the audacity to talk to me that way.

“Oh my god, Liz, what the hell was that” Lana exclaims as soon as I make it next to her.

“That was me ripping him a new one. What is it with men in the corporate world? Why do they think they are gods? I swear I will commit murder one of these days,” I mutter, grabbing a glass of champagne from one of the waiters.

“Okay, calm down. Let’s just enjoy the party for a few more minutes and get out of here,” Lana tells me, and I nod.

I stand in the corner for the rest of the party, not in the mood to socialize anymore. I just wanted to go home and forget the entire ordeal and never see his face again, but what I didn’t know was that a storm had begun, and neither of us could foresee the turbulent journey that awaits.

# Chapter 2

Unlikely Partners

James

My hands curl into fists even as my nostrils flare. I try to calm myself, but anger brews inside me. Never in my life has anyone talked to me like that girl did. I have no idea who she is, but I have every intention of finding out, and then I will make her realize just who I am. I can’t believe she actually had the guts to talk to me the way she did. Although, a small part of me can’t help but be impressed even as I try to control the irritation inside me.

I have spent years building a reputation, and no one would ever dare talk to me the way she just did. I am used to people bowing and scraping around me, but the fact that not only did she shout at me in a room full of people but also threatened me is something I can’t get over. I have never met anyone like her. The way her hazel eyes lit up with fury, and her expression turned from confused to surprised to murderous has become etched in my memory.

Whoever this girl is, I am going to find her and make her realize that sometimes being too brave can also get you in trouble. The entire room whispers and gossips around me, looking at me like I am a bomb that’s about to explode, but I don’t let it happen. My expression is blank as I keep myself composed, completely indifferent to what just happened. This is one of the things I hate about my life. With success comes influence and power but also too much attention. I never was someone who preferred the limelight. I prefer to keep to myself and keep my life as private as I can.

But that proves challenging when I have paparazzi following me everywhere I go. The minute someone recognizes me, I know I have to get out of the place. It’s a cost I have to pay to be where I am today. It’s not that I am ungrateful. God knows how hard I have worked to reach the point where I am today. Still, I simply don’t like people breathing down my neck all the time, waiting to find just about anything about my personal life and exposing it to people who have absolutely no reason to know what I do outside of the professional world.

But after years of being in this line of work, I have come to make peace with it and handle it with grace. Only years of practice and endurance help me keep a blank expression on my face right now. I sip on my fresh drink as I stand by the bar, not wanting to talk to anyone just yet, when I catch sight of a group of men who I instantly recognize. I see Alexandre Beaumont first and realize he is here with his Chinese and Russian partners.

I know exactly why he is here and why everyone is swarming the group of men like bees. It is common knowledge at this point that the most prominent luxury brand owner in France is looking for a team of international companies to work on his latest product, which is still a secret. Everyone in this room is trying to woo them, but I can tell by their blank impression that they haven’t found much yet. I notice Derek Cullian, the CEO of one of the most prominent manufacturing companies in the country, talking to the Russian partner.

I have to admit that he has them engaged, and they seemed pleased to be in his company. But Alexandre Beaumont is a picky man, and there is only one company he will choose here, and I will make sure it’s mine. I have built my reputation on the basis of never losing a deal, and I don’t intend to lose this one, either. I am going to get this deal, and no one will stand in my way.

My eyes catch Alexandre’s, and I nod at him. He and I know each other from having met at different events I attended in France. He nods back at me before I look away. I won’t approach him. I refuse to be just another kiss-ass, hounding him to get in his good graces with the hope that I get the deal. No, I work differently. My proposal has already been sent, and that is all that is going to go from my side.

What most people fail to learn, even after years in the corporate world, is that businessmen don’t like to be chased. They don’t want to hear praises and flattery from people, but rather what they can do for us. I don’t care how much someone admires me. If they have nothing to offer me, they are useless. So, I won’t stand there and tell him just how much I admire him, but rather, I am going to make a statement by only showing him what I can offer to him and his company.

I finish my drink, finally pull myself together, and step back into the ring of socializing. I talk to people about business and a million other things that distract me from today’s events. That is all I need right now: to forget and get this day over with.

“James,” a voice calls out to me, and I turn to find Alexandre standing behind me. A feeling of triumph fills me as I look at him. I already knew my plan would be successful, but to see it play out in front of the rest of the world is just another achievement. While the rest of the room was busy trying to claw their way up to them, to approach them, the man had approached me himself.

“Alexandre,” I respond, turning to him as he holds his hand out to me to shake, and I take it.

“It’s good to see you. I haven’t seen you around in a while,” he tells me, pulling his hand back.

“I haven’t had a chance to visit France in a while. How are things going? Still giving your competitors a tough time?” I ask, and he smirks.

“If I don’t, who will? And you say that as if you are any better. I saw the whole display of authority over there not long ago,” he mocks playfully, and my lips thin at the mention of the current events.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” I tell him nonchalantly, my expression blank.

“Uh-huh. I saw your proposal” he tells me, instantly catching my interest again, but I don’t make it too apparent. I nod at him casually as he informs me.

“I hope you enjoyed going through it,” I tell him calmly.

“I did, but there were a few others that I enjoyed and was quite impressed with as well. You never told me America has so much potential,” he tells me, and for a moment, I think he is bluffing, but with the way his eyes glint with fascination, I realize he might not be joking.

“Every place has potential. I just hope you pick only the best for yourself.” I tell him, and he nods, a knowing glint in his eyes mixed with a look of amusement, but I can’t be too sure.

“You know me, James. I only accept the very best. Even if sometimes you have to take a different route to get something you want,” he says cryptically, and I raise a single eyebrow in confusion, but he just shakes his head at me, smirking as if he is enjoying an inside joke.

“I’ll see you soon,” he tells me before turning and walking away.

I stare after him as he makes his way back to his partners, trying to figure out what he means, but I eventually give up. I turn back to the crowd and realize I no longer have the strength or energy for this party, so I make my way outside, calling my driver to bring the car around.

The drive home is silent as I think about tonight’s event, Alexandre’s cryptic words, his hint of finding other companies, and most importantly, the girl that I can’t seem to get rid of from my mind. Her face, flushed with anger, keeps reappearing in my head, and no matter what I do, I can’t seem to get it out.

I finally give up when I reach home and decide to go to sleep. But even as I lay in my bed, her face is the last thing in my head before I drift to sleep.

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The sound of the alarm fills the room, and I open my eyes as I lean over to shut the alarm off. I check the time to realize it’s almost nine and get out of bed. I walk over to the washroom when my phone rings. I pause, confused as to who would be calling me on my personal number. My assistant knows that I don’t take calls before 10 a.m. I consider ignoring it, but my curiosity gets the better of me as I walk back over to my nightstand, pick up the phone, and press it against my ear as I answer the call.

“Hello?” I say, and a female responds, her tone professional.

“Good morning is this Mr. James Montague speaking?” she asks.

“Yes? Who is this?” I ask, confused.

“This is Mr. Alexandre’s assistant. He provided me with your number and asked me to set up a meeting with you. Mr. Alexandre and his two partners are available to meet today for lunch at 1 p.m...” she tells me, and it instantly dawns on me that they have selected my company.

“I can make it work,” I tell her calmly, even as pride swells inside me.

“Perfect. Mr. Alexandre asked me to bring your proposal along with you so you can discuss the details with him and the others at lunch,” she tells me, and my attention snags at the word ‘the others’ but I don’t think much of it, assuming she means his partners.

“Alright,” I tell her.

“Great, I’ll send you the details of the hotel. Have a nice day, Mr. Montague,” she says professionally before disconnecting the call.

I stand there for a moment before a huge smile appears on my face as I relish in the triumph. I knew I would get the deal, but the victory feels elating. I quickly make my way over to the washroom to freshen up and get ready.

A few hours later, I make my way to the hotel where we all agreed to meet, a file clutched in my hands that has the proposal as I walk inside. The manager quickly recognizes me, rushing over to me.

“Mr. Montague. This way, please,” he says as he leads me toward a private booth. As soon as I enter, I see Alexandre, Nikolai, and Xei Chen Ming sitting there talking amongst each other before their eyes fall on me.

“Good afternoon, gentleman,” I greet them as I walk inside.

“It’s good to see you again, James,” Alexandre says, getting up and making his way over to me.

“Likewise,” I tell him as I take a seat.

“So, shall we get started?” I ask just when another voice interrupts us.

“Oh, I hope I am not late.” a familiar voice says, and I instantly look up to find the same girl who shouted at me standing there. My eyes widen unable to understand what the hell is going on.

# Chapter 3

Turning Point

Eliza

A few days pass after the party, and I try my best to forget about that day. But that doesn’t seem to be happening. The next day after the party, when I went to the office, the rumor mill was updated, and everyone was whispering around me, talking about what happened that night. I doubt many of them even saw what happened, but who cares about that, right? As long as they have something to gossip about, who cares what actually happened?

Lana filled me in about what everyone had been saying behind my back and how they were misconstruing the whole thing to make me look like an attention-seeking person who just did what I did to gain James Montague’s attention. I roll my eyes at the absurdity of the statement. The last thing I want in my life is that man’s attention. If I never see him again, I will live peacefully and happily.

**I have never met anyone as arrogant, self-centered, and conceited as that man. I hate people who act like everyone is dirt beneath their feet.**Just because you have power and fame doesn’t mean you have the right to treat other people like shit. **If I ever see him again, I might as well give him an earful about how to treat people like humans.**

But I ignored everyone, not bothering to correct their assumptions. I had more important things to worry about. Namely, the deal that Derek and I were determined to score. We have been working day and night to make the perfect proposal. I can’t even begin to count the sleepless nights I spent in the office, mulling over our proposal and making sure it was the best out of all the other **options they** were likely to get.

Derek and I were realistic about our goal. We knew that the competition was extremely tough, and considering the fact that Alexandre was looking for either a manufacturer or a marketing **company, it only broadened** his horizons and added to the competition. We know that the chances that we might not get the deal are high, but that isn’t going to stop us from giving our best. If there is any chance that we will be able to pull it off, then we have to try.

We finally finished our proposal last week and sent it. But a week had passed, and we hadn’t heard back from Alexandre or anyone from his team. Derek and I had agreed that we had given it a shot, and while it didn’t work, it still opened up other possibilities for us. We can use that proposal as a framework for other proposals, considering it is the best one we have ever made.

As I make my way to my office, I hear a few hushed whispers here and there and barely keep myself from rolling my eyes. Some people really need to get a life. It had been a while since the whole ordeal, and yet they were still talking about it. Just as I stepped out of the elevator and step onto my floor, I see Derek rushing out of his office, a look of excitement and shock evident on his face as he races toward the elevator and comes up short when he sees me.

“Oh God, thank god you are here!” he exclaims, and I raise my eyebrows in confusion. What has gotten into him?

“I just got here. Is everything okay?” I ask, confused.

“We did it, Eliza! We got the deal. We did it!” he exclaims, and my eyes widen.

I can’t believe him as he looks ready to jump up and down from happiness.

“Are you serious? We seriously got the deal?” I ask, not wanting to get my hopes high for anything.

“Alexandre’s assistant just called me to set up a meeting for lunch today, and Alexandre especially requested your presence. I knew they liked you,” he tells me, and I almost don’t believe him.

“Wow,” I say, unsure of how to react. “This is great, Derek. This is better than great. I can’t believe we actually pulled it off.”

“I know. But we both know how hard you worked on this proposal. Did I ever tell you how proud I am of you? You have come such a long way from where you started. I still remember the first time I met you. You were so young, and yet you were determined to make your name. I always knew that one day, you will succeed and accomplish the greatest of things. I am so damn proud of you, Eliza.” Derek tells me softly, and my eyes start to well up with tears at the mention of my past.

It is true that I was very young when I started working here, but the truth is that had it not been for Derek and his guidance, I wouldn’t have accomplished half of what I have. I owe so much of my success to him. He is the one who introduced me to new opportunities and motivated me to reach new heights. His faith in me never faltered**, nor** did he ever stop believing in me.

“This means so much to me, Derek. You know I couldn’t have done any of it without your help. You should take credit for it. In fact, I doubt this proposal would have gotten accepted if you hadn’t helped **me through** every stage. Thank you.” I tell him sincerely.

He opens his mouth to answer when his phone rings. He pulls it out, and his eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“Who is it?” I ask, concerned.

“My dad. He never calls at this hour,” he says worriedly as he picks up the call.

“Hello?” he answers.

“What!?” he exclaims after a few moments, and I instantly grow more worried.

“I will be right there. Dad, text me the address,” he says quickly before disconnecting the call.

“What is it, Derek? Is everything okay?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“My mom got into an accident. I have to go, Eliza,” he tells me frantically, and I nod understandingly.

“Yes, of course, you have to go. **Hurry up(delete).**” I tell him.

“But… the meeting? This is so important to **us. You** worked so hard. What do I do?” he rants, and I place my hand on his shoulder.

“Derek, nothing is more important than your mother right now. As for the meeting, I will handle it. I already know everything. I will make sure nothing goes wrong. Trust me. But you need to go right now. Your mother needs you**,”** I tell him softly, and he takes a deep breath before nodding.

“I do trust you. **Good luck,”** he tells me before rushing out.

I watch as he leaves, and once he disappears from my view, I exhale. I realize just how big of a responsibility I have taken on. It was always decided that Derek would take the lead and deal with Alexandre while I would be responsible for the team at the office, but this sudden change in dynamic has me worried. I haven’t even prepared myself. How will I ever lead this meeting?

I close my eyes, telling myself I have to do this. I can’t afford to lose this deal, not after everything we have done to secure it. So, with one final look at the elevator that Derek disappeared behind, I turn around and walk toward my office, determined to make sure everything goes perfectly today.

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A few hours later, I retouch my makeup quickly and grab my things before heading out. I put the location on the map and start driving to the hotel. I realize I am running a little late due to the traffic, but by the time I reach, I am only five minutes late. I take one last look at myself in the side mirror before getting out of the car, grabbing my laptop, and taking confident steps inside.

As soon as I enter, a waitress walks **over, smiling** at me.

“Hello, Ma’am. Can I help you with anything?” she asks, and I nod.

“I am meeting Mr. Alexandre Beaumont,” I tell her, and she nods immediately.

“Eliza?” she asks, and I nod in confirmation.

**“This** way, please, Ma’am.” she guides me as we make our way inside. She stops outside a personal booth, and I take one last deep breath before entering. As soon as I do, I hear people talking.

“Oh, I hope I am not late,” I say as I enter, and everyone’s attention shifts toward me.

“You?” A familiar voice sounds from the corner, and I look over to find none other than James Montague sitting there.

“Now, now. No need to get emotional. Eliza, it’s good to see you again.” Nikolai **interrupts, and** I turn my attention to him.

“You too,” I tell him, still unable to comprehend what is going on. Did Derek misinterpret? Maybe we didn’t get the deal.

“Come, have a seat, Eliza,” Alexandre says, and I nod silently before taking the seat farthest away from the arrogant man in front of me.

“Where is Derek?” Xei Chen asks.

“His mother got into an accident a few hours ago, so he couldn’t make it. He asked me to attend instead if that is okay.” I tell them.

“Yes, that’s quite alright. I hope his mother is **well,”** Alexandre says, and I nod.

“I must admit that I am quite confused right now. **Derek told me you invited him to lunch because you had chosen us, but I assume that is not the case?”**I ask.

“Actually, that is the case. As you are very well aware, I am only hiring one team from each country, so I obviously can’t choose two. However, I underestimated the potential of the United States and was pleasantly surprised by all that it has to offer. Your company is the best manufacturing company I have found **until** now, and we are all aware of James’s company’s success. We can’t bring ourselves to pick between one of you. So, we have an offer for you both.” Alexandre explains, and both James and I look at him, waiting for him to continue.

“I want both of you to work together to manufacture and market my product. I want one team rather than two companies. And Eliza, you and James will have to lead the team, which means you will be working together on this project. Either you both take it or leave it.” he relays, leaning back, a pleased expression on his face.

I try to keep the horror off my face, but James doesn’t even try.

“You know very well that this isn’t possible. I cannot work with the likes of **her,”** he snaps, and my jaw clenches.

“The likes of her are the best this country has to offer. Like I said, James, take it or **leave it,”** Alexandre says.

James and I glare at each other, his eyes sparking with annoyance, and my own mirror the emotion. But I know what this deal means to me.

“I’m in,” I tell them through gritted teeth, and Nikolai grins.

They all turn to James, and he glares at me before giving in.

“Fine.” he grits out, and I give him the fakest smile I can muster.

“Perfect. Now, let’s start **planning!”** Xei Chen says excitedly.

Throughout the meeting, James and I clashed with each other, arguing over small things that Alexandre reprimanded.**Everyone is exasperated by the end of the meeting, telling us to sort our differences out before the next meeting, which makes him scoff.**

As I make my way out, with James on my heels, I somehow manage to ignore the wet floor sign and slip, a yelp escaping me as I close my eyes and wait for the hard floor to make contact with my body. But it never comes.

I open my eyes after a moment, only to find myself staring into James’s eyes. His arm is wrapped around me, and I am suddenly aware of every inch of our skin that is touching. He stares at me, and I notice how his eyes move from mine to my lips. My breath hitches at the intensity of his gaze when the sound of a throat clearing pulls me out of a trance, and I instantly pull away.

“Eliza, you forgot your phone,” Nikolai says before handing it to me with a smirk and turning back. I feel my face flush, and I turn back and narrow my eyes at James.

“Learn how to walk,” he tells me condescendingly, making my jaw tighten.

“Learn to keep your hands to yourself,” I tell him as I walk inside the elevator, and before he can enter, I close the doors and hit the ground floor. What have I gotten myself into?

# Chapter 4

The Mistake

James

Finally, the day is here, the day I have been patiently waiting for. I have had many contracts in the past, but being able to sign this deal will change the whole landscape of my business. **I get up from bed at six am, thinking about how I am going to secure this deal today, and for tomorrow, nothing will be the same.**

However, there is one thing that’s making me uneasy, which is the collaboration I have with Eliza. Every time we have had a meeting, I am reminded of why she gets on my nerves. She is stubborn and doesn’t back down. My mind drifts toward the moment we shared that day and how quickly she went back to hating me.

 “Focus, James, Focus. Today is not the day for you to be distracted.” I interrupt my thoughts about her.

I leave the bed and begin to prepare for the big meeting. After about an hour and a half, I stand in front of the mirror, fully dressed and ready**to sign** this deal.

“I am going to leave them all stunned,” I repeat as I affirm to the mirror before I leave my house.

My team has always been efficient and active, but it’s on days like these that they are at their best, undefeatable. I walk past some of my employees in the lobby, responding to their good morning wishes with a nod.

“Is everything ready? How much time till the meeting starts?” I take my seat in my office and ask my secretary about the meeting.

“Everything is ready, Sir. The meeting will start in thirty minutes. The international team will arrive here in twenty. We will settle them in and offer refreshments for the next ten minutes and will be all set to start the meeting in thirty **minutes.”** She replies to my single question with a detailed answer. That’s what I like about her.

**“Sir, I also need to ask if you went through the email Ms. Eliza sent you.** I left a hard copy on your desk yesterday.” She asks for a confirmation.

“I did, but this isn’t the first or the last deal I will have with international clients like these. I know what I am doing, and I will take charge and close the deal before Ms. Eliza even has to say a word. I will make it very easy for her; all they have to do is share their name on the contract.” I make it clear to her not to bring it up again, and she nods.

“I have printed out all the required documents for you, Sir. I will go take another look at the arrangements.” I nod at her, and she leaves.

I start to read the documents and only look up when my secretary knocks on my door.

“Sir, they are here.” She informs and leaves.

I take my coat and very confidently leave my office. I have got this; nothing can stop me now. As **I approach the** meeting room, I see Eliza wearing a black pencil skirt that barely covers her knees with a white button shirt and a black coat. Unaware of my surroundings, I stare at her for far too long than I would like to admit.

“Hello, I am Derek, The CEO of Collin’s,” Derek greets me as he stands next to Eliza in a sharp grey suit and extends his hand to shake mine.

I accept his handshake as I nod at him in greeting. Derek and I have never interacted before, but we are both aware of each other’s standing in the business world.

“Good morning, gentleman.” I greet them as I enter the room.

“Morning, James. I hope you have something good in store for us today. **We want** to discuss the details and be on our way. Today has been a tiring day already.” Alexander responds, and I see everyone settle in their seats, taking his signal.

My team starts to serve them tea and coffee while I gesture to Alexandre to take a seat himself as well.

“Sure, that’s why we are all here and honored to be. Let me start by sharing the features of the product.” I turn to look at the screen behind me, but Nikolai stops me.

“James, I am sorry to stop you, but I know all about the features of the product; that’s why I am here. I want to know how you are going to do it.” I like this man’s approach to business.

“Right, so since you don’t want any fancy presentation, **Mr. Sokolov**, I will tell you how I am going to sell the product that has brought you to us.” I leave the remote on the desk and ignore the screen.

I start sharing all the details of the plan that I had discussed with my team and made sure that it was a foolproof plan. We had covered everything from sourcing the premium yet inexpensive raw material to the best advertising channels, ensuring the maximum sales till the launch of the product. And the after-sales services as well.

“That’s all good. But I would like to know**a few more things**.” Xei Chen interrupts.

“A few more minutes, **James, and** the deal is yours.” I think to myself, and my eyes drift to Eliza.

She looks uncomfortable in her chair. I can see how badly she wants to join me in this question-and-answer session, but I don’t need her. I give her a reassuring smile, but she narrows her eyes at me. I ignore her and get back to Xei Chen.

After about six questions, I can see him making his decision;**we will be asked to sign the deal any second now.** When Nikolai whispers something in his ear, Alexandre turns to me.

**“James, you have told me about logistics, supply chain, and profit margin.”** He stops for a second and then continues. “What about the carbon footprint?”

“As I told you earlier, we are only using environmentally friendly materials and other materials that we have to use. We have designed a program to dispose of them sustainably.”

I stand my ground, not feeling nervous for a second, but the look on Eliza’s face has changed. She looks as pale as a vampire; I wonder what’s going on with her.

“James, where are you going to supply the environmentally friendly raw materials?” Alexandre asks me incredulously.

“We have a list of different countries, and it’s pretty cheap,” I reply.

“Will the extra transportation not cause carbon emission?” Xei Chen asks, suddenly looking disappointed.

“In fact, it will cause more carbon emission than using the material we have **here,”** Nikolai chips in to share his thoughts.

I feel like I have been served with a silent bomb that I did not spot until it was too late. I see Eliza standing up from her seat to join me.

**“Mr. Chen, your concerns are valid and show that you want to make money and be good to this world.** And that’s what’s common between my company and yours.” She is trying to do damage control, I realize.

“And because of that, we have sourced the raw materials from the same countries that we told you about but from their warehouses in the USA. So, even though the material isn’t from USA, the transportation will be from within USA,” She answers their concern.

“As satisfactory as that answer is, Eliza, I can’t help but wonder why it is only one of you who knows this when we made it very clear that we don’t want to work with both of your individual companies?” Alexandre leaves his chair, and the rest do the same.

“I thought you were honest people. When you said you **had** agreed to work together, I believed you. But this only tells me that you have done nothing but lie to us and waste our and your time.” He says that and leaves the meeting room along with his team.

I am standing in the same position, trying to gauge the situation. I know I said this isn’t the first and won’t be the last business deal I attend. Little did I **know this** would be the first time a client would walk out on me. And for what? My mistake.

“How could you do this, James?” I hear Eliza’s voice shaking either from anger or sadness. I turn to face her, and she does the same.

“I had worked so hard, so hard for this one opportunity. Why did you have to take it and ruin it for me?” She was struggling to keep her voice and anger in control.

“Eliza, let’s **go. We** can discuss this later. I think we should leave for now.” Derek tries to move her, but she stands firm.

“No, Derek. This is the time I tell him how his arrogance cost us the biggest client that I had personally worked so hard on.” She turns to Derek, who is now quietly listening to her.

“I know you run your own company, but when we agreed on doing this project **together, you** should have honored our agreement and let me jump in when I was telling you to instead of being an arrogant, conceited idiot and ruining it for all of us.” I can tell how she means every single word that’s coming out of her mouth right now.

“I am done with you, **James. I** thought, if anything, you were a man of his word. But you proved me wrong yet again.” She shakes her head in disappointment.

**“I had specially prepared a document for you to review before the meeting so we are all in sync.** But you just ignored it because you think you know everything. But look what happened. You don’t always know everything, so maybe sometimes, just sometimes, listen to when people tell you something.” She doesn’t wait to hear an answer and storms off.

Derek follows her to the lift, and then I see them both disappear right in front of my eyes. I turn my head to look at my team who is just as shocked as I am. This is a first for all of us.

We have never been declined since we came into business. And to be rejected like this? It’s a nightmare we never even imagined. I pick up my cell phone that I had kept on the table and clear my throat to say something to move on from here.

“I know this is a first for us, and I know we have worked day and night for this project. I am taking full responsibility for this failure. Rest assured, I will do everything in my power to make things right. Until then, I want you to take it as a lesson and move on to our next **project,”** I say. My voice feels foreign to me, and my words are empty, but I don’t let it show.

“Back to your **day, we** have clients waiting.” I clap my hands, and everyone wakes up from the shock and jumps out of their chairs to rush to their daily work.

# Chapter 5

Turning Point

Eliza

“I had already emailed him everything, Derek. What more could I do for him?” I complain to Derek as we sit in the car on our way back to the office after the meeting.

“Nobody is saying this is your fault. If anyone, it’s James who made a mistake.” Derek is still keeping his calm when I am losing it.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t call it a mistake. A mistake is something that happens by chance, unintentionally. What you do purposely is called sabotage. That’s what he did with us, Derek. He sabotaged this deal for us on purpose.” If I had James in front of me, I would have punched his smug face.

“I don’t think he would do anything like that on purpose. He has a reputation in the industry. He is known for his work ethic.” Derek defends him, and I give him a death stare.

“Any friend of my enemy is my enemy too.” I hiss at Derek, and he chuckles.

“How are you so calm and relaxed, Derek? Don’t you know where we stand and what’s next for us without this deal?” My tone was now serious, and so was Derek’s expression.

“What can we do, Eliza? We did everything in our power. This is up to fate now. **We sit and let it all unfold in front of our eyes.**” Derek’s face looks like it has aged five years in just a matter of time. His mom was thankfully okay, but I could tell that he was stressed.

I **remember when** he started this company, and I joined as an office manager to run his start-up business operations. It used to be only two of us, and how far we have come. The car stops in front of our office, and we both get out. I follow him to his office, which has a glass wall looking on the lower floor where all of our employees work to make this company what it is today.

“I don’t want this to be a sad ending. Instead, I want to cherish the growth we saw together,” Derek says, standing next to me, looking at our employees.

“These employees, they work magic into our products. But you know the thing about magic? Not everyone believes in it, just like how not everyone believes in Collin’s. One underperforming product, and we are about to lose everything.” I don’t know if I am talking to Derek or myself, but all the memories from the last eight years run in my head.

“You want to know another thing about magic, Eliza?” Derek asks.

I look at him, waiting for him to answer.

“It just takes one more trick, one more surprise to make the audience stay and believe in the magic again.” I know he is trying to stay optimistic, but I like to be realistic.

“This deal would have been the last magic we could make, but I did nothing and watched it slip through my fingers.” I have started to regret staying quiet and not joining James’s question-answer session earlier.

“Eliza, if you are a magician, you will always have a trick up your sleeve. A true magician always does.” Derek smiles at me.

“What are you thinking, Derek?” I ask. I can tell he has an idea.

“If not Mr. Beaumont, then who else believed in our product?” He asks.

“What do you mean we haven’t made it public yet?” I am utterly confused.

“But who is ready to make it public?” He asks again. “Who is also responsible for missing this chance for us?”

And a light bulb clicks on in my head.

“But I don’t think he will want to do it anymore. What’s in it for him? It was different before; he was not going to invest.” I raise my objection.

“But if he does invest, then he can have profit sharing. I’m sure he has everything planned and figured out for this project. Why would he want to waste the resources of time and HR he spent on this project?” Derek seems pretty optimistic about this.

“Derek, it sounds nice, but knowing what I have seen, his arrogance will not allow him to do that. In fact, in my opinion, he did all of this to get rid of us anyway.” I try to show Derek the other side, the dark **side of things.**

He smiles, “We won’t know until we try. Will we?”

“I am not going to talk to him about this again. I told him I am done with him, and it will stay that way.” I fold my arms.

“But what if he comes to you? Will you then consider it?” he has a mischievous smile on his face.

“Well, yeah, if he comes to talk to me, then I might propose the offer.” I finally say reluctantly, trying to figure out the mischievous smile on his face, and I get to know why when he hands me my phone that was ringing on his desk.

I look at the screen, and it’s James calling. It’s only been a few hours since we came back. Why is he calling me to tell me it was my fault? Well, if that’s what this arrogant man thinks, then I will give him a piece of my mind.

I pick up the call, ready to tell him how all the rumors he has spread about his professionalism are all lies.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Hi, Eliza, this is James.” He says.

“Yes, James, what do you want?” I couldn’t help but snap at him.

“To apologize.” He says quietly.

“You think this is my fault that I didn’t stand up and jump in earlier when you know I wanted to**, and** you asked me to…” I stop without ending my sentence, realizing he is not accusing me but apologizing.

“Did you say you want to apologize? I ask him, my tone a little embarrassed this time.

“Yes, I wanted to apologize for what happened today. I should have let you join me and not risk it.” His apology is sincere.

“Yes, you should have, and now see what has happened. My company is going to suffer the loss of this deal.” As honest as his apology was, the fact that my company is on the verge of bankruptcy will not change.

“My company will suffer the same loss, Eliza. And that’s why I wanted to call and apologize because I **know my** company will also need time to recover from this setback.” He says.

“You think your company will suffer the same? No, James, it won’t; you know why? Because your company is not on the verge of bankruptcy. Because this deal wasn’t the only means for your company to survive.” I feel a wave of anger and sadness mixed with helplessness rush through my body, and I blurt out the most confidential information in front of him.

There is silence on the other side. I don’t know what he is thinking, but I am trying to contain myself and not let him hear me cry. Derek comes closer to console me, but I stop him with the gesture of my hand, and he stops.

“Can I come to meet you, Eliza? I might be able to offer you a business proposition that might save your company. To make up for the loss I have caused your company with my mistake.” He was as professional as he always has been; my emotional outburst doesn’t change his tone, and I appreciate that. The last thing I want is sympathy from him.

“Sure, we can meet and discuss what business proposition you have for us.” I give him the go-ahead and end the call.

“I am sorry, Eliza. I know this isn’t easy on you, but we need to stay strong, for our magicians, at least.” He points at the glass wall.

“I **will.** I promise.” I smile through the tears.

“I am going to go make coffee before **James gets here.**” Derek nods at **me,** and I leave.

Twenty minutes later, I get a call from the front desk that James is here to see me. I tell her to send him to the meeting room and ask him to wait for me and Derek.

I end the call and get up to go join them in the meeting room when my intercom buzzes again. I pick up the receiver.

“Yes?” I ask.

“Ms. Eliza.” There is a reluctant pause. “I told Mr. James to wait for you and Mr. Derek in the meeting room, but he refused and asked me to tell you that he is here to meet you only.” She conveys his message and leaves me confused.

“Umm… **Okay, that’s fine, send him to my office.**” I end the call and sit back on my chair, curious to know why he wants to avoid Derek and talk to me alone.

James knocks on the door, and I press the door lock to open it.

“Hi.” James enters the room, still dressed in his black coat, grey tie, and tailored pants to match his **coat. He** looks like a model on a ramp.

“Hi, please take a seat.”

“Thanks.” He replies, taking a seat right across the table, sitting in front of me.

There is an awkward silence between us. I have taken my anger out on him, and he has caused me the deal that could save my **company. There**is nothing left to say.

“You know, James, I have 25% shares of this company, and Derek has 30%?” I finally asked him a question.

“Yes, I am aware of that.” He nods, his one leg crossed over his other.

“We have fought very hard to keep this company running up until this point. Just because we made one product, just one product that wasn’t commercial, but it just helped people. An app for **the blind** to navigate their way around. But who cares about that, right?” I can sense the bitterness in my tone, but I don’t care right now.

“Since the target audience who were well off already had many alternatives, they did not buy our app, and the people who were not as financially able, they just simply couldn’t buy. So, what do we do? We make the app free; you would think this would be appreciated, but no. We were rather depreciated, our shares price **immediately dropped,** and we lost profits just because we wanted to help our community a little.” I can feel that sadness taking over me.

“But anyway, Derek and I did not stop. We funded it with all our money. Because we knew the next big deal would cover all of it. But then one, just one simple mistake, your one simple mistake cost us our whole company.” I am finally done telling him what he has done to us. I pick up the glass and take a sip of water.

**I know it will shock him to learn the ugly truth behind the successful company we run, but little did I know that I am in for a bigger shock.**

“Let’s get married.” I spit out the water on his suit in shock.

We both sit still, looking at each other. I am waiting for him to tell me this is one of his twisted, sick jokes, but he sits quietly, wiping the water **off his jacket.** When he is done, he sits still and looks me right in the eye.

“What do you mean, James? Are you not listening to what I just said?” I almost scream.

“I hear everything. And I think that’s the best solution for you to keep your business running.” He says with the same composure.

“Please don’t test my patience. You have done enough today already,” I warn him.

“You have a team who respects you and works hard to help bring your vision to reality. How will they feel when they realize you sold your company or free will just for me to sponsor this project?” He takes a pause, making sure I understand what he means.

“But on the other hand, if you marry me, and I, as your husband, can help you by sponsoring your project, it will only look romantic.” How is this so easy for him?

“Well, of course, the marriage will only be on paper. We won’t really be a couple, but just for show.” I finally let go of the breath **I had** been holding for the last minute.

“So, what do you think?” He asks.

“And I have to decide right now?” I ask him in return.

“I would appreciate that.” He nods.

I have to be realistic and honest with myself. This is my only chance to save my company. The company I have worked so hard for. I did not date. I did not party. I worked all the time. When my colleagues were having fun, I was burning the night oil, trying to make this company the best. How can I back down now?

It’s a small price to pay compared to what I will have in return. **I can tell people that he was arrogant; we just weren’t compatible, and we got a divorce.**In the span of a minute, I had a million thoughts run through my mind and made the most important decision in my life.

 “Okay, I agree to this arrangement. When do we get married?”

# Chapter 6

Contractual Arrangements

James

I hear the most unexpected words come out of her mouth, when do we get married? **My mind went blank. I did not expect her to agree to this.** I am not ready for this question, but I have to answer.

I clear my throat and start to explain to her how this will work out, but I can actually say anything she cuts me off.

“But I have **a few conditions.**” She immediately realizes that she has agreed to this arrangement unconditionally.

“Yes, sure. I believe we must have certain rules and conditions for this to work.” My monotone doesn’t change.

“I will neither sell nor donate my shares of the company nor **give any authority over my staff to your company.** Collin’s is mine and will remain mine.” She seems determined.

“Okay, you will keep your ownership and management of **Collin’s.”** I am a little disappointed and surprised at the same time. She just agreed to enter a marriage contract and all she is concerned about is her company and staff.

**“As much as I appreciate your ambition about keeping your company afloat and growing it through this opportunity.** But I was expecting to have some personal conditions and rules to keep this marriage agreement working successfully.” I remark on her lack of concern for herself.

“Oh, yeah, well. I do have some conditions about that too.” It’s visible that I caught her off guard. She is not the one **to struggle**with a rebut.

“I am curious to know what these are.” I did not mean to, but I have started to enjoy this conversation.

“Umm… for example, I want to live in my house.” She tries to come up with something quickly.

“Okay, so I move in?” I raise an eyebrow at her. This game is getting interesting.

“Listen here**, Mr.** I-know-everything, I haven’t thought this through. Unlike someone, I do not sit and imagine fake marriages in my free time. Some of us have real problems here to deal with.” She is back to being herself and immediately puts me in my place.

As much as I hate her guts, I can’t deny the fact that I respect her resilience and fighting **spirit. It’s** like nothing can stop her. She single-handedly managed to bring her company to these heights.

**“I’m sorry,** I am just dealing with a lot of things right **now. I** didn’t mean to snap at you.” She apologizes when I don’t reply to her.

“I think that will be a good start, our condition number will be to not snap at each other in public,” I say with a straight face, I am back to business.

“Okay.” She replies.

“Ms. Eliza, I understand you are in a difficult situation right now. But I want you to think about this and then get back to me. I believe you need to discuss this with your partner as well before proceeding with the business deal?” The truth is I need some time to think it through as well, but I don’t show that.

“Yes, I need to talk to Derrek before I go ahead with this. I think it’s better if we meet later to talk about this.” For once she agrees with me.

**I get up, buttoning my coat again, and extend my hand for her to shake.** A moment I never thought I would have to live, but here we are, shaking hands, making alliances, and becoming partners. She shakes my hand and I leave her office.

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I come back to my office determined to do this properly. **And from my experience, trusting people and taking their word for anything is just as good as fooling yourself.**If you want anything to work, you should put it on paper.

I call my assistant on the intercom and ask her to come to my office.

“Sir, you called for me,” **Janet asked.**

“Yes, I need you to prepare a contract between me and Ms. Eliza from Collin’s company.” I can see the shock on her face, the question on her face is very clear, but she doesn’t utter a word and takes a seat.

That’s what I like about Janet, she knows when to ask and when to avoid questions.

“What would be the terms of this contract, Sir?” She asks, ready to note everything down on her laptop.

“**Number 1:** Ms. Eliza gets to keep her company and full rights to management.

**Number 2:** We must always attend the public events together. If any of us has to attend a public event the other has to make themselves available.

**Number 3:** We must live together until one of us decides to end the contract.

**Number 4:** No party is allowed to share the details of the agreement with anyone else.

**Number 5:** Both parties are allowed to date other people as long as it’s not in public.

**Number 6** …. What else do married couples do?” I ask Janet.

“Umm…. **They go out on dates, spend vacations together, meet each other’s families?”**she is just throwing ideas at me.

“Okay, yeah, make number 6: Both parties must take a weekly vacation, once every three months.

**Number 7:** Both parties should make time **to go out on** dates every weekend.

**Number 8:**Once a month family dinner.” I am trying to cover all the aspects to make this marriage look as legit as possible.

I look at Janet, who is looking at me.

“I think this is good enough.” She suggests.

“Yeah, yeah, I think so too. This should be fine. Thank you, **Janet. Please**have this contract ready for me before three pm and cancel all my engagements for the day after that.” I know Janet can take care of the rest in getting the contract ready.

She nods her head and leaves my office, and I pick up my phone to confirm meeting with Eliza.

Let’s meet at three pm and discuss the details of the contract. **I hit send on the message, and a moment later, my phone vibrates; it’s Eliza’s message. Sure. I look at the time, and it’s still noon; I have three hours to wrap up my work.**

**I hear a knock and look up to see Janet standing at the door with a document in her hand.**

“Come in, **Janet. Is** it ready?” I ask her.

“Yes, Sir. All done, and it’s 2:30 pm already.” She reminds me of time.

“Oh yes, I should leave soon. Let me go through the contract once.” I scan the document at a glance close my laptop, pick up my coat, and head out.

I look at my watch**and notice it’s still**five minutes until three**. I** inform Eliza that I am waiting for her outside her office. After waiting for a few moments, I see her walk out of the building**. She** is still in the same pencil skirt, and she carries herself with grace with the expression of an iron lady. Anybody would be a fool to mess with her, anybody but me.

She gets in the car and I start driving towards a nearby café. We cover the small distance from her office to the café in silence, it isn’t until we get seated that one of us even looks at the other.

“So, I thought, it might be a good idea to have everything noted down on paper, so I made this.” I show her the contract that I have brought.

“Oh.” She seems surprised. “Well, that’s very thoughtful and professional, but before I read this or anything else. I want to ask you a question and I would expect an honest answer to it. Because I believe if we are to enter any such agreement, honesty is compulsory between us.”

I don’t know what she is getting at, but I am ready to answer her questions and address her doubts.

“Why did you suggest this **arrangement? It’s** quite odd. What will you gain from this?” She is finally asking the question that I expected her to ask immediately.

“Well, you took your time to ask this. I always find myself in the spotlight wherever I go, and someone who has had enough share of this limelight would know that it comes with a cost.” I stop and take a pause.

“I have been made to appear like a playboy in the eye of the public by being associated with a lot of female celebrities. Which most of the time is not true. Especially after what happened the last time, it left me struggling with anxiety.” I share my reason with her.

“What happened the last time?” I look at her in **shock. How** does she not know? It was in the news, on social media, it was everywhere.

“Sorry, I don’t care much for the **gossip, so**I am unaware of this.” She reads my face and apologizes.

“The last time, some paparazzi saw me and a female movie star dine at the same **restaurant and**immediately created a story of us dating. To make it worse, she confirmed all the rumors saying we **were dating and**later informed the press that I left her heart broken for someone else.” I can still sense the lingering feeling of anxiety that the incident caused me.

“I am sorry this happened to you. I had no idea.” Her apology was sincere

“Let’s go through the **contract, and**we can add your **terms too.**” I point towards the contract, changing the topic.

“The only condition I have is that I keep my company and staff. I have no other condition.” She announces.

Either she is the bravest woman I have met or the dumbest, but without any argument, **I take my pen out, sign the contract, and slide it towards her; she hesitates for a moment but si**gns it anyway.

“I wish you the best fake marriage.” I extend my hand to shake hers and she takes my hand.

# Chapter 7

Public Relations Chaos

Eliza

Everyone is busy, everyone is in a rush nobody wants to wait a second, nobody wants to waste a second. If you waste someone’s minute, they get offended. If something fails, they get heartbroken if something works, their faces light up. That’s how my employees are, my magicians, but instead of wands, they have their brains and hard work to create magic in this real world. This is their whole **world. They** come here to watch their ideas turn into reality in front of their eyes. They are never **tired. They** never stop.

“This always gets me too.” I am lost in my thoughts when Derrek pulls me out of it. I have been standing in his room watching over the working floor for **over thirty** minutes.

“I have never seen them complain,” I say to Derrek.

“Yes, **because** this isn’t a job to **them. This** is a chance for them to transform their ideas, imagination, and creativity into a reality. They love being here.” Derrek comments.

“I don’t know how they do that, work so tirelessly, and still be happy with it.” I shake my head.

“Oh, you don’t know? **I forgot about the time when we started expanding our operations.**You were literally sleeping in the office.” Derrek reminds me of the time and I can’t help but laugh, thinking about it.

“Derrek, I said yes to him. But I don’t know if this is the right thing to do or not. I feel like I am making a deal with the devil. It can’t be this simple, he must have some other reason, why else would he want this?” I share my concern with Derrek.

“What does your heart say? If you feel it in your heart to not go ahead with this deal, then don’t. We run a multinational company, Eliza; we will find a way. I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to.” Derrek has always shared his honest opinions with **me. When** I joined him, he was a young guy with a dream to make it big. But over the **years, I** have learned so much from him. He treats me like his younger sister and I respect him like a mentor.

“For some reason, my heart feels at **peace. I don’t trust James, but I still feel like this is the right thing to do right now.”**I turn and look at him.

“Then I am by your side, as I always have **been.”** Derrek gives me a reassuring smile.

I pick up my mug of coffee that’s been sitting on Derrek’s desk waiting for me to get back to it, but I get lost in my thoughts. Now I have to make a cup of coffee again. When my phone starts to ring, I look at the screen and it’s James.

“Hello?” I attend the call.

“Hi, this is James.” I hear him on the other side.

“Yes, James.” My tone is still as professional as it was the first time, I met him.

“I was wondering if we could sit and talk about our arrangement today.” He asks.

“Well, yeah, I can meet you after **work, if** that works for you,” I respond.

**“Alright, I**will make the dinner reservation and pick you up at 7 pm.” He informs me and ends the call.

I didn’t realize how quickly the day passed until my phone rings and James tells me that he is waiting for me outside the office. I quickly wrap everything up and leave the office. We sit in the car silently until we reach the restaurant.

“I wanted to talk to you about announcing our relationship to the public.” He gets straight to the point.

There are a million things that make me want to punch his smug face, but his straightforwardness is not one of them.

“Oh, yes. When do you want to do that?” I ask.

“I was thinking maybe we can host a party at my place tomorrow and make the announcement.” **He suggests, but before I can say anything, the waiter starts serving the food.**That’s when I noticed the ambiance of the **restaurant. It** was very romantic. Though it’s not completely speculated the tables are way too far from each other. The petals of roses are all around our circular **table, and** the glass floor has some more flowers underneath. The dim lightening makes it even more **dreamy. It**would be any girl’s ideal place to get proposed to.

**The thought runs a wave of current through my spine, and with a jerk, I turn my head towards James, who is now kneeling in front of me, a small box in his hand with a giant diamond ring waiting for me. I am in a state of pure shock; I knew we had to fake a marriage, but a proposal, too?**

The flash of the camera helps break my state of shock and I take a breath and sense the presence of people around us who are now taking our pictures and whispering to each other. I take another deep breath before I nod my head at **him. He** puts the ring on my finger and gets up to wrap his arms around me.

I still haven’t recovered from the shock of this proposal when he breaks his embrace around me and locks his lips with mine, for a second, I think I might **faint, but** the second I find myself kissing him back, it’s as if my body was craving his touch and doesn’t want to let go now.

But finally, after a minute that felt like an eternity, he pulls back and holds me by my arms to kiss my forehead. I can hear the sounds of ‘aww’ and ‘ohhhh’ around us. So, this was all planned, only I wasn’t informed, but maybe if I had, I might not have agreed to it all.

**He pulls the chair for me, and I take a seat, and then he sits in front of me; I look at him, smiling at me with nothing but love and affection for me in his eyes.**And just like that I am engaged to James Montague.

\*\*\*

James had booked a ballroom for the dinner and an appointment for me with a well-known **makeup artist to do my makeup and hair. I finish all**of it at five **pm, waiting**for James to pick me **up, but** instead, it’s his driver waiting outside for me. I get in the car; I still need to get ready for dinner and get there by 6:30 pm. **I have yet to try or see the dress I am supposed to wear tonight. James said his stylist had taken care of everything for me.**

The driver drops me off at my place, I rush out of the car and into my apartment, and to my surprise, I see about 2 huge boxes and 3 more smaller boxes with a guy standing next to them.

“Can I help you?” I ask him.

“Mrs. Montague?” he asks.

**“No, sorry, you got the wrong address,”** I reply and start to unlock the door when it hits me.

“Sorry, sorry. Yes, Mrs. Montague. I… I am newly married; I am not used to being called by my husband’s name yet.” I give him an awkward smile.

“Oh, no problem. Mr. James sent me to hand it to you. If you open the door, I will bring them inside.” His tone is polite and professional.

I open the door for him to bring all the boxes inside and then start to open them one by one. I leave him in my room and go to get myself a glass of water. After a few minutes, he passes by the kitchen towards the main door and leaves. I shrug my shoulder and go to my room, but what I see takes my breath away.

**On my bed lies a full-length black gown embellished with a thousand tiny crystals; its long sleeves exude sophistication and class.**The cuts and the tailoring of the dress are made perfectly to enhance the beauty of the body. I stand at the door in awe of the **dress when** my eyes slide to the box of jewelry opened next to it, a simple diamond necklace and small diamond earning with black onyx hanging from it. In another box are a pair of silver heels and a plain silver hand purse, with an exterior of pure silk. And the last box contains luxurious lingerie.

I run my hands over all these things when my phone buzzes, it’s James’ message.

I hope you got the package. See you in half an hour.

 I shake my head pick up the dress and start getting dressed. **Thirty minutes later, I hear my phone buzz again; I pick it up to see James’ message again.**

Hope you are ready, waiting for you downstairs.

I start to feel the pressure now. I already have on the dress. **I rush to put on the silver heels and shove the jewelry inside the purse, and without getting a chance to look in the mirror, I leave the house with a purse and a phone in my hand.**

**I see James waiting for me in the lobby as I exit the elevator. He looks at me and then looks away immediately; I don’t know why, but I feel a sting. I**watch him turn back immediately and look at me up and **down, slowly** taking his time, paying attention to every inch of my body. It takes him a few minutes to be able to form a sentence as I walk towards him.

“Uhh…” I feel proud to have left this arrogant and self-obsessed man speechless.

“Let’s go?” I ask him with a smirk, and he nods.

He walks in front of me towards the car, and I notice his black suit**and white shirt tailored** perfectly for his body. His biceps showing through the sleeves as he opens the car door for me, I give one last good look to his broad shoulders before I sit inside the car.

**We sit in the car silently as always, but this time, I notice him turning his head to look at me every few minutes; it’s as if he is fitting this urge to keep looking at me.**

**We reach the venue in fifteen minutes, and there is a storm of people running towards our car, screaming, and pushing each other.**The crowd is so thick driving the car forward becomes difficult. I turn to James, who is suddenly looking all pale, the drops of sweat shining on his face, his forehead frowned.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, I don’t like him, but I haven’t seen him like this before.

“Yes.” His answer is short.

I don’t say anything after that, it takes us ten more minutes just to drive to the drop-off point of the ballroom. Finally, we can get inside I take a breath of relief when I hear him breathe loudly as if struggling to catch a breath.

“James, I know it will kill you to ever accept that I am right, but I really don’t think that you are okay.” I finally express my concern to him.

**“I'm not.”** I am ready to give him a piece of my mind when he **replies, leaving me shocked.**

“What’s happening?” I ask.

**“I feel very anxious.** These journalists want to know everything. I can’t hide from them. They will speculate, spread rumors, **and make** me into a monster again.” He says but the vein on his forehead starts to pop put.

“Then we won’t **hide,”** I suggest.

“What do you mean?” He looks confused.

“This event is to show them our relationship, so let’s do that. Let’s get out and show them what they want to see. Let’s give them a lot of pictures and answer all their questions. Let them tell the world how we are so in love and can’t keep our **hands off each** other.” I shrug my shoulder as if it’s not a big deal.

“I don’t know if I can do that. I don’t like this public attention.” He makes a face.

“Well, either that or we can stay in the car because they don’t look like they are going anywhere,” I comment and rest my back on the seat.

“No, let’s do it. I have dealt with worse. Let’s do it.” **He gets out of the car, comes to my side, holds the door open, and gives me his hand.**

I take his hand and do the same thing, he did. They say revenge is best served cold, but I like it hot. I lock my lips to his. **He is taken by surprise, but just for a second, after that, I feel this hot passion through his kiss that’s melting me away, making me forget that this is for the show.**I am kissing him with the same passion, as my life depends on it. I am lost in this sweet sensation.

**The cameras flashing around us bring me back to reality, and I pull back; it takes James a second to gain his balance.**The raw expressions on his face can’t fool anyone. The paparazzi are screaming at the top of their lungs asking us to pose for them and kiss again. I turn to look directly at them, James’ arm on my waist.

Instead of avoiding and hiding from them, we stand right in front of them giving them a look inside our personal lives. Laughing and kissing in front of them, for them to take as many pictures as they want.

I look at James, who is back to being his charming self, with no sign of anxiety on his face, but just a smile. He looks back at me with the same loving look in his eyes. I smile at him, and we kiss again for the camera.

# Chapter 8

Unveiling the Past

James

It’s been three days since our first public appearance and to my surprise, the paparazzi have not been bothering me anymore. **The only news I hear about myself now is my marriage with Eliza.**

**I liked Eliza’s strategy of going directly to them instead of running away from them and giving them what they want to avoid spreading more rumors.**Despite our differences and our mutual hatred for each other, we have been coexisting really well.

Eliza has been living with me for three **days, and**I barely even notice her. She mostly keeps to **herself, and** her presence in my house has not disturbed my daily routine in any way possible. The only difference now is that we go to our offices together and come back together. But even that time is spent in silence. **Sometimes, she still stays at her apartment, but mostly, we stay together.**

This whole week has been a roller coaster of emotions, from losing a deal with an international client to being in a fake marriage. It all has been exhausting. I make myself a cup of coffee and take it to the **balcony, where** I see Eliza sitting on the balcony swing sofa. I take one of the chairs on the other side. We sit in silence until her phone starts to ring.

**“Yes,” she answers the call immediately.**

**“No, we don’t want that. And if they have a problem with our product or terms, they can take their business elsewhere. We don’t change our products or compromise quality to make a little extra money.”**She is very assertive, a quality all leaders should possess.

“Alright, yeah. Thank you.” She ends the call, and the silence takes over again.

“What do you do other than work?” I ask her causally.

“Just the same things you do.” She answers without looking at me.

I **nod my head. I** wouldn't say I like to do anything other than **work.**

“I do read books.” **If there was ever an award for awkward conversations, this one would win.**

**“I read books, too.” She replies, still looking out from the balcony.**

**“I liked to grow plants at some point in my life.” She suddenly says, remembering something from the past.**

“When?” I ask.

“Before I started working.” She looks a little sad.

“Why did you start working at an early age?” I**ask, genuinely** curious to know.

“I wasn’t always this well off. I come from a humble family. But I did not start working because I wanted to make a lot of money. My work, or my **company, has** never been about money. It's all about passion, love, creativity, and art.” She says in a trance-like state.

“You love working with these people,” I ask.

**She turns to look at me, and with a smile, she says,” I love working for them now.**There was a time when I worked with them. **Now, I** work to give all of these kids a chance to bring life to their ideas.”

“Yeah, kids. Your team is fairly very young.” I comment.

“They are all students.” She confirms.

“No wonder, with their hoodies and soldier pants. I can tell they are students.” The sarcasm in my voice is very evident.

“You don’t agree with our culture.” She asks.

“Well, no. It’s a working place. **It’s an office; it should have a dress code, some decency, some class to it.”** I explain.

“Some people might call you old.” She comments with a smirk on her face.

“Or well dressed,” I retort.

“I don’t disagree with that. But I think the office shouldn’t be about clothes, it should be about giving people an environment where they can relax and generate ideas that no one has ever thought about before.” She argues.

“Well, you can do that in full **pants, too**.” My disapproval of her team wandering in **the office** wearing short pants is very clear in my tone.

She burst out laughing.

“Why are you like that? So rigid in your ways?” She asks me.

“Because that’s how life should be. Disciplined.” I answer honestly.

“I don’t think discipline is a bad thing but what it does is it treats everyone the same way. And not everyone is ever the same. Where did you even learn such discipline from?” She brings a new perspective. But her question leaves me speechless, as it brings back a lot of memories from my childhood.

And we are back to being silent again. She kept looking at **me, waiting for an answer, but when** I made no effort to give her one, she started looking outside again.

“My father was in the army. We never had the luxury to live our lives based on how and what we liked. Or how different we were from him or each other. His word was just as good as God's word in our house. And we only had one option, to obey.” I can hear myself sharing my unhealed wounds that I have never spoken about before.

**I feel exposed right now. I shared one of my secrets with a woman I had just met.**But somehow it feels right, to tell her this. **I feel lighter, as if I was carrying this weight until today, and now, I stop.**

“I am so sorry about that. Can I say something that you might not like?” She asks innocently.

“I am used to that, please go ahead,” I answer.

**“You aren’t a kid anymore, and this isn’t your dad’s house. You can do whatever you want. You** can eat breakfast for dinner if you like, you know.” She says.

“Breakfast for dinner? No, thank you. I am an adult, not a sociopath.” I reply **bitterly, and**she laughs.

**“Well, you are not just an adult. You are a grumpy adult.” She says, laughing, she looks her age when she laughs, but when she is working, she is not a young girl; she is a serious businesswoman who doesn’t take anyone's bullshit.**

“What are you thinking about?” she **asks, noticing**my eyes on her.

“If not for money, what made you work at such an early age?” I ask her again.

 “It’s a long story, to be honest.” She replies, trying to brush it off.

“You are an experienced businesswoman**. I** know you can summarize it for me quickly.” I insist.

“My father worked in the airport security. He has a reputable job, but he was never promoted while all his other colleagues moved ahead of him.” I witness her expression changing as she shares this with me.

She pauses as if gathering the courage to share **something personal** with me. After a **minute, she continues.**

“His only fault was that he never complied with any illegal activity. He stayed loyal to his job and country. And watched**all his** other colleagues make deals to gain tens of thousands of dollars in a matter of days.” She takes another pause.

“I love him for his honesty, not only **love, but**I am proud of him for his honesty and loyalty to the company and the state. But it used to break my heart to see how my father never got what he deserved. While others climbed the stairs of success one after another. Every time they had to promote **someone, they**would hype my father up just to leave him disappointed in the end by giving what he so rightfully deserved to others.”

There was silence between us again for a minute but then she turns towards me.

“And you know what breaks my heart even more?” **She says and then continues, “That he never even complained.** **He never said anything bad about his company management or colleagues.**In fact, he always helped them out.”

“I couldn’t live such a life. I had to do **something. If he couldn’t make a name for himself, then I want to do it for him.** He raised us right, and I want to make him proud. I want to work for **myself and create** an environment for others that nurtures their talent and gives them the recognition and success they so rightfully deserve.” She looks away as she completes her sentence.

I could see the tears shining in her eyes.**I had never imagined that she would have this side.** Even in my wildest dreams, I couldn’t imagine her to be someone so empathetic, someone so sensitive. Her morals and ethics drive her, not her greed for money and fame. I have only known very few people to have such values. And she is one of them.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t think it's so bad to work in a professional setting wearing short pants and oversized shirts.” I try to hide my discontent about the matter.

“No, you don’t.” She says.

“No, I don’t. I don’t think I can ever agree to wear such outrageous clothes to your workplace.” Just talking about it makes me feel the same discomfort I feel looking at those kids.

Eliza notices it and chuckles.

“I hope it's still funny when they spill ketchup on one of your highly sophisticated and specially designed systems worth tens of thousands of **dollars,” I comment.**

“Well, about that. Food and drink aren't allowed anywhere near the systems. We have cafes that have some **laptops, so** they can use those. But they can not bring food inside the working area.” She says with a straight face.

“Oh, some might call you old.” I reminded her of the comment she made about me a few minutes ago.

“Oh, you are so petty.” She says as she laughs.

That’s when my phone started to ring, and I realized I have a meeting in five minutes. Talking to her, I completely forgot about everything else. It's not common for me to feel this comfortable and open up about my past with anyone as I did just now. My phone continues to ring so I shake my head and take it in the study.

# Chapter 9

Unexpected Allies

Eliza

I wake up to the sound of my alarm ringing. With a groan, I cover my ears, shutting my eyes tightly to avoid having to deal with my fate. The past few days, I have been working late at the office and even bringing work back home in order to keep afloat. **Our company has been dealing with a lot since the deal with our international clients was canceled.** Even though James had stepped in to make things right, it didn’t mean our company hadn’t seen the brink of bankruptcy.

But I have to admit that James offering to help me out has been a massive help. If it hadn’t been for him, our company would have collapsed by now. Although it’s true that we only got to that point because of him and his overconfidence. But he had truly and sincerely apologized for that several times at this point. From my first impression of him, I never thought he would have it in himself to not only apologize but also make amends.

But he surprised me by how willing he was to rectify his mistake. Ever since I met him for the first time, I had the worst impression of him. After all, he had been an asshole to me without even knowing me. At that party, I was determined to hate James forever. Everyone who knows me knows just how much I despise people with arrogance and pride. And before this whole ordeal, James Montague was the personification of every quality that I hated in a person.

He is proud, arrogant, overconfident, and used to getting everything he wants. **And although some of these qualities are still prevalent when I talk to him, there has been a slight change in the way I have always perceived him.**I can’t decide if it’s just me who has started to look at him differently now that he has shown me that he is capable of caring about someone but himself. I wonder if I am the one who is going out of her way to see the good in him or if he truly has changed a little.

I groan again when my phone starts to ring, giving up any attempts to go back to sleep. At least I tried, though. I tell myself to feel a little better. With a single exasperated sigh, I sit up in bed and lean across the nightstand to grab my phone. I check it to find my phone flashing with Derek’s name. My eyebrows furrow in confusion at the sight. Derek never calls me this early unless there is some kind of emergency. The thought makes me even more concerned so I quickly answer the call and press the phone against my ear.

“Hello?” I answer hesitantly, hoping everything is okay.

“Hey, I hope I didn’t wake you?” Derek says, and I can tell that he is trying to sound as calm as possible.

“No, my alarm did its job well. But what is up? Is everything okay?” I ask him, deciding to jump straight to the main point.

“Yes, yes. Well… I-” he starts to say something but pauses, unable to find the right words.

“Come on, Derek. Just spit it out; you are seriously scaring me now. Please tell me everything is okay? Is it your mom? Is she okay?” I ask, my mind coming up with the worst of scenarios with each passing second until he finally answers.

“Jesus Christ, calm down, Eliza. How can you even tell something is wrong?” he says, exasperated.

**“I have known you for years and worked for you for a long time.** I know very well when something is up and when you are trying to hide something from me. So stop wasting time and beating around the bush and tell me what is wrong before I come up with an even worse scenario.” I warn him, and I hear him sigh.

“Mom is fine, by the way. But I need you to not panic completely when I tell you this, alright?” he says hesitantly, and for some reason, his words scare me even more.

“Just tell me, Derek,” I tell him impatiently.

“I just heard that…” he pauses, “details of our projects have been leaked to our rival company. Our product has not yet been introduced to the market, somebody leaked its features, and now our rival company is working on manufacturing a similar product.” he finally **admits. I feel as if the floor beneath my feet has disappeared.**

“What?” I say, unable to believe what he is saying.

“I know, but I am trying to work through this situation,” he tells me, but I know that if something could be done, he would have done it already rather than calling **me now.**

“But who the hell leaked this information?” I ask him. I couldn’t help but feel betrayed. All my employees are treated like family in my house. I remember my conversation with James just a few days ago. I remember how I defended my staff and my way of working. I can not believe that anyone from my staff could do something like this.

“I don’t know, Eliza, I really don’t. But as I said, I am trying to find out. Hopefully, we will come up with something to help us figure this mess **out,”** he tells me, and I almost feel like crying.

“How could our employees do this to us, Derek? They would have no reason to.” I tell him, massaging my temples.

“You don’t know anything for certain right now, Eliza. Honestly, the more we try to make things work, the more**problems arise.**For some reason, I think we should just give up. Maybe this company has reached its expiration date, and we are trying too hard to save something that has crossed the point of **saving,”** he tells me. His voice sounds defeated, and my heart breaks for him. I know just how much this company means to him and how hard he has worked to build it and bring it to this point.

I can’t even imagine the level of disappointment and helplessness he has reached to say things like this. Derek is the most optimistic person I have ever met. On days that I gave up or gave in to my pessimism, he was the one who cheered me up and brought my spirits up again. He has always had blind faith in this company and my abilities, and it shatters my heart to see him give up. But I won’t let that happen.**I don’t care about the lengths I have to go to save this company, but I will do it no matter what.**

“No, Derek. We can’t give up now. We have come a long way to give up now. I **promise we will**fix this and figure out who is responsible for it. I am going to be in the office within the hour. Just wait for me there, alright?” I tell him quickly, and he sighs again.

“Alright. I’ll see you, I guess,” he says dimly **before disconnecting the** call.

I quickly get out of my bed and rush to the washroom to take a quick shower. I head out when I realize that I should probably inform James as well. After all, he is the one who is investing in our project. He has a right to know about something as important and disastrous as this.

I turn back **around, pick** my phone up again, and search for his contact before quickly dialing his number, hoping I won’t wake him up. The phone rings for a few **seconds,** and I am about to cut it when he suddenly picks up, his deep voice surprising me.

“Hello?” he answers.

“Hey,” I reply as I recover.

“Is everything okay? You calling me so early in the morning is concerning as **hell,"** he mocks teasingly, not knowing just how right he is.

“Well, no, things are not really great,” I tell him, and a pause comes from his side before he finally responds.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asks, and I am surprised to hear genuine concern in his voice.

“Somebody leaked the information and the features of our new product to our rival company, and they have started working on their own **project to**copy ours. The biggest USP of our new gadget is its never-before-seen features, and we have lost them. Without that…” I trailed off, letting him put two and two together. **My mind seems to be utterly muddled as I think of the disaster I am in.**

“What the hell? Do you know who did it?” he demands, anger evident in his voice.

“I don’t know anything. I just heard, but I am heading to the office to find out exactly what happened. I thought I should let you know first, considering you are investing in this gadget and **all,”**I say.

“No, I am glad you informed me. I am going to join you at the office, too, and I’ll have my team on it. They’ll find out who is responsible for leaking this information to your rivals. Alright?” he tells me reassuringly, and I nod even though he can’t see it.

“That would be extremely helpful. Thank you.” I tell him gratefully.

“Don’t worry, Eliza. We’ll figure it out,” he says, and my eyes prick with unshed tears. I had worked so hard to pull us out of one disaster only to find myself in a new one.

“I’ll see you at the office,” I tell him, needing to end the call before I burst out **crying.**I disconnect the call quickly and wipe away a few tears that manage to slip free.

No, Eliza, you can’t just give up and break down. You promised Derek you’d fix this and keep your word, I told myself. I get up again and walk into my washroom to take a quick shower **and get changed. I** skip the makeup and pull my hair in a loose ponytail before grabbing my purse, phone and car keys and leaving as quickly as possible to deal with the aftermath of this disaster.

# Chapter 10

The Charade Contines

James

Getting a call from Eliza this early in the morning had not been on my agenda today. I must admit that when I saw her name flashing on my phone at this hour, I had to blink twice just to be sure that I wasn’t seeing things. Even though my relationship with her had greatly changed and, our mutual hatred has transformed into something that helps us tolerate each other. Though, I have given up denying my attraction to her at this point. When I first met her at the party and the fact that she told me off in front of so many people, it pissed me off.

I remember thinking, who the hell was she to have the nerve to talk to me like that. And thus began our journey as enemies. I never was a believer of fate but the way Eliza and I keep running into each other, our paths intertwined in ways I never even imagined, makes me wonder if fate may actually play a role in this whole ordeal. I never thought I would see her again after the party, but somehow, we got pushed into a situation where we had to work together, which is, again, something I never expected would happen.

But despite our mutual animosity, I haven’t been able to keep the fact that I am attracted to her **under wraps** that well. That day, after our meeting with Alexandre, when she accidentally slipped, and I caught her, I didn’t even realize how attracted I was to her until my eyes clashed with hers, and I found them drifting down to her lips. Suddenly, I felt the urge to lean down and taste them. If Nikolai had not interrupted us, who knows what could have happened. Even though Eliza claimed to hate me **too, I**saw the spark of desire in her eyes as she noticed where my gaze had drifted to.

But since we have agreed to work together and even put on the facade of a fake marriage and engagement, I keep trying to ensure that I don’t cross any boundaries. We have a contract, and I don’t want to create any complications, but then again, at times when we are together, I find myself slipping from reality and forgetting that all of this is meant to be fake and she isn’t actually my partner.

But with the way something inside me keeps telling me to touch her, hold her, I don’t even know how long I’ll last before I give in to the desire. Especially if she keeps looking at me with the same desire in her eyes. I catch her staring at me when I am not looking. But all of this seems like a faraway thing as I rush to get dressed to be able to reach her office as soon as I can.

When I picked up her call this morning, I didn’t know what to expect. But I most certainly did not expect the bomb that she dropped on me. I can’t seem to make sense of what she told me. The way she talked about her employees, I can’t bring myself to think that they might have betrayed her like that. But then again, if it wasn’t them, who else could it have been? I could hear the strain in her voice as she spoke to me this morning, and I knew she was on the brink of breaking down.

Despite everything, I couldn’t help but feel bad. Eliza and I had only come to **this**agreement to have this fake engagement so it could help her company. I know how hard she worked for this, and the fact that she agreed so easily to get fake engaged to a man she hates only proves it. And yet, she has found herself in another problem, and this time, there is nothing she can even do. But I promised her that I would help her, and contrary to what she believes after the whole incident with Alexandre, I actually keep my word.

As I make my way out of my house, the driver rushes to open **my car door**so I can sit; as soon as I am settled, I pull out my phone and find my friend Max’s contact number. He is a good friend of mine who works in the cybercrime investigation. He is one of my most trusted people, and every time I have had issues with information getting leaked in my company, he has always helped me trace it back to the person who actually did it. I dial his number, hoping he will be up at this hour, as I press the phone against my ear.

“Who the hell died?” a groggy voice sounds from the other side as he answers the call.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” I say sarcastically.

“If you just called me to piss me off, I am hanging up,” he grumbles, and I roll my eyes.

“I need you to come over to an address I am sending you. My wife’s company’s information got leaked, and I need to know if this was the work of someone from within or if someone hacked into the system.” I tell him, my tone serious, even though I can feel the weirdness of calling Eliza my wife.

“Your wife? The pretty little thing that suddenly appeared in your life and has been the talk of the town recently?” he says, fully awake now.

“I would mind how you describe my wife if I were you. Don’t talk uselessly, and tell me if you are coming.” I tell him.

“Fine, fine. I will come, but only so I can meet your mystery woman. You never even invited me to the**wedding,”** he jokes, and I shake my head at his childishness.

“I am sending you the address. Get here as soon as possible.” I end the conversation.

“You got it,” he tells me before ending the call.

I pocket my phone again just as I reach her office and walk inside, heading straight to Eliza’s office. She texted me that she had reached out while I was still on the way, which is why I know she is in there. I ignore the whispers and the way everyone is looking at me with curious eyes as I intercept Eliza in the hallway.

I subtly notice the audience the we have and walk up to her slowly as she talks to one of her employees. I wrap my arms around her from behind, surprising her enough to make her jolt before she recognizes me.

“Shh… relax, it’s just me,” I whisper in her ear as I hug her from behind, letting the people around us witness the public display of affection that we are putting on for them.

But are you putting it on for them? Or do you just enjoy touching her? A voice inside me taunts, but I shove it aside, not wanting to ponder on whatever my mind is telling me.

“You got here earlier than I expected,” Eliza says, turning in my arms to face me as she dismisses the employee she was talking to.

“How could I take more time when I know my wife misses me,” I say loudly so everyone can hear. I lean down and brush my lips against hers, making her breath hitch. I can’t help but smirk at the way her body reacts to my touch.

“What are you doing?” Eliza hisses into my ear in a low voice, and my smirk widens.

“Putting on a show, of course. Didn’t you know we have an audience?” I tease her as she pulls back and narrows her eyes at me.

“We have to discuss some really important things. Come, Derek is waiting,” she tells me, pulling away from me and grabbing my hand to lead me to Derek’s office. As we walk, I notice a few of the employees checking her out, and I glare at them. As I pass them, a sudden sense of possessiveness fills me. **I don’t ponder why or how I am suddenly feeling all these emotions, nor do I get a chance to as we step inside Derek’s office.**

“Oh, you guys are here,” he says as a greeting, and I nod in acknowledgment.

“I am sorry about this. But I want to let you guys know that I have called a friend of mine here to come check if someone hacked into your system or if the information was leaked personally by someone.” I inform them, and Eliza looks up at me, surprised.

“That’s a great idea,” she tells me and I nod.

“But other than that, we need to figure out what to do now that this information has been leaked. What’s done is done. We need a new plan now.” I tell them, and Eliza gives me a troubled look.

“That’s what Derek and I have been trying to think of,” she tells me.

“I actually already have an idea if you guys are interested**,”** I offer, and both of them instantly nod.

“So, even though your features go leaked, we still have the advantage that they need to manufacture a gadget with those features, and maybe they can do it faster, but we can do it even faster,” I tell them, and they both give me a quizzical look.

“What are you getting at?” Derek asks.

“I am saying it would be great if we could change the date of our release and instead make it a sudden surprise release that no one will hear about, and you will have the benefit in every way,” I suggest, and they both sit up straight.

“That’s a great idea, actually,” Derek says, and Eliza nods in agreement.

We continue to discuss the plan in more detail when Max finally shows up and instantly gets to work. He checks Derek’s computer and laptop first but rules out hacking from them before turning to Eliza. But he takes longer as he checks her computer, his eyebrows furrowed before he starts messing with the computer’s interior, and a few minutes later, he pulls out a chip, making us all gasp.

“Shit,” he murmurs, making all of us worried.

“What is it?” Eliza asks, and Max looks up at her with a troubled expression.

“Your laptop is hacked. Someone inserted this chip into your laptop and has been accessing your data through this,” he tells her, and her eyes widen.

“What do we know?” Derek asks.

“I am going to take this laptop with me, and I will figure out more about this. I will get back to you all in a few days. Okay?” he says, and we all nod. Once he leaves, along with her laptop, I turn back to them.

“I have a splitting headache. I think I need a nap.” Derek says, and Eliza gives him a concerned look.

“You should probably head home and rest. Eliza, I have to head home for some work. Why don’t you come back with me for now, and we will discuss this in more detail?” I offer, and Eliza hesitates for a moment before nodding.

We say goodbye as we head back. As we step inside the elevator, the sexual tension between us grows palpable. I risk a glance toward her, and my eyes drift to her lips, and I am again overtaken by the need to kiss her. She turns around, and our eyes meet.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says quietly.

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like you want to devour me,” she tells me, and I smirk, walking closer to her.

“And what if I do?” I whisper in her ear, but before she can answer, the door to the elevator opens, and she rushes out, making me chuckle. The ride back is almost unbearable, and somehow, suddenly, I can’t keep my hands off her. As soon as we entered my house, I lead her to the kitchen.

“Do you need anything?” I ask her, trying to fight off my attraction.

“I…” she hesitates, and I look at her expectantly.

“Just a glass of water, please,” she says instead, and I nod. I turn around to open my fridge and grab a bottle of water, and when I turn around again, I almost bump into her, making her jump back in surprise. Quickly, I wrap my arms around her to save her, and I am hit by Deja vu. We stare into each other’s eyes for a few minutes before I give up.

“Fuck it,” I whisper before slamming my lips against hers and pulling her flush against me. She stiffens in surprise for a few seconds before she melts in my embrace and starts to kiss me back. I don’t even know what happens after that, but soon after, we are in my room, kissing each other hungrily. Finally, I pull away from her to look at her.

Eliza is standing in front of me with her tits almost popping out from her t-shirt, and I am unable to resist myself anymore. **I come close to her, and we breathe each other's fragrance for a moment before I push her back on the wall and run my lips down her throat**. We savor the taste of each other, swirling our tongues in each other's mouths.

**“You smell irresistibly good,” I say, hinting at what I am going to do with her in the next few moments.**

“Enough to fuck me?” she asks, and my eyes widen at her direct demand.

Damn! This girl will be the death of me one day. I say to myself as I nod, with a half smirk on my face, and slide her clothes down from her body. **Our clothes pool at our feet, and I carry her towards the bed, leaving the remnants of our clothing there in one corner.** **I press my lips again to her lips and trail past down her collarbone and breasts, tickling her nipples, and she moans in a slow and steady voice.**

That's what I have been wanting for a long time now.

**I come out of my thoughts and push her back on the bed as she grasps the sheet beneath to maintain her balance. I lean over her, placing my dick on her pussy, and sliding it down her body as slow as I can before finally pushing inside of her, and she moans in pleasure.**

**Her voice.**It takes me into a wonderland.

I continue to thrust inside her, kissing her body passionately **as if it's** the last time I would be able to experience that. Her hips rock back and forth against the sheets as I continue to stroke inside her pussy until we both reach the climax. It wasn't long until our liquids trail down our bodies, marking the end of our bliss.

# Chapter 11

Conflicting Emotions

Eliza

The shrill sound of the alarm jerks me awake, and I groan. Somehow, my alarm is extra loud and effective today. In fact, I don’t even remember setting an alarm, I think unconsciously. I cover my ears with my hands, willing it to stop, but it doesn’t. When it continues to ring, I give up. I try to reach over and shut it when I feel something restraining me from moving toward the nightstand. Confused and still half sleepy, I look down to find arms wrapped around my waist.

I blink, my mind needing a moment to process what I am seeing before my eyes track back to see the face of the person who is tangled up with me. When my eyes land on none other than James, all the memories of last night rush back to me. My eyes land on the discarded clothes lying on the floor, and I can suddenly feel the dull ache between my legs. I remember the way James looked at me last night. His gaze had been so intense. The way he slammed into me again and again until both of us were sated.

I close my eyes as my body tingles at the memory of what happened between us last night. I should have known that something like this might happen, considering the noticeable sexual tension between the two of us every time we are together. There is no doubt that James is one of the most good-looking guys I have ever stumbled upon. Even though we didn’t start off on the right foot, I still knew that I was attracted to him.

But at that time, we hated each other. I knew our mutual disdain would act as a boundary that would keep us away from each other. But ever since we lost the deal with Alexandre, things have taken a turn. The animosity we both felt toward each other started to die down. I didn’t even realize when we went from enemies to friends. If I had to explain it, I would say that our forced proximity due to him and I working together can be blamed for this sudden change in our dynamic.

But it doesn’t matter what led us to this moment. What’s done is done. I had been having a bad day yesterday and needed someone to rely on emotionally or someone to distract me enough that I would forget about all my troubles. James had offered me both these things, and that was it. This was just a mistake, a major oversight on my part. I should have thought of all the complications I would go through if I made this decision.

Groaning at my stupidity, I lay back in bed and slowly try to untangle myself from around him. I manage to pull his arms back and away from me before quietly slipping out of bed. I am sure James is already aware of the fact that whatever happened between us last night was a mistake. But I don’t want to face him. If there is one thing I have accepted after last night, it is that I can’t be trusted in his presence. My attraction toward him will get me in trouble, which is why I have to make it my mission to avoid being alone with him.

As I stand up, I feel weak in my knees. James really did a number on me last night. He was relentless in his pursuit as he kept me up almost all night, licking, fingering, and fucking me until we were both exhausted and passed out the minute we closed our eyes. I somehow manage to reach the spare room I have in his house for the time that I stay here and rush to the washroom and take a quick shower. I walk out after a few minutes and get changed into a black pencil skirt and white blouse. I pull my hair up in a ponytail and apply my signature red lipstick before rushing out of the apartment, glad to find that James is still asleep.

As I make my way to the office, I still can’t get the previous night out of my head. I can’t help but wonder what James was thinking. Did he enjoy it as much as I did? Does he think it was a mistake, too? For a moment, I wonder if walking away before he even woke up was the wrong thing to do, but then I remind myself of how awkward and embarrassing it would have been instead if he had woken up and kicked me out of his bed, telling me how big of a mistake last night was.

The thought sours the memory, and I push it aside as I step inside the building and make my way toward my office. I hear the hushed whispers of my employees as I walk past them. Ever since the announcement of my wedding with James spread out, more and more people have started to pay attention to me, and I can’t say I quite like the attention, but I have learned to ignore it.

As I reach my floor, I find Derek’s office empty and decide to return to mine and get to work. I need to get to the bottom of this scandal and figure out a way to save my company. But with each passing day, problems seem to only increase. The more I try to get out of them, the harder they seem to chase me. Derek and I have been struggling to keep the company afloat for a while now. When we heard about Alexandre and his project, we were determined to score ourselves the deal, knowing that only that deal could save our company.

But things didn’t go our way. When James decided to help us, I thought that maybe the difficult times would be over now, and soon, James and I could end this whole charade. The minute our company gets its footing back, James and I will no longer need to pretend to be a married couple, nor do we need to work together.

The thought of ending things with James in every context makes my heart stumble, but I remind myself of the reality of our situation. James and I were always meant to be a temporary solution that would come to an end the minute neither of us needs the other. But with this sudden interruption of our product's information getting leaked, everything is a mess again. **Although James, Derek, and I agreed that we would release our product earlier than planned and get the element of surprise on our end, I suddenly feel unsure.**

Suddenly, a knock sounds on my door, jerking me out of my thoughts as I look up, furrowing my eyebrows in confusion. I am not really expecting anyone, but still, I respond.

“Come in,” I call out, and slowly, my secretary walks in, giving me a small smile, which I return.

“Ma’am, I am sorry to disturb you, but there is someone here who is asking to meet you. He says it’s important,” she tells me, and I raise my eyebrows.

“Did they give you a name?” I ask her, curious as to who it could be.

“Yes, it’s Max,” she tells me, and the name instantly clicks as I remember James's friend from yesterday.

“Oh, yes, please let him in,” I tell her quickly, and she leaves with a nod. A few minutes later, another knock sounds from my door, and Max slowly steps into my office. He gives me a small smile as he sees me, and I give him one in response.

“Hey, please come in. Take a seat,” I tell him politely, and he nods as he takes a seat in front of me before pulling it out and placing it on the desk.

“I am sorry for stopping by unannounced. I didn’t have your number, and James wasn’t picking up when I called him last night to let him know I will be visiting today,” he tells me, and I try not to blush as I think about the reason why James didn’t attend to any of his calls last night.

“No, it’s quite alright. Did you find anything?” I ask him, getting straight to the point.

“I wouldn’t say I found anything, but I think I have figured out what happened. **Have you left your laptop unattended at any public place in the past few days?** He asks me, and I pause as I ponder upon his question before it finally hits me.

“Yes, I think so. I have been going to this local cafe these past two weeks to work, and often, I leave my laptop unattended there.” I tell him, and he gives me a grim expression.

“Okay, so from what I have gathered, somebody who had access to your laptop managed to insert the chip in your laptop. Now, I am not sure who did that, but from what I have seen and heard, you truly believe in your employees. However, due to that chip, all of your data and files were easily transferred to your rivals. I managed to trace the documents that were sent to the rival company and erased everything. But the fact still remains that they have already seen everything there was to be seen.” he tells me with a serious expression with a tinge of sadness.

“I know. What’s done is done.” I tell him.

“I wish there was more I could do for you, but I am afraid I can only offer you help in terms of making sure no one gets any more information off your laptop. I have secured it against any threats or anything,” he tells me as he pushes the laptop toward me.

“Thank you. This really means a lot to me. How can I pay you back for this favor?” I ask, unsure of how to deal with the situation, but he only laughs.

“Your brute of a husband will annihilate me if he finds out I have taken any money from you. Honestly, there is nothing I want in return, but I would like it if you call me if anything is wrong. Okay?” he asks me, and I slowly nod.

“Right. Of course, thank you once again.” I tell him, and he nods before taking his leave.

I watch as he disappears suddenly, even more disappointed than I had been. But at the same time, I can’t help but feel grateful to James for having called his friend. Just as I think about him, my phone pings, and I pick it up, only to find James' message waiting for me. I gulped, wondering if it had something to do with our night together or how I left this morning, but I took a deep breath as I opened the message.

Husband: We have to attend a charity gala together tonight. I would prefer you get ready at my house so we can leave together and avoid any problems and speculation. Everything you might need is already here. We leave at 7. See you.

I stare at his message, and I can’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment at the lack of mention of our night together. But I should have expected that he wouldn’t say anything. But I guess I have to attend a ball today. I just hope I don’t find myself getting hurt.

# Chapter 12

Secrets Revealed

James

The sunlight streams into the room and goes right into my eyes, blinding me as I open them for a moment. I turn around, opening my eyes only to see if the other side of the bed is cold and empty. I expected to find myself waking up to Eliza after the night we had just spent, but much to my disappointment, that did not happen. I don’t even know when she slipped out of bed without waking me up. I sigh as I get up, disappointment etching its way inside me even as I try to keep it at bay.

I should have expected it. Considering the fact that Eliza and I hadn’t started on the right terms and our complicated relationship, I should have known that this would have never worked out well in my favor. But last night, I had been unable to fight off the temptation. I knew I shouldn’t have kissed her**or**done everything else that we did last night, at least not yet when things are so uncertain and complicated around us. But I wasn’t able to keep my hands off her.

A part of me feels guilty. I knew she was in emotional distress due to all the issues she was facing at work, and even though I hadn’t meant to use that against her, I couldn’t help but wonder that this is exactly what I did unconsciously. Shit. The thought makes me freeze, and I wonder if that is what Eliza is thinking, too. Does she think that I took advantage of her in any way? Disgust curls inside me at the thought, and suddenly, it makes much more sense why she would leave without leaving like this.

As I walk into the washroom to freshen up, these thoughts continue to haunt me as guilt gnaws at me from inside. How do I talk to her and explain to her that this had not been my intention? But knowing Eliza, I doubt she will want to talk to me or even face me any time soon. I remember the days when we were working together for Alexandre’s project and how she used to avoid me like a plague just to avoid conflict.

I know that if I try to talk to her, she will not listen and shut me down even before I get the chance to explain things to her. But what will I even say? How do I explain this whole thing to her when even I can’t make any sense of it. Our relationship is fake, only existing to benefit each other. Then why are my emotions suddenly all over the place? Why did last night mean more to me, when I never cared about any of my one-night stands before? Why did I lose myself in her eyes as she lay beneath me, with me buried deep inside her? Why did I suddenly think about all the ways to pause time just so she wouldn’t leave?

I know for a fact that I haven’t felt this way for anyone else in a long, long time. But the fact that I am feeling this way toward her is even more complicated. I am the reason that Eliza is in so much trouble right now. Will she ever forgive me enough to even think of me that way? God, everything makes me want to bang my head against a wall. This is why I run away from emotions. Somehow, they find a way to mess everything up.

I get dressed for work, and all the while, my brain keeps me occupied as I try to come up with a way to get Eliza to talk to me. I wear my gray Armani suit, grab my phone and wallet, and leave my house. The ride to the office is silent as I scroll through my phone, reading a few emails I missed. I notice the several missed calls I have from Max, and my eyebrows furrow in confusion. I call him back, but it goes unanswered, and I guess he is still sleeping.

When I finally reach my office, I find my assistant standing there with my coffee in her hand. I nod at her in acknowledgment as she hands me my coffee and follows me into my office. She doesn’t say anything until I am seated in my chair and sipping on my coffee.

“What’s the schedule for today?” I ask her, leaning back in my chair.

“You have two meetings today, and I cleared out the rest of your day because of the charity gala you have to attend today,” she informs me, and I look up in surprise.

“Charity gala?” I ask, confused as I try to remember what she is talking about.

“Yes, I informed you that you received an invite last week from Mr. Carson for the charity gala that he is hosting today. You asked me to clear your schedule for today,” she explains, and I remember suddenly.

“Right. Alright, thank you.” I tell her, dismissing her.

As she leaves, a small smile appears on my face as I realize I now have an excuse to get Eliza to meet me. I release a sigh of relief at the fact that I can see her now without having to come up with another excuse. With the smile still intact, I pick up my phone and leave her a message informing her of the event.

Once that is done, I call my assistant back to my room to dish out a few more instructions. A few seconds later, she knocks on my door.

“You called, sir?” she asks, and I nod.

“Yes, I need you to run a few errands for me. Since the meetings are already scheduled, I would like you to rush to the mall and buy an evening gown for my wife for the event. **Or maybe find the** best shop there and have them bring out their best collection and pieces, and I’ll join you there when my meetings are over.” I tell her, wanting to pick out a dress for Eliza myself.

Why? Even I don’t know, and honestly, I don’t want to think about that just yet.

“Of course. I am assuming the price is not a problem?” she asks, and I nod again.

“I want only the best for my wife. Make sure you keep that in mind. Price is never a problem when it comes to her, understand?” I tell her, the word wife rolling on my tongue smoothly. I hate to admit that the word is starting to grow on me.

“Understood. I will let you know when I have everything you need,” she says before taking her leave,

Satisfied I turn back to my work and busy myself in it, looking forward to the event.

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**The next few hours pass in a blur as I talk to Max, who fills me in about everything he told Eliza, and as I lead the two meetings, which turn out to be successful.** And by the end of the second meeting I am in an exceptionally good mood. This day is proving to be lucky for me at every turn. Not only did I close two deals, but I am closer to mending my relationship with Eliza than I had expected when I woke up this morning.

Or at least that is what I am hoping. I have my fingers crossed in the hope that she will give me a chance to explain when I see her. But knowing how stubborn she can be, I don’t think I can make any safe bets just yet.

As soon as I leave the meeting, glad that I am done for the day, my phone pings with a notification, and I pull it out to find my assistant’s message informing me that she has all the dresses **and is** waiting for me. I quickly ask her for the location and make my way over to her.

As soon as I enter the shop, I am surrounded by several colorful dresses. I find my assistant standing near the counter with the sales lady, and as soon as they see me, they turn toward me. The sales lady’s eyes widen as she sees me, probably recognizing me as she rushes over me.

“Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you today?” she asks professionally.

“I am assuming my assistant already told you what I am looking for,” I tell her, nodding toward my assistant.

“Yes, sir. Of course. I have the best of our collection out. Please follow **me,”** she says before leading me toward the pile of dresses.

She starts to show me different gowns of different colors but nothing seems to stand out. She tries hard to sell the dresses to me, but my unimpressed expression doesn’t change.**When I am about to give up and find another shop, my eyes land on a sparkling midnight blue gown.**

“That one,” I tell her, making her pause in her pursuit of showing me another dress as I point toward the blue gown. She quickly pulls the gown out and shows it to me and I know it’s the one.

It’s a full-sleeved gown that changes colors as it goes down from midnight blue to pale blue with crystals all over the dress. It has a slit that starts from mid-thigh, and I can almost imagine how breathtaking Eliza would look in this.

“Pack this,” I tell her without a second thought. Once the dress is packed, I continue to buy shoes and jewelry for her. Once I am satisfied with my choice, I head back home, expecting to see her home already, but she isn’t.

Disappointed, I have the things placed in her room before I leave to get a few other errands and only return at six p.m. to get ready. When I walk in, I make my way to her room first but find it locked. Not wanting to disturb her, I walk into my room and start to get ready even as anticipation builds inside me. I put on my blue Tom Ford suit to match Eliza’s gown and walk out only to find her already waiting for me in the living room.

I come to a halt as my eyes take her in. The dress fits her like a glove, complimenting her olive skin. She looks exquisite with her hair cascading down her back and the sparkly makeup she has done. Our eyes meet from across the room, and suddenly, all I want is to close the distance between us and claim her lips.

“You look breathtaking,” I tell her, and I notice the slight blush that appears on her face, making me smile.

“Thank you. Whoever picked these things has great taste,” she says.

“At least you admit I have good taste,” I tease, and her eyes widen.

“You picked these?” she asks, surprised.

“Of course I did,” I tell her, and she seems at a loss for words, so I take the chance to step closer to her.

"Eliza, I want to talk to you about la-” I start to mention the elephant in the room, but before I can finish the sentence, she cuts me off.

“We should leave, or we will get late,” she says quickly before turning around and running away.

I stand there for a moment, disappointed, but eventually, I follow her out. She might have been able to escape me this time, but I’ll make sure that by the end of this night, she is back in my arms.

# Chapter 13

The Public’s Reaction

Eliza

The air is thick with tension as James and I sit in the car on our way to the gala. Am I a coward? Yes. When James' expression turned serious, I knew where this was going, so I did the one thing I could think of.

Run.

Now, we are both in the car, the unsaid words, and the memories of last night hanging in the air as they dangle over our heads. But I refuse to give in. I can see that James wants to say something, but I don't look at him again in case he takes his chance and brings up last night.

I only look up again when the car stops, and the flash of cameras surrounds us. James exits the car before moving to open the door for me like a perfect gentleman. He wraps his arm around me as we start to walk inside, but the crowd and the media hold us back as they take pictures and shout questions at us.

"Mr. Montague, is it true that you only married her to save your reputation?" someone asks.

"Eliza, are you pregnant?"

"Is your marriage real?"

"Is it true that you only married James for his money?"

"Mr. Montague and Ms. Eliza, are you both in a contractual, open marriage?"

"Ms. Eliza, rumor has it that you slept with Mr. Montague and trapped him with a baby. Is it true?"

I can't keep the disgust off my face as questions are thrown at us here and there, and I feel James' arm tighten against my waist before he comes to a stop. I look up at him in confusion when I find him glaring down at the reporters.

"If any of you says one more despicable thing about my wife, I will make sure you pay. Our marriage is as real as it comes, and whether Eliza is pregnant is none of your business. All you need to know is that we are happily married and do not need this kind of toxicity revolving around us." he says in a loud, clear voice before making his way inside.

I can tell that he is still mad as his grip doesn't loosen on my waist, even as he greets people. Mr. Carson, the host, apologizes to us for the chaos outside, and James just brushes **by**him. We mingle for a few hours, but James doesn't say much, his jaw clenching and unclenching before he leads me to the bar.

"Whiskey on the rocks," he orders before turning to me.

"Champagne, please," I order and turn back to him, taking in his tense posture. "Calm down," I tell him.

"They have no right to say such things. I am going to sue each and every person out **there,"** he grits out.

"They are reporters, James. That's what they do. You can't sue someone for doing their job." I tell him, trying to calm him down.

"Saying all those things about you and our marriage is most definitely not their job. How are you so calm?" he demands, turning toward me.

"You think I didn't expect this kind of reaction? I am a young girl who has managed to make a name for myself. Of course, they are going to accuse me of sleeping with you. If it's any solace to you, though, if it hadn't been you, they would have accused me of sleeping with someone else." I tell him nonchalantly, but that only seems to anger him more.

But before he can say anything else, a third voice interrupts us.

"James?" a shrill voice calls out, making us both turn around. A girl stands there wearing a black gown that compliments every curve in her body, showing off everything a girl would be proud to show off. She looks at James with a mix of sadness and desperation.

"Lydia?" James grimaces as he turns toward her.

"Thank god, I got to see you here. You haven't been answering or replying to any of my messages," she says, coming closer to him as she places a hand on his arm.

Something inside me rages at the sight. Jealousy and possessiveness I didn't know existed rises within me, and I want nothing more than to push her hand off him. But James does it instead as he pulls back.

"I think I made it clear that I have no interest in seeing your face anymore," he tells her stiffly.

"Come on, James. I told you I am sorry," she says, but he just glares at her.

"I am not interested in anything you have to say. My wife and I are in the middle of a conversation. Leave." he tells her, and her attention finally turns toward me.

"Wife?" she repeats. "You can't be serious. Are you seriously telling me that this girl is your wife? Wow, I can't believe your standards dropped so low after **me,"** she mocks before turning to me. "I am sure you feel like you scored, honey, but trust me when I tell you this: You mean nothing to him. He is still in love with me even though he won't admit it. But he will." she smirks, and I give up trying to keep my mouth closed.

"Really? Is that why I have this and you don't?" I ask her, flashing her the ring James had got me. Her smirk fades as she looks at my ring and glares at me.

"Who do you think you are? You are just a means to an end for him. He is going to use you and discard you. Do you think you are special to him? Think again. What do you even know about him, huh? I bet he didn't even tell you about me." she snarls.

James pushes between us, his hands curled into fists as he glares at the girl.

"Leave, Lydia. This is the first and last time I will tolerate such disrespect toward my wife. If I ever see you again, Lydia, I will make you regret the day you met **me," he** warns her in a low voice.

Lydia looks between me and James one last time before scoffs and walks away. But even as I see her walk away, her words still ring in my head. They act like a much-needed reality check because none of what she just said is a lie. It's easy to lose myself in the fairytale of a happy ending with James when it's the two of us. I don't remember that this is all just a fluke. But Lydia had just dragged me back into reality, even though I didn't want to be dragged out just yet.

"Eliza," James whispers my name as he tilts my face up with a finger under my chin. Our eyes meet, and I want to lose myself in his eyes. But the bitter reality surrounds us, and I can no longer ignore it.

"I want to go home," I whisper, not trusting myself to say anything more.

James looks at my expression and, thankfully, doesn't push it as he calls his driver. We both head out as he places a hand on my back, and I try to blink the tears back. I don't even know what I am crying about. All I know is that this day has been a wreck for me.

We stay silent on the way back, both of us unsure of what to say to the other as we make our way back. When the car finally stops, I don't wait for James as I rush inside, but before I can make it to my bedroom and shut the room to conceal myself and deal with my mess of emotions, James catches up to me.

"Eliza, stop," he says, but I don't listen to him.

"Not right now, James." I manage to respond before continuing to walk away but I feel his hand wrap around my wrist as he pulls me back toward him. I gasp as he pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around me as he cages me in his arms.

"What are you doing? Let me go!" I say, my eyes widening.

"Not until you talk to me. Damn it, Eliza, you can't run from everything," he says, exasperated, and I stop struggling.

"It's been a rough day, James. We both need to rest and sleep it off." I try to rationalize with him, but he just shakes his head at me.

"No, you ran away from me this morning, too, but I'll be damned if I let you run away from me for a second time. We have to talk about this." He says.

"There is nothing to talk about. Last night was a mis-" I start to say, but he cuts me off as he slams his lips against mine. It takes me a moment to recover from the shock as he kisses me passionately, and I finally give in and kiss him back, unable to resist him. He ravages my mouth, kissing me until my lips are swollen, and when he finally pulls away from me, we are both breathing hard.

"A mistake? I don't think so, Eliza. I don't run from my problems. I prefer to face them. I know things are complicated, especially because of this sudden shift in the dynamic between us, but I am not willing to give up on it just yet. I want to see where this **goes,"** he tells me, and my heart skips a beat.

"James…. We can't. There is so much here. Our fake marriage, the media." I start to list the reasons, but he just shakes his head at me.

"I don't give a shit about the media or anything. I will make sure no one says a word against you. But this thing that I am starting to feel for you is not fake, Eliza. It's the realest thing I have felt in a long time. I know today was a mess, but please just give it a **chance,"** he pleads, and I close my eyes.

I know I should say no and walk away, but somehow, my heart won't let me, so I do the only thing I can and nod. James' eyes light up, and before I know it, he slams his mouth against me again before he picks me up and carries me to his room. He sets me down when we reach, and his eyes travel the length of me, the hunger and desire evident in his gaze.

"You look amazing with this dress on, but from the moment I saw you in it, I have been wanting to slide it off you," he tells me as he starts to unzip my dress until it slips down and pools at my feet.

The rest of the night is a blur of kisses and passion. After several minutes of torturing me, he finally slides inside me, taking me hard and fast. When we ride out our highs, we both lie there on the bed, wrapped in each other's embrace. I can't help but wonder what tomorrow will bring for us.

# Chapter 14

Crossroads

James

Ever since I took this project with Eliza, I have gotten busier than ever. I have worked with very different products from different industries, but launching a tech gadget that is expected to break through is something I had no experience with. If I did, I would have been mentally prepared to tackle the issues and obstacles that come with it.

But here we are, still doing it. I am taking it one day at a time, but if I have to be honest, now I see why the international clients choose both of us to work together. If it wasn’t for Eliza, I could never have done it alone. I am thinking about how good she is at what she does when I see her name flashing on my cell phone. I pick up the phone and attend her call.

“Hello”, I say.

“Hi, James. It is me, Eliza,” she responds.

“Yeah, I know. What's up? I thought you were in the office.” I ask her.

“Yes, I am, and I need you to come here too. There is something we need to discuss.” Her tone is serious, worried, in fact.

“Eliza, is everything okay? Are you okay?” I ask impatiently, feeling uneasy.

“Yes, yes. We are all okay. It is about the project. I need to discuss some new developments in the process. Some more challenges, and before I make a decision, I want to discuss it with you.” She says, her tone still the same.

I can feel my heart ache for her. Partially because I feel responsible for all of this. If I hadn’t been so arrogant and listened to her in the first place, if I had taken our collaboration on this project seriously when the international client asked us to work together, none of this would have happened.

“Okay, I will be there soon,” I reply, and we end the call.

I sit in my office, thinking about what Eliza must be going through. I don’t know what the new development is or what kind of challenges she is facing this time. I fear it's not what I think it is. However, I know she wouldn’t have called me if it hadn’t been something serious. And knowing how she feels about this company, I can bet she must be under a great deal of pressure herself.

I call my assistant on the intercom and ask her to cancel all my appointments for the rest of the day, and I will be leaving the office in ten minutes. Then I get back to my laptop and rush to wrap up the work I have been working on. Right now, Eliza’s situation feels more urgent, so I need to shift all my focus there.

I reach Eliza’s office in fifteen minutes, and in those fifteen minutes, I keep wondering what kind of challenge we must have this time and what solutions we would have available at hand. I was lost in thought until I saw a young kid riding a bicycle in the office wearing headphones and being lost in some deep, deep thoughts.

I shake my head and make my way to Eliza’s office. When I enter her office, to my surprise, there is a group of people sitting and discussing what I guess is the current problem. Seeing me, one of the people sitting in the center gets up to offer me the seat. I nod and sit down there and look at Eliza.

She seems like she has lost weight. Her skin looks pale, her eyes lifeless. She looks tired, but it's not just exhaustion I see on her face right now. It feels like she is ready to give up; her shoulders have dropped. I have never seen her in a state like this. I wonder what the problem is that could make someone as resilient as Eliza drops to her knees.

“Thanks for coming, James. This is my marketing team, and I know your team is handling the main marketing and launch of the product. But my team also researched the market to see how well our product will work if we launch it earlier than the decided schedule.” She introduces her team and explains why they are here.

“And what are your results?” I ask the head of the team directly.

“The results aren’t good. We will face a major backlash from the industry if we launch this technology right now. The audience might be ready, and the sale of the product might be really good initially. But the industry isn't. If we launch this right now, they will slowly and eventually boycott us, and in a matter of six months or, max, a year, they will make us irrelevant in the industry,” one of them explains his research analysis in detail.

I can feel Eliza’s eyes on me, trying to read me, trying to understand why I do not look surprised. She is studying me cautiously before she says anything.

“You knew about this, didn’t you?” She finally asks.

I can hear the pain in her voice as if I betrayed her trust. I can see the disbelief on her face. She is looking at my face, wishing for me to deny it. But I can't, she is right, I knew about this.

“Yes, I got the report from my team yesterday,” I say calmly.

She shakes her head. She is disappointed, I can tell. Derrek assesses the situation and stands up from his seat.

“Okay. Well, we will discuss it further and then get back to the whole team. Until then, how about you get back to work. Thank you.” He dismisses everyone.

Eliza stays quiet till everyone has left.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She asks.

“Because I don’t want to stress you even more,” I answer.

“When were you planning on telling me this?” She shoots another question.

“After I have found a solution to this,” I answer honestly. I see the tension in her shoulder relax a little with my answer.

“James, I understand you want to help. But this is our company, Derrek’s, and mine. You can't keep such information from us. We trust you.” She says while Derrek stands between her and me, resting his back on the desk between Eliza and me.

“Then trust me, my team has been working since yesterday to find a way out of this,” I say, trying to convince her.

“Do you really think there is a solution, James?” She asks, then answers herself. “There is no solution. How many people are we going to go up against? First Alexandre, then the competitors, now the whole industry?”

“Maybe this is just a sign for us to stop and give up. Maybe this is time we accept our defeat.” I hear the words I never thought Eliza could say. Accept defeat?

“When have you done that before?” I ask.

“There is always a first time to everything. This will be mine.” She says, finally resting against the chair as if she has really accepted the fate of the company.

“If we are going to go down, Eliza, then we do it our style,” Derrek says, turning to face her.

“You want to go down fighting?” She asks. I see a flicker of a smile on her face.

“I don’t know any other way, do you?” Derrek says.

“I don’t think so. But we also need to remember that it's not just us this time, Derrek. James company is also involved. It wouldn’t be just us going down. It will destroy him, too.” The smile on her face is gone again.

“Nobody can destroy him, Eliza. Remember who you are talking about. He is the devil himself.” Derrek laughs and looks at me.

Like always, Eliza looks at me and tries to read my face. I notice her struggling to understand the smile on my face.

“What is it now, James? Why are you smiling? What else are you not telling us?” She asks.

“I can't out all my secrets, now, can I? But I will say this much: if you have decided to dance with the devil, then let him lead, and just enjoy the melody.” I say cryptically.

I know Eliza won't like it, especially when it comes to her company. She tolerates no riddles. But this time, she doesn’t say anything but just nods.

“I am only concerned about one thing, James. How will it look for you? How will your company deal with this setback?” She shares her concern.

“My company will face no setback, and if everything works out, neither will yours,” I reassure her, and she nods again.

“Okay, then we are back on track. We continue doing what we have been doing. I will inform the team that the project is set to launch on the new date.” Derrek says as he leaves the office.

“I am planning on the launch event since you are the marketing company for us. What do you suggest? Do we go big, or should we keep it quiet?” She asks me.

“Eliza, I need to say something to you,” I reply, completely ignoring her question.

“Yes, what is it?” the concern on her face is evident.

I can't help but smile, seeing her worry for me.

“I just want to apologize for everything. Ever since we had the meeting with Alexandre and his team, I made a grave mistake. You have paid for it, and you continue to pay for it. I just want to say that if I can't do anything, I at least want you to know that I feel sorry for what I did, and if I could go back in time and undo it, I would.” I offer her my sincere apology, which has been long due.

“It's all in the past, James. Why are you bringing it up now?” She doesn’t look mad at me anymore.

“It is in the past, but we are still recovering from its repercussions, and every time we face a new setback, I realize what I did and how stupid of a mistake it was.” I am being honest when I say this. Guilt gnaws at me from inside every time I look at her exhausted face.

“Are you okay? The master of the business world accepting that he is capable of making stupid mistakes?” The smile that I have been missing on her face is back. In fact, from the looks of it, she might start laughing any second.

“No, not mistakes, but just one, singular. I made one singular mistake, and everyone is allowed one mistake.” I try to cover up.

“Oh my God, if I told anyone you accepted that you made a silly mistake, no one would believe me. So, how about you say it again? I will record it this time.” She suggests.

“Well, like I said, one mistake. I won't make another one by recording myself.” I say and stand up to leave. I have a lot to work on. I know I asked Eliza to trust me, but so far, I have got nothing. I am up against the whole industry, and they won't make it easy for me.

# Chapter 15

Genuine Gestures

Eliza

Seeing this new side of James has left me shocked to the core; he accepted his mistake, and amidst all of this chaos, I still felt relieved, as if I needed that apology, or maybe it was the apology I needed to know the fact that he cared about this. To know that this project means something to him, just as it means something to me.

But the voice inside me disagrees with me. I try to stop it, but my heart keeps telling me that I want to see if I matter to him, more than the project, more than his giant ego. His apology showed me that he does, but I don’t want to get too ahead of myself. I shake my head and try to concentrate on the problem at hand.

But my mind keeps going back to the moment when I could see him being so sincere and honest in his apology. I could see the sensitive side of his personality hidden under the conceited exterior that he has maintained. I have always hated his guts, but now that I see his kinder side, I envy him just as much.

“Lost somewhere?” Derrek's voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

“No, just thinking about how to proceed,” I reply with a smile.

“I have a bad news.” Derrek sits on the chair, almost falling into it.

“More?” I ask, shocked and scared.

“Yes, more. So brace yourself.” He warns.

“Okay, I am ready. Hit me,” I say.

“The latest prototype isn't functioning properly.” He says casually, not realizing the bomb he has dropped on me.

“Breathe, Eliza.” He reminds me.

And I let go of the breath I am holding. I try to breathe for a minute before I continue the conversation.

“What happened?” I question him.

“The team got to know about the problems we are facing, and they have lost their morale. They are all in panic mode, and that’s affecting their performance.” He informs me, throwing his head in his hands.

I can imagine what he must be going through; he has been with the team since the morning, working with them and trying to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

“How did they get to know?” I can’t keep the surprise from my voice.

“Someone’s friend works for a competitor; they talked, and now everyone knows.” He explains and gets up to go back to the team.

“I will come with you. I need to talk to them.” I leave my office with Derrek.

I know I need to talk to them, but I have no idea what I can say to them to make them feel any better. It's their lives and their careers that are at stake. And I can't make any false promises either; that’s not fair to them. So, I will give them the truth, however difficult it may be, but that’s what they need to hear from us in order to believe us.

“Hi, everyone, gather around. I want to talk to you all.” I clap my hands, standing in the center of the hall.

Everyone drops what they are doing and forms a circle around me. I wait until everyone has joined, and then I start.

“I know you have been hearing all sorts of news and rumors. So, I am here to set the records straight. Yes, we are on the verge of losing our company.” I say loudly and directly.

I can see Derrek's panic, as I am sure this isn't what he expected me to say to them. I also hear a lot of noises and questions around me. Everyone is panicking even more now, but I pause for a few seconds.

“But I am not worried. Do you see me worry?” I ask them, and none of them respond.

“I am not worried because this is the first time; I am going against all odds. I have done it a million times, and I have won every single time. And I know I will win this time too, you know how, because I have what no one else does; I have what's irreplaceable. They can't replace me with anyone or anything; you know what do I have that’s so irreplaceable that makes me feel invincible?” I throw another question at them.

“I have my team of geniuses. I have the brains of some of the smartest people, and it's something no one else can copy, replace, or reject. We have given this market so many innovative products, and the market couldn’t deny even a single. Why do you all worry that it will deny this one when you all know that this is the best of all?” I leave them with another question.

“I am not worried because I have done it a million times. But you guys are stressed out because you are dealing with this situation for the first time. So how about instead of focusing on something you have never dealt with, you do what you do best and let me do what I do best? I think it’s a fair deal?” I finally stop and move in a circle to see if there is anyone who is still stressed and doesn’t agree with this approach?

“I also want to say one more thing. Derrek and I made this company by being honest and open with each other, and that’s what I want to do with all of my company. So, if you have any concerns, please come talk to Derrek or me. Let us take care of these things for you.” I say softly, allowing them to feel reassured.

I pause for a few seconds again, giving them a chance to speak up if there is still something on their mind, but when no one says anything, I take a breath and leave after telling them to get back to work.

“That was impressive.” Derrek comments as I pass by them.

He still needs to stay with them and make sure the prototype is ready.

I come back to my office, and to my surprise, I see James sitting there, calmly waiting for me.

“Hi, I didn’t know you were coming?” I say to him as I get seated across the table.

“Oh, yes, it wasn’t a planned visit, and I couldn’t wait until we met at home. So, I came here.” He replies.

“I hope all is good,” I ask him, and he nods.

“I am sure you are well aware of the seven families that hold 70% of the industry?” He asks, and I wonder what he is getting at, but I nod.

“So, I have family ties with the three of them, and I have met with them in the last week to show them the product, talk to them, and mentally prepare them to see it in the market soon.” The information he is sharing is crucial.

“What do they think then?” I ask impatiently.

“Initially, they disagreed like I expected. They want us to hold the launch till everyone has agreed to a tech gadget so advanced. But then I talked them into supporting it as it can be beneficial for them as well in so many ways. So, by the end of our meeting and several phone calls, I could convince these three families to support our product after the launch.” He shares the details and I feel my body physically relax.

I feel like he just took a load off of my shoulders that I have been carrying since the beginning of this project. I don’t know if I want to jump from excitement or cry because of how exhausting this all has been, but I decide to keep a straight face; I know he noticed.

“But we need to go talk to another one; for us to be in the majority and influence the rest of the industry, we need at least one more major player for the industry by our side. To turn this in our favor.” He explains.

“So, what's the plan? What can I do?” I ask.

“Nothing, you just focus on the product and the launch. I will deal with these problems and let you know how it went.” He replies with a reassuring smile.

I still have to get used to his smile, which leaves me breathless. I am not used to this sweet side of him, especially when he smiles at me like that; it makes my heart skip a beat. He has been nothing but helpful in all this chaos. If it wasn’t for him, I would have already given up.

It hasn’t been easy for me, but having him by my side makes everything easier, everything better. I close my eyes and rest my head against the chair. To take a deep breath and unwind for a minute because that’s all I have, one minute. I don’t know why, but I feel safe when he is around, and having him in my office right now makes me believe that I can close my eyes and forget about everything, even if it's just for a minute.

“I just need a minute,” I say to him with my eyes closed.

“Take your time. You need it,” he says.

And without realizing I fall asleep. When I open my eyes, I see him sitting still in the chair, arms crossed against his chest, looking at me intently as if trying to memorize my features. I look directly into his eyes and, for a moment, forget where I am and the problems I am running from.

But it was just for a moment. The next, I am back to being my composed self.

“I dozed off. Sorry.” I apologize.

“Oh, don’t worry, it was only for 15 minutes, anyway. Your body needs this rest.” He comments.

“I am fine. My body is used to the stress of my work. Anyway, how do you think you will do it? Convince the fourth family? Do you have something?” I ask him.

My 15-minute nap gave me the energy to get back on my toes and fight till the end, as I always have.

“Well, I have a few tricks up my sleeve. And a few favors that they owe me. But if I am being honest with you, Eliza. They are not the easiest to deal with. Not only does this family own 25% of the market, but it also controls people’s opinions. So, we need to be very smart about this. One wrong move, and we might lose it all.” He shows me the full picture.

“Is that why you are here, to scare me?” I ask him sarcastically.

“Honestly, I am here to see you. Because seeing your unbreakable spirit gives me strength. It makes me want to do the undoable. Your strength and resilience inspire me.” He says with a gentle smile.

I look at him in a state of shock. Is he the same guy who ruined the most important deal of my career? Who risked my company just to prove his arrogance? It can't be!

“Am I dreaming?” I ask this time honestly.

“I don't think so. I believe you woke up about ten minutes ago.” He says in his normal casual tone.

“An apology and humbleness. Did something hit you in the head, or are you the nicer twin of two? Because not just me but no one will believe the things that are happening.” I express my shock to him, and to my surprise, he starts to blush.

James, blushing!

Am I really dreaming, or is this actually happening? I can't believe my eyes. But the next second, he says something that brings me out of the state of shock.

“Well, if you are done drooling over my perfect face, I will excuse myself. Unlike some, I have to deal with a real problem of a real business.” And just like that, he is back to being his arrogant self.

“That's what I thought,” I comment as he is about to leave my office.

“Eliza, I will make it work for you. I messed it up, and I will make it happen, too. Just keep trusting me as you have so far. I won't mess up again.” A genuine promise from the man himself.

I am left in shock and surprise. My heart skips a beat. I immediately try to calm it with one of my hands, but the heartbeat is not in my control. I didn't know someone’s words could make me feel so much. But when these words come from him, it makes my heart go wild, just as it did just now. How will I ever tell him what he is doing to me? How can I ever show him what he makes me feel?

# Chapter 16

Breaking Point

James

I leave Eliza’s office to meet Martin’s, who controls and runs the industry on their terms. They own 25% of the whole industry and are the major players. Having them on our side can mean guaranteed success, but fighting against them would mean an unfair war. A war that Eliza and I combined would not be able to win, a war that would drive both of us out of business. As successful as I am, I am still a man with a million-dollar revenue organization, but Martin’s have been in business for more than a hundred years.

One of the lessons I learned very early in my career was to accept reality and then plan your strategy. And that’s what I am going to do now as well. The reality is that I am no match for Martin’s and that is why I have accepted many if not all offers and requests from them. These have always been made to me indirectly by third parties but even so, this shows that Martin’s does see me as a vital player of the industry.

I always knew that having made them several favors would always pay me back someday, but I can’t solely rely on that. In the business world, nobody will do you a favor unless it's in their favor. So, I need to convince the Martins that this deal will be a huge advantage for them as well as the industry.

On my way to Martin’s, I find myself feeling more confident and anxious both at the same time. Seeing Eliza trust me fully with this gives me the confidence boost that I need to go talk to Martin’s but seeing her in a state of exhaustion and sleep deprivation leaves me anxious. A lot is riding on this deal. This deal needs to come through or…. Or what? I ask myself.

Or I will have to watch Eliza break down in front of me, the image of Eliza with her shoulders dropped and eyes teared flashes in front of me and I feel a wave of sorrow rush over me, the pain in my heart I feel is new. I don’t know what that’s about, or maybe I just want to stay oblivious to it. Because accepting it will just make it way more complicated than it already is.

I reach the head office of Martin’s and take a deep breath.

“You can do it James; you can make it happen,” I say out loud before I enter their office.

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After four long hours of intense debate, implied threats, unabashed ostentation, and offers for mutual benefits I leave the Martin’s office with victory to my name. Martin’s are known for their value of time, they like to save every single minute and second, and for them to spend four hours with me, says a lot about how they are also aware that our product will be a revolution in the tech industry.

I get in the car and dial Eliza’s number.

“Hello,” She picks up the call.

I can hear the sound of traffic in her background, she must be driving.

“Can I ask you where you are?” I ask.

“Yeah, I am on my way home. I should be there in fifteen to twenty minutes. Is everything alright?” She asks.

“Yeah, everything good. Have you had dinner?” I ask her a question I have never asked before.

I hear the silence from the other side and after a few seconds, she responds.

“Actually, I haven’t. But why did you ask?” She sounds confused.

“I haven’t had dinner either. Would you like to have dinner with me? I want to discuss something as well.” I say.

“Well, yes, we can do that. But what do you want to discuss? Is it something about work?” She asks curiously.

“Yes and no. I will tell you when I meet you. How about the Chinese place by the corner of my street?” I suggest.

“Sounds good to me. I will see you there then.” She says and ends the call.

I start the car and in about thirty minutes I reach the restaurant we had decided to meet at. I park the car and walk towards the entrance when I see Eliza sitting in a sacculated area using her phone, probably reading something. She is still wearing her black pant suit with the white button-down shirt with her top two buttons now undone, her hair however is not tied up tightly in a bun which is how she wears them in the office, instead, they were open and freely falling on her right shoulder.

Every time I see her silky hair falling on her shoulders touching her collarbones and kissing it with every move she makes, I feel an urge to touch those strands of hair and move them so I can touch her collarbone. I realize I am standing and staring at her through the glass wall of the restaurant. I shake my head to get these thoughts out of my head and walk inside.

“Hi,” I greet her as I take a chair in front of her.

“Oh hi.” She smiles.

“Have you been waiting for long?” I ask.

“Maybe ten or fifteen minutes, but I just started reading the business report so didn’t mind.” She clarifies.

“Oh, that’s good then. Have you ordered?” I ask her.

“No, I was waiting for you to see what you wanted.” She answers.

I look up from the menu and a waiter appears from the back of the counter and starts walking towards us.

“Hello sir, what would you like to order?” he asks.

“Is Antonio in the kitchen?” I ask the waiter about the chef who usually prepares my meals here.

“Yes, sir, he is.” He nods.

“Okay, ask Antonio to prepare my usual order and for the madam.” I look at Eliza.

“I will take the same.” She says to the waiter with a smile.

“Alright, ma’am. Your order will be served in twenty minutes. Can I take your order for the wine?” The waiter asks.

“Tell Antonio to send the white, he knows,” I say and dismiss the waiter.

“Seems like you dine here often.” Eliza comments.

“I actually do, it's one of those places that serve clean, hygienic, and delicious food. The chef here Antonio is a good friend.” I tell her.

“You ordered the same dish as mine, but you don’t even know what it was,” I ask her.

“Well, from what I have seen, you are very picky plus your taste is very gourmet, so I can rely on your choices of food.” She replies.

“Oh... so you have been noticing me a lot, lately huh?” I raise an eyebrow at her.

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Just trying to keep a closer eye on you.” She says.

I wonder if there ever will be a time when Eliza will have no answer because I would love to see if not myself then someone, anyone to leave her speechless. But if it's me, then that would be the best.

“You said, you wanted to talk about something?” She asks.

“I do.” I nod.

“What is it?” She asks again.

“Well, it's something very important,” I reply.

I can see the frustration on her face now. She wants to know what the matter is, but I want to enjoy this moment and tease her.

“James, for your own sake, I think you should not be making any riddles right now.” She threatens me.

“For my sake? What does that mean?” I reply with a smile.

And the waiter comes back and paces two glass each in front of us, and then pour a sip for me to taste. I move the glass to twirl the wine inside and then drink it, when I nod at the waiter, he pours the full glass for Eliza and then for me, keep the bottle in the bucket on the side of the table and leave.

Eliza picks up her glass and gulps it all in a single go.

“Way to go girl” I laugh at Eliza and pour her another glass.

“Don’t mess with me James, spit it out.” She snarls at me now.

“Okay, brace yourself,” I say to her with a straight face, and look directly into her eyes.

“The martin’s agreed to support our product and we can now easily launch our product as we have planned to,” I announce the news.

I look at Eliza who is in a state of shock, she is holding her breath and staring at my face without blinking, I wait for a few seconds before I wave my hand in front of her eyes.

“Eliza?” I say.

She finally let’s go of the breath she has been holding.

“Are you okay?” I ask her softly.

She finishes her second glass in one go again before she answers me.

“Yes, yes. I am okay. What did you say, can you repeat?” She says.

“We can launch our product. The Martins are on our side.” I say with a smile.

“I think I need more wine.” She says.

I pour her another glass of wine carefully monitoring the expressions on her face. So, this is how it feels like to leave Eliza speechless. She takes a sip of white wine and opens her mouth to say something but the waiter starts serving the food.

She looks at the food as if it’s something alien.

“You don’t look so well, Eliza, how about we take it to go and head home?” I suggest.

She nods and I ask the waiter to get the dinner packed. When we leave the restaurant, Eliza informs me that she has sent her car back home already so she would ride with me home. We spend the whole five minutes driving in silence until we enter the house.

She enters the house and I am behind her when she turns throws her arms around my neck and locks me in a very tight hug.so I hug her back and when she leaves me and pulls back, I feel the attraction building. I pull her closer again, and we kiss passionately. I scoop her up into my arms and carry her to the bedroom, not wanting to waste any more time.

I quickly light the candles in the room, and the scent of lavender and the dim candlelight fills the room. Eliza looks around and smiles, her eyes lighting up.

"This is beautiful," she says.

I take her in my arms and kiss her again. The kiss is more intense this time, and I feel her boobs pressing against my masculine chest. We move to the bed, and I lay her down gently.

We continue kissing, our hands roaming over each other's bodies.

I start to undress her slowly, taking my time with each article of clothing. I want to savor every moment with her. When she's completely naked, I take off my clothes and join her on the bed.

We continue kissing, and I explore her body with my kisses going to her chest, back, and shoulders. She moans softly, and I know that she's enjoying it. I move up to her breasts, kissing and suckling them. She arches her back, and I can feel her body shiver under my touch. I kiss my way down her pussy, finally reaching the place I've longed to touch. I can tell she hesitates for a while.

She gasps as I explore her with my tongue, and I know she's close to climaxing. She reaches out to me, pulling me up to her lips. We kiss again, and I can taste her on my lips. She wraps her legs around me, pulling me closer to her. I enter her slowly, feeling her body yield to mine. We move together, our bodies in perfect harmony. I can feel her getting closer and closer to the edge, and I know I'm not far behind.

We both orgasm together, our bodies shuddering with pleasure and radiating the heat of love. As we lay in bed, sweaty and satisfied, I pulled Eliza close.

"Thank you for everything James, thank you for saving me," She says.

She snuggles up to me, her head on my chest. I stroke her hair and hold her close, feeling content and happy for the first time in a long time. As we drift off to sleep, I can't help but think that this might be the beginning of something special.

# Chapter 17

Revelations

Eliza

Sunlight streams into the room, hitting me square in the eyes. I try to cover my eyes, annoyed with myself for forgetting to close the curtains before I sleep. I close my eyes tightly, hoping to sleep through the disturbance, but it doesn’t work. With a groan, I open my eyes and glare at the window. Why couldn’t I have been a little smarter? Why did I have to be so stupid all the time? I think to myself. I make a move to get up and close the curtain when I feel something wrapped around my waist tightly.

My eyes drop lower to my waist to see what it was only to find an arm, a very veiny, very familiar arm wrapped around it. I slowly turn around and of course, there he was. James was holding on to me as if I were some treasure that someone would steal if he didn’t keep a tight grip on me. Even in his sleep, this man is a possessive, arrogant person. But as I look at him, memories of last night resurface, and I can’t help the flush that rises to my cheeks and neck.

My eyes move toward the floor and the discarded clothes lying around. Last night had been wild. We were so desperate for each other that we couldn’t even have waited for longer before James could get inside me. Considering the burning passion and the undeniable attraction between the two of us, it makes sense why we can’t keep our hands off each other. Even though James is older than me, maybe the oldest guy I have ever been with, somehow, he is also one of the most attractive people I have ever seen.

My body has never responded or yielded to anyone the way it surrendered itself to him last night. My body craves his touch and comes alive for him in a way I have never experienced before. That is probably the reason why the best sex I have ever had in my life has been with him. He knows just how to touch me, how to get me soaked and begging within minutes. Just thinking of last night makes me wet all over again.

I look at him, surprised by how peaceful he looks. This is the first time that I have woken up before him. He usually wakes up earlier, but as I look at him right now, I can actually admire how good he looks. Despite his age, he has the kind of face that could get him any girl. His sharp jawline and prominent cheekbones are what any girl would die for. Not to mention his long eyelashes, which are probably longer than mine, which I personally find very unfair.

I get why so many girls go crazy to be with him. Not only is he super rich, but he also looks way too hot for someone his age. It’s a win-win. A girl would count her lucky stars if she scored a guy like him. Shouldn’t you count your lucky stars too? A voice interrupts me and I shove it aside. I don’t want to think of myself as someone who got him.

The thought sours everything as I remember the harsh and bitter reality of my situation. It doesn’t matter how hot, or how wonderful James is. The truth is that James isn’t mine; he never was and will never be mine. He comes from a very different background, not to mention how this entire thing is just a fluke. God, it’s so hard to remind myself that none of what James and I have is real. It is so easy to forget and lose myself in the midst of joy when he is with me that I completely forget why this is happening. Everything seems like a mess all of a sudden.

I look at him, lying there peacefully and I suddenly realize how stupid it was of me to sleep with him. We keep blurring these lines between us; I already know that my feelings toward him are not fake, and the more we get involved, the worse it gets for me. As for James, he doesn’t do commitment. I am sure this is just a fling to him, just some fun he can have and nothing more. While I wish I could be that laidback, relaxed, and fun to enjoy one-night stands, unfortunately, that is not the case.

I close my eyes, covering my face with my hands as I realize my mistake. God, he probably thinks of me as a one-night stand or maybe someone he casually sleeps with from time to time. Just thinking of myself in that way makes me want to throw up because this isn’t like that for me. With each passing day, my attraction toward James increases but that’s not it. For someone who started with the worst impression, James seems to become the most trustworthy and reliant person I have after Derek, which is scary because I never trust anyone. My feelings for him have changed from hating him to tolerating him to genuinely liking him. I enjoy his company, and any time he isn’t there I find myself thinking about him.

This is such a mess; I keep telling myself. Slowly, I get out of his embrace, slipping his arms off me. I try my best to be as quiet as possible as I get out of bed and grab all the clothes, I was wearing last night from the floor. I open the door, slip outside, and sigh relief once I am out. I quickly rush to his other spare room and use the washroom there to freshen up and change into my clothes. I check the time and realize I am running late for work, making me pick up pace and grab my things.

Thankfully, James doesn’t wake up until I have left, saving me from the embarrassment of waking up after he does and having the awkward conversation where he pretends that he is not kicking me out or mentions how this means nothing. I swear if I had to sit through that conversation, I would just leave the country out of embarrassment. When I finally reach my office, I come across Derek who checks his watch and raises an eyebrow at me curiously.

“How come you are late?” he asks with mock disbelief and I roll my eyes at him.

“I am a human too, Derek. I am allowed to sleep in sometimes.” I quip, trying my best not to expose myself.

“Mhmm, especially when someone is keeping you up all night,” he says teasingly.

“Oh my god, stop.” I glare at him, but he laughs.

“What? I am only voicing what everyone can see. You are glowing and you are flushed. Plus, that poorly concealed hickey isn’t doing you any favors either,” he tells me, and my hands fly to my neck.

God, someone just bury me here.

“You know what? Everyone needs to mind their own business. Now I am going to get to work.” I tell him and walk away even though I can hear the sound of his chuckles from behind me.

As soon as I enter my office, I close the door and calm myself. I can’t believe I am so obvious. I move toward my desk and take a seat before my eyes land on the files placed there and I instantly remember all the pending work I have to do. The launch is so close now and this is the worst time for me to be distracted.

Shoving all thoughts of James and our complicated relationship aside, I pull the files toward me and get to work. As I go through the statistics and the forecasts for the market, I find myself trying to link things and figure out what kind of an effect it will have on our product launch.

Deciding that I can’t figure all of this out on my own, I grab the files and go to Derek’s office. We both study and mull over the files for hours without even realizing it. We only look up and stop discussing them when someone knocks on the door.

“Come in,” Derek calls out, and my assistant walks in, and I look at her in confusion.

“Ma’am, Mr. Montague is here to see you,” she tells me, and my jaw drops. James? What the hell is he doing here?

Derek looks at me with a smirk before turning back to my assistant.

“Yes, that’s alright. Send him up,” he tells her, and I glare at him, which he responds to with an innocent shrug.

“Don’t act as if you aren’t excited to see him. Honestly, Eliza, just because this started as something fake doesn’t mean it can’t become something real. I can tell you really like James, and from the looks of it, he feels the same way. Why are you so hesitant?” he asks me and I want to laugh at how right and yet so wrong he is.

He is right about the fact that I really like him, and how this can become something very real. But that is just from my side. How do I tell him that James doesn’t think the same?

“I’ll figure it out,” I murmur, not responding properly as I get up and bid him goodbye before leaving his office.

I take slow steps toward my office, my heart pounding as I think of the reason behind this visit. Why would he come here unannounced? Could it be work-related? But if it were that he would have wanted to meet Derek, too, right? My train of thought stops abruptly when I see him get out of the elevator and our eyes instantly connect. He breaks eye contact as his eyes take me in from my face to my feet. The heat in his gaze is scorching and I feel myself get hot.

No, Eliza! You can’t go there again. A voice inside me reprimands me, and I instantly look away, refusing to make eye contact again as he walks toward me until he is standing in front of me.

“Hi, I murmur.

“Hello, Eliza,” he says, his voice deep and raspy.

I lead him to my room, and he takes a seat in front of me.

“So, what did you want?” I ask him, my tone professional and I know he notices as he raises his eyebrow at me.

“I can’t come visit my wife at work?” he asks as he looks at me and I clear my throat awkwardly.

“I am sure you have better things to do, Mr. Montague,” I tell him in a serious tone.

“More important than you. Mrs. Montague?” he says.

“Look, James, I have a lot of work to do, so if this isn’t important, then it’s best I get back to work,” I tell him, not meeting his eyes as I stand up.

“Eliza, wait,” he says quickly, and I pause.

“Look, I am sorry about last night, okay?” he begins, and I instantly know where this is going. Didn’t I leave his house early just to escape this conversation? I don’t want to hear him tell me how it was all a mistake, so I don’t give him a chance to finish. I take a moment to process his words and try not to let the hurt show on my face.

“It’s alright, James. But I really need to go right now, sorry,” I tell him before walking away. I notice the confused expression on his face as I walk away but don’t pause and walk out of my room. Maybe I am a coward, but I can’t deal with him telling me how insignificant last night was for him.

# Chapter 18

Unravelling Facades

James

I sit there, confused and utterly blank, as Eliza dashes away before I even get the chance to explain myself. I noticed the way her face fell, and her expression changed. It took her a few minutes to process my apology before her entire demeanor changed. I can’t be sure, but I feel like that was hurt. I saw a flash in her eyes as she processed my apology. But it makes no sense. Why would she be hurt that I was apologizing?

Isn’t that what I should have done anyway?

Jesus Christ, I have absolutely no idea what to make of this situation. I can’t even decide if I should regret the night we spent together or cherish it. It was undoubtedly one of the best nights of my life, but the aftermath of my actions that night has been troublesome. Eliza has been avoiding me like a plague ever since that night happened.

That hadn’t been the first time we hooked up, but somehow, this time, it felt more real. I am not sure how I would describe it, but we both saw that this time, it was more than just our hunger and desire for each other but something more. For the first time that night, I truly imagined a future with Eliza. I don’t even have it in myself to deny that I am falling for Eliza, but the question remains if she reciprocates. But judging from how she just walked out on me, I am forced to consider if that is the case.

I tried to figure out what I did wrong and what I could have done better to get me at least a chance to finish what I was saying, but before I could finish, Eliza already decided that it wasn’t worth it. My fingers tap on the desk in front of me as I sit there, completely lost in thoughts. This whole thing is the most frustrating and challenging thing I have been through in a long while.

But more than anything else, I couldn’t get Eliza’s expression out of my mind when I started to apologize. I want to get up and go after her, but the fact that we are in her office deters me. The last thing we need is people stirring up more drama. The media already has so much shit to say about Eliza and our relationship; I don’t want to give them another thing they can blow out of proportion.

It still pisses me off that they feel entitled enough to say and write the horrible things that they have about my relationship with Eliza. But I know that as someone who has been in the public eye and a target of the paparazzi for a very long time now, there is nothing that I can do. Everything around me is falling apart and going so terribly wrong, and for the first time in my life, I have absolutely no idea what to do in order to fix it.

Giving up with an exasperated sigh, I get up and decide to leave and return to my office. There is no point in lingering here when I know Eliza won’t talk to me while she is at work, so I guess this conversation will have to wait till tonight when she comes home, and this time, I won’t let her run away and hide somewhere. I am going to finish what I had started and tell her my true feelings.

Even though all of this started as a charade to help her company, that was no longer the case. If I think back, it makes me bewildered to think about how unpredictable life can be. The first time I met Eliza, she had set out to put me back in my place the way no one has had the gals to do before. I should have known then and there that she would be the one to bring me to my knees. How could she not when there was nothing she would back down from? Eliza has always been a force to be reckoned with, and I should have been better prepared while dealing with her, but I wasn’t.

The fact that she decided to snap back at me in a room full of people who thought twice before looking at me the wrong way is proof of how brave she can be. My arrogance, however, did not take the blow very well. But fate works in mysterious ways. The odds of Alexandre putting me and her in a team after the first time I saw her were absolutely zero, but somehow, it managed to work out. But like the idiot I am, I let my ego and arrogance win over rationality.

I still feel the urge to bang my head against the wall as I remember how arrogant I had been with the deal we were signing with Alexandre. If it hadn’t been for that one mistake, Eliza would not have been going through so much today. The absolute terror of losing her company has put so much pressure on her, and she doesn’t even deserve it. Despite our differences and that neither of us liked the other even an ounce, she was still professional enough to keep all of that aside and reach forward to work with me.

But that couldn’t have been said for me. My ego couldn’t handle that the girl who had the audacity to shout and snap at me in front of a room full of people was now working at the same level as me. I wanted to show her how that deal was no big deal for me, that I scored deals like that with no problems whatsoever. I guess that’s why I got humbled so quickly. Losing the deal is what started the chain of actions that has been taking place ever since that day. It’s safe to say that I have been humbled not just by fate but also by Eliza, enough to have stomped all over my ego and arrogance every time I am in Eliza’s company.

As I make my way out of her office, I think about all the pending work I have to do. With the upcoming launch and the four major families in league with us, there is a lot that needs to be done. Especially considering it’s not our time to shine as we market the product to the rest of the world and convince them to buy it. I can tell that everyone is getting more and more anxious as the launching day gets closer, but I have to keep myself in check. There is no room for mistakes this time; I will not risk it for a second time but, most importantly, lose Eliza once and for all.

Just the thought of losing Eliza forever is scary enough that I need to put the thought out of my head and distract myself. On my way back to the office, I scroll through my phone, going over my emails and the schedule that my assistant had sent me. It looked like my day was busy, but then again, when are they not? I notice the three consecutive meetings she has scheduled for me, and I groan, not feeling like doing anything, but unfortunately, these meetings are important enough that if I miss them, I will have issues in the future.

Once I reach my office, I barely have a few minutes before my assistant rushes in to inform me that the people with whom I have the meeting are already here. I consider leaving Eliza a message to inform her that we will have dinner together tonight and to wait at my house until I return if she gets free early. But with the way I have to rush from one place to another for the rest of the day, I can’t leave a message for her.

The rest of the day passes in a blur as I go through hours and hours of discussion and arguments. I am not sure if I should be annoyed or grateful for the meetings. The one thing I needed was a distraction, which it offered me, but I also wanted to go home as soon as I could so I could fix whatever the problem between us was and finally admit the thought that had been brewing in my mind for a while now.

By the time I finally get free, it’s seven. Checking my phone, I hope to see a message from Eliza, but I find none. Disappointed, I decide to text her and ask her where she is just as I start to make my way downstairs to go back home.

James: When will you be home?

I press send and hold my phone in my hand as I wait for her response, which will come within the next few minutes.

Eliza: I am already home.

Her response makes me release the sigh I had been holding on to. As I sit in the backseat, I google ideas on how to make it up to my partner. Don’t judge me; I need some ideas on how to win her back, and food might be how to do it. I have gone over several options and want to know what she will think if I decide to make her something. Will that be enough to make her forgive me?

The question hangs in my head as I finally reach and slip out of my car and make my way toward my house, anxiety, and anticipation of finding her there alive inside me. But when I finally unlock the door to my house and take the step inside, I realize how quiet it is. My eyebrows furrow in confusion, unable to understand why there is no sign of Eliza.

“Eliza?” I call out, wondering if she might just be in the washroom, but no response comes.

I walk deeper inside the house, but nothing has been moved out of its place.

“Sophie?” I call out my maid’s name, and after a few minutes, she rushes out.

“Good evening, sir. What can I do for you?” she asks professionally.

“Did Eliza stop by?” I ask her, but she just shakes her head. Aggravated, I nod for her to leave and pull my phone out again to text her.

James: Where exactly are you?

I don’t close the chats as I stare down at my phone until she finally starts typing.

Eliza: I told you, I am home.

As I read her message, I get even more confused.

James: Are you wearing a cloak of invisibility? Because I don’t see you here.

A few seconds pass before my phone pings, and I quickly check it.

Eliza: That’s because I am at my own house.

My jaw clenches at her message. How am I even surprised? Of course, she went back to her own house. I already know that if there is one thing that Eliza is really good at, it’s avoiding people, and I have witnessed it in the past few days. But that ends now; I have had enough of her running away from me. If she wants to run, then I have no other option but to chase.

# Chapter 19

Rebuilding Trust

Eliza

I wait for his response, but it doesn’t come. Annoyed, I throw my phone on the couch. Why did he even message me if he didn’t have enough time to respond? Plus, why the hell does he care where I am? Could it be that he feels sympathetic toward me and is only asking about this because he feels guilty? The thought makes me sick. How could I ever have been stupid enough to fall into this trap? I knew from the very start that this was a fake agreement and that nothing that happened between us was real. But it still somehow felt so real.

The way he changed, all the things he has done for me and my company when he really didn’t have to. If it had just been guilting over the deal with Alexandre that he lost, he easily made up for it by offering to invest in my company. But even after that, time and time again, he has stood by my side and supported me in ways no one has ever supported me before. He has been going out of his way to ensure that he can keep trouble out of my life.

I can lie to myself and say that it is all because he has invested money in my company but in the past few months that James and I have been working and putting up this act of a fake marriage, I have come to know him, and I know for a fact that James didn’t give a damn about money. He had enough that if he lost all the money he had invested in my company, nothing would happen; I doubt he would even blink.

But then, why did he even do all of this if that’s not the case? He considers our night together a mistake, while I think it’s one of the best nights I have ever had. And yet I always catch him staring at me when he thinks I am not looking; he still cuddles me when we sleep and holds me close when he thinks I am sleeping. God, this is so confusing. Whoever said that girls are confusing has clearly never met a guy before because there is no way he would just blame us for this when men are no better in this department.

Deciding to get my mind off this, considering there is no conclusion I have come to, I decide to head over to the kitchen and make something for myself. As soon as I pull out my pan from one of the cabinets, I hear my doorbell ring. My eyes shoot toward the door, confusion etched upon my face as I wonder who it could be at this hour. I am not expecting anyone, and anyone who comes to visit me, to inform me before they come.

The bell rings again, and this time, it pulls me into action as I set the pan down and head toward the door. I open the door hesitantly only to find James standing outside, a bothered expression on his face and his hands in his pockets. My eyebrows shoot up in surprise at the sight of him standing in front of my door when not long ago I had just been thinking of a way to get him off my mind, and now here he is standing in front of me like he has every right to be here.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him when I finally get my voice back as the shock wears off.

“If you don’t come to my house, then I guess I will have to come to yours,” he announces, and I glare at him.

“I didn’t come to your house because I wanted space. But you know what? I am glad you did show up so we can talk.” I decide as I hold the door open for him, and he walks inside wordlessly. As I shut the door behind him, I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the difficult conversation I need to have with him, but the truth is that it has to happen. I am already too deep in this, and if I don’t end this here and now, God knows where I will end up, and there is even going to be a road I can take back.

“Why didn’t you come home?” James breaks the silence as he turns to me, and I find myself getting caught off-guard.

“I am home,” I respond after a few seconds, defensively folding my arms around my chest.

“We are supposed to be married, and you know we are supposed to share our living space. Seriously, what is going on?” he asks, and I feel my stomach tighten.

“Actually, this is what I want to talk about,” I tell him, my heart clenching as I try to keep my expression as blank as I can as I say this. “I am really, really thankful for all that you have done for me till now, James, but I think it’s time to end this whole charade,” I announce. For a moment, James gives no response, but then I see the disbelief in his eyes as he listens to my words, but before he can say anything, I decide to continue.

“We always planned to end this once my company is no longer in a bad position, and I think we have already done that. With the launch so close and everything being settled, I think our aim has been reached. We should now move to the next step, which is letting the world know that you and I are getting divorced. I gave it some thought, and I came to the conclusion that making a statement abruptly about our separation would be suspicious, so I was thinking that we could instead start to get their attention in small ways. This is actually why I came back to my house. Slowly, they will notice how we are no longer living together when they see us leave separately.” I explain and look at him. His jaw tightens, but his expression is otherwise calm as he looks at me.

“And after some time, to make it official, one of us can be seen with someone else. I can go to some club and bring man back home with me-” Before I can even finish my sentence, James is on me as he grabs my waist and pulls me to him before kissing me, hard to shut me up.

I stay frozen in his arms for a moment, trying to digest what the hell is happening even as he devours my mouth. He kisses me frantically and angrily as if he is punishing me with a kiss. But somehow, I give in, melting his embrace and letting him take over the kiss. When we finally pull back, my lips are swollen, and I am breathing hard. But it’s his eyes, so full of fury, that makes my breath hitch.

“If you think I am going to let any man touch my wife, let alone look at you, you are sorely mistaken,” he growls against my lips. My eyes widen at the possessiveness in his voice.

“I am not really your wi-” I start to protest, but he cuts me off again with another searing kiss that leaves my mind in a muddle.

“I dare you to say that again,” he warns me as he pulls back, and I stay silent this time.

“You have said enough already, Eliza. But it’s my turn to talk now, and you are going to stay silent and listen to me. Understood?” he demands, and all I can do is nod.

“Did you forget that this was a two-person commitment? Do I have to remind you that you are not the only person involved in this deal we made? No, so why do you think you can make a decision and follow through with it without even taking my opinion?” he asks, and I have no words.

“But you know what? If that’s how you want it, then I guess that’s how we will do it. If one person can simply make a decision and follow through with it, then fine. There will be no distance between us, no living separately, and no other people will come anywhere near either of us.” he announces, and my eyes widen.

“You can’t do that!” I snap, and that makes him narrow his eyes.

“Why not? Isn’t that what you just did, too?” he asks, and I look away, unsure what to say.

“I don’t even understand how this has come about. One second, everything is fine; you want me as much as I want you. We give in to our desires, and the next moment, you want to get rid of me. You keep giving me a damn whiplash. What the hell is going on in your mind, Eliza? You need to tell me what you are thinking!” he tells me.

“You happened!” I snap, unable to keep it in anymore. “Don’t you dare pin this all on me now, James? You are the one who apologized after that night. You are the one who regretted it, the one who apologized because you didn’t feel that way toward me. What else do you expect me to do after that? Do you want me to pretend everything is fine when it’s clearly not? You might be able to pretend, and act enamored with someone while not actually caring for them, but I absolutely cannot. And I refuse to dig myself a grave that I will never be able to get out of by staying with you despite your non-existent feelings for me.”

James looks at me as if I have grown another head as I take a few breaths to calm myself.

“What the hell are you even talking about? When did I ever say that I regret it?” he asks, looking genuinely confused with how his eyebrow furrows.

“Oh, don’t act so oblivious. This morning, when you apologized, what else were you apologizing for?” I challenge him, and he just shakes his head at me.

“For god’s sake, woman. Is that what you think was happening?” he asks, completely shocked. “If you had stayed put for a few more seconds before you jumped to conclusions and ran from there, I would have been able to actually tell you what I was apologizing to. But you choose to draw your own conclusions rather than giving me a chance to explain,” he tells me, and there is a hint of disappointment in his voice.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I wasn’t apologizing because I regretted it, Jesus; it was the best night I have ever had. Why the fuck would I regret it? I was apologizing because you were avoiding me like a plague, and I thought it had been too soon, and now I had scared you off. I was going to ask you to forget about that and start fresh because this whole thing was no longer just a pretense for me. But you never gave me a chance to finish,” he explains, and I feel my heart drop. My attention someone snaps on the last line.

No longer a pretense.

“You mean…” I trail off, not wanting to get ahead of myself, but James takes my chin in his thumb and forefinger, making me look at him.

“I mean that I don’t want you because of your company or any other reason. I want you because you make me feel things I have never felt before. I want you because you have made me realize everything I have been doing wrong in my life. You make me want to be a better person so I can deserve you. I can list a million reasons that make me want you more than I have ever wanted anyone. This whole thing stopped being fake for me a long time ago, Eliza.” he tells me softly, and I feel my heart skip a beat.

I feel the urge to pinch myself because there is no way that this is real. But as I look at him, I realize that it doesn’t get more real than this.

# Chapter 20

Embracing Reality

James

I hold my breath as I wait for her to respond. I just poured my heart out to her, yet she hasn’t said anything. With each passing second, my heart beats faster. The anticipation is killing me as I wonder what she will say. Will she reject me? Will she tell me how she doesn’t reciprocate? A million thoughts run in my mind, and I have absolutely no idea what to do. All I can see is the shock on her face and I don’t understand how she didn’t already know this. I have been so obvious about this because God knows I can’t hide how I feel alive whenever I am with her.

She is the light in my life, the only person who makes me feel alive and also makes me want to be a better person. She deserves so much in life; she has struggled so much to get where she is today, and although I am not perfect, I promised myself that I would make her happy. If only she gives me a chance, I will prove to her that there is so much that I am willing to do for her, so much I am willing to risk if it makes her happy.

“Can you pinch me?” she says after the long silence, and I can’t believe these are the first words that come out of her mouth.

Amused, I reach out and pinch her arm, making her yelp.

“Ouch!” she says, jumping back, but I shrug, amusement dancing in my eyes.

“You asked me to do it,” I respond, and she gives me a mock glare.

“I didn’t say you have to pinch me so hard,” she says, rubbing the spot I pinched.

“Sorry,” I tell her, even as I barely manage to fight the smile that seems to uplift my lips.

“No, you are not,” she says accusingly, and I grin.

“Is this your response to my heartfelt confession? I must say I am disappointed.” I tell her, and she blushes but doesn’t look away.

“I… I can’t believe this is real. It’s just that I have spent so much time dreaming of a day when you would say these things to me, but I never thought one day you might actually say this to me,” she admits, and I smile.

“Sweetheart, you have been the only person I have been able to think of ever since I first met you. You have engraved yourself into my mind, heart, and soul. Even when I hated you because of the mere guts you have to stand there and insult me, I still couldn’t get you out of my mind.” I tell her, and she smiles.

“I guess I can relate to that. You pissed me off so much, and yet somehow, I couldn’t fight off my attraction toward you. You always pulled me in, no matter how much I ran from you,” she says.

“You can run as far as you want, baby, but I will always find you,” I tell her, leaning down and pressing a soft kiss against her forehead.

We stare into each other’s eyes, and everything else around me fades away. I look at her to confirm that she is okay before I lean down and claim her lips. I kiss her slowly at first, taking my time with her. But the minute I feel her hands on me, I lose control and plunge my tongue into her mouth as I ravage it. After a few moments, I pull away from her, leaning down to press my forehead against hers.

I plant another kiss on her mouth, this time lingering for longer. The more I kissed her, the more I wanted her. When we finally part, her eyes are bright with desire.

“Are you ready?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she nods breathlessly.

I quickly picked her up and carried her to the bedroom before putting her down. She pushes me back onto the bed and straddles me. Her skirt rides up high enough that her panties are visible beneath it. My hands move to her hips, holding her in place as she kisses me again.

She grinds against me, letting me feel the heat between us. I moan into her mouth.

“Take your clothes off,” she demands, and I smirk.

“Not yet,” I tell her.

She grabs me by my shirt and pulls me down so I can kiss her neck while she grinds on me. She reaches around, finding my cock. It is semi-hard, but I can tell she wasn’t satisfied with that. She wanted it hard.

She takes it in her hand, stroking me slowly at first until it starts to grow under her touch. Then she grips harder, making sure I know what she needs from me. I groan into her ear and then kiss her neck again. Eliza lets out a gasp when I inch further south, licking at her skin and sucking at her nipples.

I work my way down her body, kissing and tasting every inch of her flesh. She thrusts against me, matching my pace and moving faster. She bites into her lip to stifle a moan, arching her back and pressing her chest to my face. I suck one breast before moving on to the other.

“Harder,” she whispers, and I oblige.

Grabbing her thighs and spreading them wider, I move my mouth lower, kissing and licking her pussy until she is writhing beneath me. She rubs her sensitive clit, desperate for release.

She tries to hold back, but soon, there is no stopping the need within her. She cries out as she comes, shaking all over. I kiss her again, running my tongue along her lips.

When she opens her eyes again, she finds me watching her. She smiles shyly and reaches for my hand, pulling it away from me. She strokes my fingers, knowing how much pleasure I get from her touch.

“Are you ready?” I ask her again.

She nods, taking my hand and wrapping it around her waist. She gently guides me inside her. We both let out a low moan.

We move together, the room filled with their gasping breaths. Eliza’s legs wrap around me, holding me close. She looks down and watches me take her.

She reaches down and holds onto my shoulders, encouraging me to go deeper.

I thrust harder, faster. I grunt each time I enter her. Each time I thrust into her, she feels even tighter.

I can tell that she is close as I reach down and rub her clit, and not long after, she comes. I fuck her through her orgasm, nearing my own climax. I thrust into her a few more times before I groan as I empty myself inside her.

We both come down from our highs as we stare into each other’s eyes, and I wish I could stop time so we could stay here forever, entangled together. Slowly, I pull out of her and notice how my cum leaks out of her.

I get up silently, walk into the washroom, and wet a towel before coming back and cleaning her.

“You don’t have to,” she tells me as I clean her, but I shake my head.

“I want to,” I tell her softly. Once I am done, I get back in bed and pull her into my arms, and we both fall asleep like that.

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I pull Eliza closer to me as I cuddle her. I bask in her arms, not wanting any space to be there between us. I woke up a few minutes ago, and I am still trying to come to terms with the fact that I am here, in Eliza’s house, with her sleeping in my arms. Things were such a mess until yesterday, and the fact that everything is better now is a little hard to believe, but the fact that I currently have her in my arms is the perfect proof that last night was real.

I look down at Eliza, who looks as serene as ever as she sleeps. Even in her sleep, she manages to take my breath away. Something about this woman blows my mind, and I can’t even put a finger on it. The lengths I would go to keep her by my side and happy are scary. But she is a million times worth it.

She stirs in her sleep, and I wait to see if she will wake up, but she doesn’t. The truth is, I am so obsessed with her that even though I had her all to myself last night, I still want her. I already miss her and how she glares at me and says the most unfiltered things at times. And most of all, I need to touch her, taste her now that I have gotten the taste of it once.

I check the time, and it’s almost noon; I give in, knowing I can’t go any more time without her eyes on me. I lean down and kiss her neck softly as I wrap my arm around her waist. I trail open-mouthed kisses down her neck, and she hums at the feeling, making me smirk. My hands trail her body, urging her to wake up. As my lips go further south, her breathing changes rhythm, and I know she is up just as I take her nipple in my mouth.

“Ah,” she moans as her eyes fly open and land on me.

“Good morning,” I murmur as I get on top, letting her feel how hard I am for her.

“You are insatiable,” she tells me, and I laugh.

“It’s your fault. I am absolutely addicted to you, and I don’t know how to stay away.” I tell her, and she blushes.

“Okay, now get off. I need to brush my teeth,” she deflects, but I shake my head.

“Not so easily. You don’t get to leave this bed before giving me a kiss.” I tell her, and she rolls her eyes before pecking me softly on the lips and slipping out from under me.

I lie in bed as she freshens up. A few minutes later, she walks out wearing a tank top and pajamas.

“James, I was wondering something,” she tells me as she sits beside me, and I sit up. “Does this mean that our contract is void now? Or, like, are we dating? I don’t understand what happens from here on out,” she asks me.

“We are legally married, contract or no contract. But for now, I don’t want to focus on these things. I just want to spend as much time with you as I can. We’ll get to the labels later.” I tell her, and she nods.

“I would like that too. Now, come, I am going to make pancakes and some coffee,” she tells me as she gets out of bed, and I follow after her.

As we stand in the kitchen, laughing, joking, and kissing, I realize I haven’t felt as content and happy as I feel at this moment ever before, and I don’t think I will find this with anyone but her. I just hope nothing messes this up now.

# Chapter 21

A New Beginning

Eliza

Sometimes, I really feel like things happen in a way that is done to make us doubt our sanity and judgment. I mean, that sounds cryptic and pessimistic, but that’s not how I am taking it right now. I think it’s more of a fun, quirky way of life to mess with us. It’s a way to show us humans that we can think and plan all we want, but in the end, only what fate has in store for you will play out. It doesn’t matter if you imagine yourself in bad conditions or favorable conditions; all that matters is that the moment you think that you know exactly what you want for your future, God has a nice way of reminding you who calls the shots.

For someone like me who has always liked detailed and elaborate plans to be made way before something happens, all of this is like a whiplash, and my neck is still hurting from the number of times I have received it at this point. For example, one moment, our company was drowning, and so were we. But then, not long after that, we got a deal from one of the best businessmen in the world, and we even managed to impress him. That day, when I met Alexandre and his other partners at the party, there was a new hope that shimmered inside me, blazing with the need to save my company.

Derek and I were convinced that this deal was all we needed to get out of this whole mess that we have both found ourselves in. but like I said, life loves messing with our minds and our general behavior and outlook on life. One minute, we have everything figured out and planned out, and then all of a sudden, we lose that deal simply because of a certain someone who was too proud and arrogant to listen to. But I felt my entire life derailing right there in front of my life when I realized that without that deal, there is nothing left for me. The company Derek and I had worked so hard to build was going to suffer, and there was nothing I could do about it.

But, again, life decided to mess with me, reminding me that nothing I expect will always be the reality. I hated James with passion at that time and thought of him as a selfish, conceited, and arrogant man who didn’t give a damn about the consequences of his actions and how they affect others. So, imagine my surprise when he decided not only to apologize but also to step up to make amends for his mistake. Everything that happened after that is almost a blur, but it is also as unexpected as the beginning was.

We got married for the sake of pretense; we worked together and ended up sleeping together. So many things happened in that span of time while he remained acting like the most understanding and supportive person I have ever met. But if I have to pick, I think the biggest surprise that life has ever thrown my way is what happened last night. I still haven’t come to terms with everything that happened last night.

As I lay awake, wrapped up in his arms I can’t help but feel the need to pinch myself just to be able to believe that this moment, here and now, is real and not something I am daydreaming about. Because Lord knows how much I yearn for it, how much I have wished and pined for it, but while also knowing that there is no way that James will ever like me back, let alone reciprocate the same feelings as I do. My feelings for him have been changing for a long time, and although I tried to deny it, telling myself that James was the last person I would ever fall in love with. But then we had ended up in each other’s arms again, getting tangled up in the sheets and lost in each other. It was only after that night that I came to the frightening realization of just how down bad I am for James Montague.

The realization was scary, yet it was something I wanted to cherish. Knowing that I have never felt this way for anyone else and that I now get to share it and not hide it. When he opened up to me and confessed last night, I really didn’t have any idea about how to proceed from that point onward. I thought it was a dream because in what world was the man who literally had anything he wanted in this world in love with me? I spent months telling myself that there could never be a day when he would like me back, let alone even think of me that way. I knew that there was something between us, but I always chalked it up as attraction. The sexual tension between us every time we are alone is proof enough for that.

But with time, as I continued to work with him, that stopped being the only thing between us. When these feelings turned from hate to love and when I was head over heels for him, I still don’t know. The truth is, I am still processing everything. Everything is happening so fast that my mind is still reeling from it.

Like how I am still trying to process how incredible last night was, I can still feel the delicious ache between my legs. Hell, I doubt I can walk properly after the way he took me last night. I swear to God, this man’s stamina will be the end of me. We had sex several times last night, and he didn’t stop until I was panting under him, begging him to stop but at the same time not wanting him to take away the pleasure from me. He took me slowly, so slowly and softly at first, making love to me. And I knew I was a goner at that moment as he stared so deep into my eyes it was as if he was staring directly into my soul.

As he kissed me softly while moving inside me, I knew I was irrevocably in love with him. I was his body, mind, and soul. And I don’t even want to deny it anymore. There is no going back from this. And I could see it in his eyes, too, the love, the adoration, the protectiveness. I found myself lost in his eyes and realized I never wanted to find a way out. I would pause that moment and stay in it forever if I could.

There is so much that James and I have been through together. And finally, this feels like the fair end, the end that we deserved. I don’t know where this goes, but I know that I am willing to go anywhere to follow through with this; I know my heart will never let me give up on this again. I close my eyes, relishing in the serenity of this moment, before I open them again and look at him.

He looks so peaceful, so relaxed as he sleeps, so at odds with the man who is always alert, ready for action, and always full of ideas. I reach out, tracing my finger softly over his features, and I can’t even believe that this man is actually mine. That he loves me and wants me. Sighing, I brush my finger against his lips and lean in to softly peck him. I pull back after a moment and quietly and gently unwrap his arms around me. I replace myself with a pillow and giggle as he hugs the pillow instead.

I try to be as quiet as possible as I leave the bed and freshen up before coming out and walking toward the kitchen. I pull my hair into a bun and grab an apron before opening my fridge and cabinets to check what I have for breakfast. In the end, I decide to make a cheese omelet, sausages, bacon, and pancakes. Am I being extra? Maybe. But I want to make him a special breakfast; we both deserve it.

As I get to work, I hum to myself, mixing the ingredients for the pancakes and the omelet. I lose myself in the process of cooking, concentrating only on all the things I am cooking that I don’t even hear when James wakes up and makes his way to the kitchen until he wraps his arms around me from behind, making me jolt upright and slam into his chest as he tightens his hold on me.

“Shhh... it’s just me, baby,” he murmurs in my ear, and I relax in his hold even as every cell in my body comes alive at his touch. Suddenly, all the memories of last night come rushing back to me as I remember how he kissed me, how he touched me and held me as he bottomed out inside me, how I writhed under him as he made me delirious with pleasure. Heat rises up my body, and my cheeks warm as I try to shove those scandalous thoughts away and focus on the present.

“You scared me,” I tell him, even as I lean into him.

“You were so indulged and lost in your own world; you didn’t notice me,” he tells me as he places his chin on my shoulder. “What are you making?” he asks after a moment, and I smile.

“Lots of things,” I tell him cheekily, and he groans.

“As much as I love the idea of you cooking for me, you don’t have to, baby. We can just grab some breakfast,” he tells me sweetly.

“We could. But that’s not special. And I think we can both agree that things changing between us deserve a small special occasion. So, here I am.” I tell him with a soft smile, and his eyes soften as he turns me around in his arms and kisses my forehead.

“I am willing to celebrate for the rest of my life if I have to for something like this. You have no idea how lucky I feel,” he tells me, and my heart soars. We lean in to kiss when suddenly the sound of the kettle goes on, and he curses under his breath, and I laugh as I push away from him and grab the kettle.

“How about you pour the coffee for us while I finish the bacon and pancakes?” I suggest, and he grumbles before agreeing. I smile with amusement as he works around the kitchen, shirtless, and again, I realize just how unbelievable this is and how I would have never thought that a day would come when James Montague, the man I hated with such passion, would be standing in my kitchen, helping me out.

Shaking my head, I take the bacon and sausages out of the pan and place them on the plate before making the pancakes and assembling everything. We both sat together, eating, laughing, teasing each other. I was completely in awe of the comfort we felt with each other. And in that moment, nothing else matters other than how happy we are. Everything else fades away into nothing.

# Chapter 22

Resilience

James

I should have known that there was only so much happiness I could have before things blew up. I should have seen this coming. I can’t believe I was stupid enough to believe that things would go smoothly in my life for once. I don’t even understand why I always end up in this situation. It’s as if I committed some huge sin in my previous life, and I am still paying for it in this life.

Things were going perfectly ever since I finally gave in and confessed my true feelings to Eliza. Ever since that day, things have been going so well that I have had to keep checking over my shoulder, paranoid of the storm that would probably be coming my way. But much to my surprise, that hadn’t been the case. The storm had been brewing alright; I just hadn’t looked carefully enough. I wanted to believe desperately that I would not suffer for once in my life after getting something good, but that’s what you call being unrealistic.

Only a few days after Eliza and I officially got together, accepting that whatever had been between us could no longer be fake, everything came crashing down. I close my eyes, massaging my temple as my head pounds, even as it races for ideas, solutions, strategies, literally anything to appear in my head so that I can fix this issue and go back to living my life peacefully, with the love of my life staying by my side. But, of course, it wasn’t as easy as that.

A few days ago, instead of being awakened by the familiar sound of either my alarm or Eliza’s alarm, I was awoken by an urgent phone call. Normally, I would have ignored it, put the phone on silent, and gone back to cuddling my girl. But the fact that only important people in my life had that number, I knew that if someone was calling me so many times, it had to be an emergency. Even though I didn’t quite like the sound of it, and even hated the fact that I had to get out of bed and leave Eliza alone there, I knew I had to.

I slip out of the room as quietly as possible, my phone clutched tightly in my hand as I close the door and walk a little away from the room. I don’t want to risk waking Eliza up. She has been working so hard the past few days that I want her to get every minute of rest that she can have. And the second reason could simply be that this call could probably be about the product, and I doubt it was good news.

“Hello,” I answer the call, pressing the phone against my ear.

“I am so sorry to disturb you at this hour, sir. But this is too urgent for us to wait,” my personal assistant explains, and my eyebrow furrows in confusion.

“What’s going on? Will you just spit it out?” I ask him, running out of patience.

“Well, um, sir, the thing is that there is a new update that has been revolving around the media about you and Miss Eliza. We thought it would cool down on its own, but it seems like it is only getting more and more attention from everyone. And if I am afraid that this continues, the release of our product will be a complete failure,” he tells me hesitantly, and every other thought in my mind filters out.

“What the heck do you mean? What happened?” I demand, trying my best to keep my voice down even as my blood pressure reaches a point that makes me want to kick something.

“Sir, you remember a particular ex of yours? Lydia?” he asks, and my fist tightens. Of course, she is behind this entire mess.

“What the heck did she do this time?” I ask him, closing my eyes as I pinch the bridge of my nose in an attempt to calm down.

“She went public with her version of what happened between the two of you. And well, um, she…,” he trails off, and I get even more annoyed.

“Just spit it out,” I tell him, on the verge of losing my patience completely.

“Sir, she has accused you of being sexually abusive toward her. She even provided the social media and other platforms of bruises she had after… uh, your interaction. She has gone as far as to say that on the day of the event, you and Miss Eliza threatened her together. She claims to have gone there to warn you to stay away from her and that she was done, and if you ever tried to do anything to her again, she would go to the authorities. She says that you both threatened to destroy her before kicking her out,” he explains, and my jaw ticks with each passing minute.

That vermin really dug her own grave this time. If this had been just an attack on me, maybe I could have still let it go and let the rumors die down. After all, rumors are nothing new for me. But the fact that she attacked Eliza and put her company and all our hard work in jeopardy doesn’t convince me not to exact my revenge on her. But before I even think of that, I need to figure out a way that will get out of this mess.

At first, I didn’t want to tell Eliza about this, but I knew that it was better if she heard it from me rather than someone else. Even though I knew she was panicking from the inside when I finally broke the news to her, she somehow managed not to freak out. Instead, she and I have poured ourselves in an attempt to undo all this damage and make sure it doesn’t affect our project.

But the news had spread like wildfire, and before we even knew it, everyone was talking about it. The paparazzi were everywhere, reporters demanding answers and asking the most disrespectful questions they could muster. Only I know how much I have been holding myself back from punching them. I honestly didn’t even care how bad of a situation I was in; I just wanted to bash my fists into one of the asshole reporters who had the nerve to ask Eliza if violent guys were her type and had further offered to step in and fill that role for her.

I remember seeing nothing but red in that moment. God knows I would have killed that guy if it hadn’t been for Eliza and her pleading eyes that had convinced me to walk away without teaching that coward a lesson.

But that doesn’t mean I will forget about it. No, I remember this, and I will make sure he pays for every single horrid word that came out of that good-for-nothing mouth of his. This entire week has been hell, not just for me but also for Eliza. I honestly don’t even understand how I ended up becoming so lucky. The fact that I got her, a girl that has been sticking with me no matter what happens. I have been the reason why she has had so many ups and downs; I don’t even understand how she can stand me.

For someone like me, who has always been labeled as a proud and arrogant person, today is the second time in my life that I feel absolutely ashamed of myself. The first had been when I realized how badly I messed up when Alexandre walked away from my office, and I later found out just how badly Eliza needed this deal. And the second time is now, when I have for the second time messed this up for her.

And it’s worse because this time, I have actually seen just how hard she has worked to get where she is. I have seen her pull all-nighters and go hours without taking a break just to ensure that this product launch doesn’t go wrong. She has been so careful and attentive in the whole process, and every time I told her to relax, she would tell me how important it was that none of this got ruined. And at that time, I had assured her that nothing of that sort would happen. But I guess I jinxed it because if anyone is to be blamed for her biggest problems, it’s me.

This time, I didn’t even actively do anything, but I am starting to realize that it doesn’t matter if it is conscious or unconscious; the end result is that I end up messing things up. But unlike last time, I won’t give up this easily. At least this time I have a right to defend myself. Everyone who knows me knows that I would never do anything as disgusting as raising a hand on any woman. But the fact that she had enough confidence to go up to the entire world through social media to accuse me of something I never even wanted to do.

But unlucky for her, what Lydia didn’t think of was exactly who she was messing with. She forgot that if she dared to ruin me, I would return the favor back tenfold. But it had taken careful planning and consideration before the trap that I had laid down for her finally worked. The knock sounded only a moment later as the thought struck, and I looked up to see Lydia walking inside the room. She is wearing a red mini dress that I assume is meant to seduce, but it only makes me respect her even less, and I swear the bar is already in hell right now.

“I knew you’d get back to your senses,” she said in a sly tone as she walked closer to me.

“Are you done playing games then?” I ask her, still massaging my head.

“Are you? Don’t act like I did all of this without a reason. You are the one who decided to go exclusive and act as if I didn’t exist. You erased me as if I didn’t even exist. All because of that one witch?” she snaps, and I almost get up to snap her neck for saying such things.

“So, you decided to fake the proof and get me in jail?” I ask her, not letting my eyes drift to the voice recorder.

“Well, it wasn’t fake. The bruises were real enough, but they didn’t come from you. You messed me up good, but you don’t do the violence right, sadly. So, I had to find someone else to mess me up right,” she tells me, trying to rile me with jealousy, but it only makes me smile, knowing I already got what I wanted.

“I guess you are right,” I tell her as I stand up and walk closer to her. “But you know what is one thing I do know well? How to take revenge. You really thought you could ruin me? Enjoy your case of defamation and then in jail,” I tell her, and her face pales.

“You have no proof!” she argues, and I laugh.

“The confessions you just made are good enough. Thank you, we needed this,” I tell her.

“Oh, and one more thing, Lydia. I hope you rot in hell,” I tell her before calling security and getting her dragged away. I instantly shared the audio along with several proofs against her unreliable words, and before long, all the rumors flew away, but we still had to see what became of the product. I just hope all of this was good enough to save Eliza’s reputation.

# Chapter 23

The Entrepreneurial Journey

Eliza

I sit in my bed, watching the sun shine bright in all its glory, radiating the warmth and making the weather cozy. The light white curtains flow with the wind and make the room fill the direct rays of the sun. I feel myself falling in love with the warmth of the sun on this chilly day, just as I fell with James, who came into my life like the warm sun when I was fighting the coldness of life.

I yawn and lay down in bed again, this is one of those days where all you want to do is stay in bed and drink hot chocolate with a movie marathon. I pull the blanket back up on myself when I hear the bathroom door open, and a few seconds later, James comes out of it. After the whole thing happened with Lydia, James had distanced himself from me initially, too guilty about the mess. But the truth was it wasn't his fault. But none of that matters because he found a way to fix it in the end.

As soon as he shared that audio and filed a defamation case against her, the entire population was back on the right track, supporting him.

"Someone is being lazy today," he comments.

"It's a perfect day to be lazy," I reply.

He smiles and comes to kiss my forehead.

"Oh, how I have changed you. You want to be lazy on a workday." He laughs.

"I want to be lazy with you on a workday." I yawn.

"I have something I need to do today," he replies.

I stay quiet and gesture for him to come join me in bed; he looks torn between the choice of getting ready for work or getting in bed with me. But after an internal battle for a minute, he picks up the blanket and gets in bed with me, and I laugh.

"I cannot possibly resist this," he replies.

"I don't want you ever to be able to," I say.

I move towards him and hug him in the bed under the blanket, and he kisses my forehead. I close my eyes and feel his lips on me.

"Hmmm…"

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"Me in bed with you on a busy weekday?" I replied.

"Yes," he answered.

"I love it," I replied cheekily.

"Can I tell you a secret?" He whispers in my ear.

I nod.

"I love it too." He whispers in my ear again.

I hold him closer, his arms wrap around me, and I rest my head on his chest. He runs his fingers through my hair, and I feel myself drifting off again in his warm embrace. I wake up as soon as I sense him moving. My eyes widen when I realize that he is leaving.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up," he apologizes.

"How long was I asleep?" I ask.

"About an hour and a half," he replies.

I'm stunned; it feels like just a minute ago we were talking. How could it have been an hour and a half?

"Relax, your body needed the rest," he reassures me, bending down to kiss my cheek.

"I think you're right. I feel much better and more energetic now," I reply.

"I have some news that will make you feel even better," he says, his face lighting up mischievously.

"What is it?" I ask, my curiosity piqued.

He gives me a playful smile, clearly enjoying the suspense.

"Don't mess with me, James, tell me now," I say, pretending to be annoyed.

We both burst out laughing.

"I got a call from my marketing team, and they have the results from our marketing campaign for your project," he says.

But doesn't disclose the results, and I feel a knot tying up deep in my stomach. The level of anxiety is way too high. I can feel the bile in my throat that makes me nauseated to the point where I can throw up any second. James is entirely unaware of what's going on inside me.

"I was expecting at least 50% results, but surprisingly, we received a much better response from the market. We have a 77% positive response rate," he announced.

The enthusiasm in his voice is evident; he looks like a kid finally finding his lost toy. I have never seen him this excited for anything. I jump out of the blanket and straight into his arms.

"James, we did it," I scream at the top of my lungs.

"Yes, Eliza, we did," he replies.

His embrace around my waist tightens as he pulls me closer to his chest, his lips on my neck. I can feel the sensation driving me insane. But I try to resist.

"Eliza, I have been in business for many years, but never have I been so invested in any project as I am in this. Neither have I launched anything as revolutionary as this project under my name. This project has changed me in many ways." James says in my ears.

His grip around my waist is still intact and tight.

"This project means so much more than just a business deal to me, too, James. This project brought us together. How we worked on this as a team and made the impossible happen for us is truly commendable. There is one thing I know for sure." I reply to him while hugging him close.

"I couldn't have done it alone," I say.

"Oh, no. You are more than capable of doing all of this on your own. In fact, you inspired me, Eliza. You inspired me to work harder and push my limits to turn the odds in our favor," he says.

"And you made it happen. You turned the odds in our favor. I love you." I reply.

I can't resist him anymore; the urge to kiss him is way too strong, and I give in and lean to kiss him.

I pull James close, relishing the warmth of his body against mine. My hands seek the contours of his figure, fingers tracing over his back as I draw him nearer. With a rush of emotion, I press my lips against his, conveying the depth of my feelings in that tender embrace. Whispering into the closeness between us, I can't contain my heartfelt declaration, expressing the happiness he brings into my life.

"I've never felt happier," I murmur, my breath mingling with hers.

His response, wide-eyed and curious, prompts a smile to spread across my face. James's gaze, fixated on me, holds an authenticity that stirs my soul. As our lips meet in a fervent kiss, a surge of passion envelops us. Our bodies intertwine, his arms encircling my neck while he navigates between us, removing any barrier that stands in our way. It's an act of intimacy, a shared moment that deepens our connection, and as he settles above me, the world seems to fade away.

"You're driving me wild," he confesses softly against my lips, each word laced with desire.

Our kisses intensify, a dance of tongues and unspoken emotions. Pausing momentarily, he looks down at me, overwhelmed by the depth of my affection. "Eliza, I love you," he professes, sincerity coloring every syllable.

My response, a smile that could light up the darkest of rooms, fills him with an indescribable joy. With a hand cradling the back of his head, I lean in for another kiss, an exchange of passion and devotion that transcends words. We linger in each other's gaze, communicating volumes without saying a word, until he shifts onto my side, drawing me close to him. With my leg nestled between his, we indulge in the intimacy of our bond as he aligns himself at my entrance.

He stares into my eyes as if seeking permission before entering me, which is silly because there is no reason why he would ever have to stop. But as he rocks against me, he elicits a moan from me that gives him all the permission he needs as he thrusts inside, impaling me on his length in one single stroke.

He takes me slowly, his rhythm steady even as he hits a part so deep inside me that it makes my eyes roll back in pleasure. He continues to fuck me like that until we both reach our highs.

Lying there, our eyes locked, he drapes an arm across my stomach, reveling in our closeness. Our kisses continue, each one a testament to the newfound love we cherish, a feeling that envelops us in its warmth and beauty. A bond that we never expected to find but somehow stumbled across anyway. And I can't even begin to talk about how lucky I feel to have something like this.

"You know, I truly thought I would never settle down?" James breaks the silence as he holds me too close to himself, and I look up at him in surprise.

"How would that have even worked? You literally have every girl dying for you. If it's not for your looks and your body, then it's for the money. Hell, you are a freaking catch, and every girl knows that. Tell me how you expected to have never settled down when you could have any girl you wanted?" I ask him, confused, and surprised by his sudden confession.

"Yeah, I could have had any girl, but the thing is, I never wanted anyone. Before you, everything was just a means to an end. Everyone knew that I never slept with the same girl again and never wanted to date or have any commitments. I was too avoidant of the whole thing. Until you." he tells me, his voice full of wonder and awe.

"So, what changed?" I can't help but ask.

"What do you mean?" he asks me.

"I mean, from our first interaction, I doubt you were head over heels for me. Considering the fact that we never even started on the right foot, I can't help but wonder when or what happened that made you change your mind.?" I clarify, waiting for him to respond with anticipation shining in my eyes.

"Honestly, I don't even know myself if I am being honest with you. But what I do know is that even though we had quite a first interaction, I was attracted to you from the very first time that I saw you. Did you piss me off? Yes. Did I wish to make you pay for having the audacity to shout and tell me off in front of so many people while everyone else cowered before me? But you managed to engrave yourself into my mind. The sight of your blazing eyes was embedded in my memory, and I couldn't get you out. Honestly, I should have expected it. The way we just kept bumping into each other, how our paths always entwined and got us stuck together. But I think most of all, it was because of how different everything was with you. I felt different from you. For the first time in my life, I wanted to be better, to change myself for the better just so I could deserve you, Eliza. You were meant to be mine. It was just a matter of time before we found our way to each other." he tells me, and my eyes fill with tears at his emotional explanation.

Everything he said is true, and he is right; we should have seen it coming. But it's better this way.

"I know, James. And I wouldn't want to change it for the world. You are all that I want in this world and the next." I tell him as I lean in and kiss him softly. We lay there, wrapped up in each other's embrace, and nothing else matters in the moment but this. Us. Nothing could come our way ever again, and neither will I ever let anything mess with us again.

# Chapter 24

Trusting the Future

James

It's about time I give a nod to the fact that I'm all set to step into the next chapter of my relationship with Eliza. Let me tell you, this journey has been nothing short of a wild ride. Falling in love, contemplating marriage—yeah, that's where my mind's at these days. Eliza has taught me many things since she entered my life, and the most crucial lesson is embracing empathy.

I had my guard up for so long, shutting out all the good stuff. My tough exterior wasn't doing me any favors either. Change was overdue, for myself first, and then for the person I cherish the most: Eliza. She deserves to see the real me—the boundless, passionate side of me. I want to love her for the rest of my days, hold her close, and build a family together.

For years, I've felt a sense of isolation, but not anymore. So, what's the game plan? Right now, I'm cruising down the road on this sunny Sunday afternoon, George Michael tunes playing on the radio, and I'm soaking in every moment. I'm on my way to pick up something that will truly solidify my connection with Eliza. All those games, the facades that evolved into love, well, today marks a shift with what I'm about to do. I've mulled this over for days, and yes, Eliza is the one for me.

Pulling up to the most opulent jewelry store, I park my car and gaze at the dazzling billboard that reads LuminaLux Bijoux. This place is the most luxurious jewelry store in the heart of New York City. The golden lights are nearly blinding, and my heart races as I step out of the car. Tonight, everything is about to change.

I push open the heavy glass door, and a wave of cool air washes over me as I step into LuminaLux Bijoux. The interior is nothing short of dazzling. The light glow of chandeliers overhead illuminates a vast array of shimmering gems and intricate jewelry displays. It's a sight to behold—diamonds, sapphires, and emeralds sparkling in every direction. The store is tastefully decorated with elegant showcases, each housing a unique piece of artistry.

I continue to take in the luxury and momentarily feel like a fish out of water. I've never taken on such a mission before. Nevertheless, I gather my nerves and make my way toward the rings section. A friendly female shopkeeper greets me with a warm smile. I take a deep breath and settle into the plush chair in front of the jewelry counter.

With a subtle air of expertise, the shopkeeper asks, "What brings you to LuminaLux today?"

I return her smile and confess, "I'm here to find the perfect ring for my special someone."

Her eyes light up, and she responds, "Ah, a romantic quest! That's always a pleasure. Any particular style you have in mind?"

I chuckle nervously, "Honestly, I'm a bit out of my element here. But I want something unique, something that she'll treasure."

The shopkeeper nods knowingly and says, "Not to worry, we have just the thing." She disappears into the depths of the store, leaving me to anxiously fidget in my seat.

After a brief moment, she returns, cradling a substantial velvet box in her hands. She places it on the counter with a flourish and says, "Behold, our most exquisite collection. I believe this one might catch your eye."

I open the box and inside rests a breathtaking ring—a delicate dance of diamonds and sapphires set in an intricate white gold band. I'm genuinely taken aback. The shopkeeper leans in and whispers, "This piece is one of a kind, sir. It tells a story of timeless love and commitment."

I'm mesmerized, and a grin escapes me. "You might be onto something here. How did you know?"

The shopkeeper replies with a twinkle in her eye, "Call it a sixth sense developed over years of helping people find their perfect symbol of love. Now, what do you think?"

I nod emphatically, "You've got a deal. Wrap it up. This is the one."

She then carefully prepares the ring for me, and we continue to chat about love, relationships, and the significance of a well-chosen ring. The shopkeeper's anecdotes and insights make this experience more than just a transaction—it becomes a memorable part of my journey toward building a future with Eliza.

With the ring securely snugged in its elegant box, I express my gratitude to the helpful shopkeeper.

"Thank you for guiding me through this. I appreciate your expertise," I say, extending my heartfelt thanks.

Next up, I approach the cash counter to settle the deal. With a swift and confident swipe of my card, the purchase is complete. I leave the store with the ring cradled in my hands, feeling a rush of excitement and satisfaction.

Back in my car, I ponder the next item on my to-do list—snacks for Eliza. A smile creeps onto my face as I think about the special night I have planned for her. I make a mental note of all her favorite snacks—salty chips, sweet chocolates, and a variety of other treats that she loves. Oh, and don't forget the flowers, I remind myself.

Having already sent a dress to Eliza at home, I wonder if she likes one of my surprises and hope she'll love it. The plan is for her to wear it for our special evening. As I navigate the streets, I wonder if she'll be as thrilled as I am about the night ahead. She doesn't know about this yet, so I told her we were going out for dinner. She must be ready when I return home.

Pulling into the parking lot of the nearest grocery store, I feel a surge of excitement. The automatic doors slide open, and I step into the cool, well-lit aisles. I grab a cart, feeling a sense of purpose as I weave through the aisles, collecting each item with care.

In the snack aisle, I deliberate over various options, making sure to pick up Eliza's favorites. The variety of colors and flavors in my cart grows, and I chuckle at the thought of her delight. The scent of fresh flowers wafts through the air, and I make my way to the floral section, carefully selecting a bouquet that mirrors the warmth and vibrancy of our relationship.

As I head toward the checkout, the excitement builds. Tonight is going to be something special, and I can't wait to see the joy on Eliza's face. With the snacks and flowers secured, I make my way back to the car.

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Arriving home with a car full of surprises, I carefully gather everything and make my way to the garden. The lush greenery provides the perfect cover for my secret stash. Hidden between the foliage are the snacks, the bouquet of flowers, and, of course, the ring—the symbol of our journey. Satisfied with my covert operation, I step back into the house.

With a quick call out to Eliza, I venture into the bedrooms, following the sound of the running shower. I playfully ask, "How long has someone been indulging in a shower marathon?" Her laughter rings out as she assures me she's just stepped in.

This is the opportune moment. I remember the rooftop, the perfect place which I have decided for our special evening. Sneaking into my wardrobe, I retrieve the carefully concealed box containing fairy lights, plush red pillows, candles, and a cozy blanket—everything I need to transform our rooftop into a sanctuary of warmth and romance.

I've been hoarding these treasures for a week, patiently waiting for the right moment. Knowing Eliza tends to take her time in the shower, I seize the opportunity to set the stage for our unforgettable night. With the box in hand, I tiptoe out of my room, navigating the hallways with the stealth of a secret agent.

I ascend the stairs to the rooftop feeling the excitement bubbling within. This is the culmination of a plan, a surprise that I hope will put a smile on Eliza's face. The rooftop door creaks open, and I step into the open air, greeted by the city lights and the cool evening breeze. It's time to weave some magic and create a space where our love can flourish.

With the rooftop as my canvas and a box of enchantment in my hands, I survey the space, plotting the perfect arrangement. First, I unravel a cascade of fairy lights. Each delicate bulb finds its place draped carefully along the edges of the rooftop.

Next, I scatter plush red pillows, creating a cozy nook under the starlit sky. The faux candles follow suit and their flickering flames add a touch of romance to the scene.

Unfurling the cozy blanket, I arrange it over a low-slung chair, creating a spot for us to share stories and dreams. Then, I immediately rush downstairs to bring the other items from the garden. The subtle scent of fresh flowers mingles with the crisp night air as I place the bouquet at the center of our makeshift sanctuary.

When the final touches come together, I step back to admire the handiwork. The rooftop now pulses with the promise of a magical evening. The soft glow of the fairy lights, the inviting pillows, and the flickering candles all conspire to create an atmosphere that mirrors the warmth I feel in my heart.

Satisfied with the transformation, I glance at my watch. Time is on my side and the rooftop hideaway is ready well before Eliza wraps up her shower. The stage is set, and the rooftop adorned with care and affection stands ready to host a celebration of love.

Descending the stairs from the rooftop a sense of satisfaction envelops me. Everything is in place—the twinkling fairy lights, the inviting pillows, and the flickering candles—all conspiring to create an enchanting setting. The ring, the flowers, the snacks, they're all ready for the grand reveal. With a contented smile, I make my way to the bedroom, where Eliza is still in the shower.

I lay down on the bed, pondering if I might have overlooked anything. The mental checklist affirms that everything is in order. The rooftop hideaway is primed, waiting to weave its magic under the city lights. The expectation fuels my excitement, and I can hardly wait for Eliza to discover the surprise.

Moments later, I hear the bathroom door open and there stands Eliza in her bathrobe, a vision of effortless beauty. She playfully asks where I've been all day, and I can't resist teasing her a bit. "Oh, just planning a little something," I reply with a mischievous grin.

I rise from the bed and envelop her in a tight hug, savoring the warmth of the moment.

"Did you get the dress I sent you?" I ask, eager to know her reaction.

With a gleam in her eye, Eliza replies, "Yes, James! That red silk dress is stunning. You have a great taste for picking the perfect things. Thank you!"

I chuckle, "Well, I'm glad you like it. I thought it would be fitting for our evening plans."

She raises an eyebrow, "Evening plans? Dinner, right?"

With a twinkle in my eye, I play along, "Yeah! Just a little dinner I had in mind. Nothing too fancy."

Eliza laughs, "You and your surprises. I can't wait."

Little does she know, the real surprise awaits her on the rooftop—the culmination of weeks of planning, all for the love we share.

I plant a gentle kiss on Eliza's cheek and whisper, "I'm going to hop in for a quick shower, and then we'll head out for dinner. I promise it'll be worth the wait."

Eliza smiles, a curious glint in her eyes, "You're keeping me on my toes with all these mysteries, James. I love it."

I grin, "Glad you're enjoying the suspense. I'll be quick, I promise."

# Chapter 25

Happily Ever After

Eliza

Ever get that fluttery feeling in your stomach that screams, "Something big is about to happen"? That's exactly what's going on with me right now. Sure, I've seen James excited before, but today is different. There's something he's not spilling, and it's got me all sorts of curious. James always has a trick up his sleeve to surprise me, but this time, it's a mystery. As he's taking his sweet time in the shower, I'm here, wrestling with the zipper on the dress he sent over this morning.

I never pegged James as the type to pull off thoughtful surprises, but here he is, turning the tables on me. The guy I once thought was a perpetual grump has morphed into this mature, understanding partner. Love really does work its magic on us, doesn't it? It's like we've both done a 180 from the days of crankiness and clashes to falling head over heels for each other.

It's not just James who's undergone a transformation – I've changed too. I find myself more empathetic and understanding toward those around me, showing a little more compassion for myself. It's not just about work anymore; life has thrown so many interesting things my way. I'm eager to grow and become the best version of myself.

Taking a quick look in the mirror, I focus on this stunning red dress that James picked out. Shifting from side to side, I can't help but love it. I pull out my small golden hoops and a few other accessories from my jewelry box to complement the dress. Time to work on my hair – thinking a sophisticated bun with a middle part might be the way to go today. Here's to embracing the changes and looking forward to whatever surprise James has for me tonight.

Alright, so here I am, all dolled up and feeling like a million bucks. The red dress hugs me in all the right places, and I'm rocking a sleek bun with those small golden hoops, adding a touch of glam. I take one last look in the mirror, making sure everything is on point, and head towards James' bedroom.

As I swing the door open, there's a moment of mutual surprise. James, looking dapper in a black shirt paired with beige pants, and me, standing there in my stunning red attire. We both take a beat to scan each other from head to toe, and I feel a rush of excitement.

Slowly, I start to walk towards James, channeling my inner seductress. My fingers graze his face as I reach him, and with a sly smile, I tell him, "You, sir, are looking incredibly handsome tonight."

James, visibly taken aback by the compliment, grins back and says, "Well, thank you. But let me tell you, Eliza, you take the cake. You look absolutely stunning in that dress."

He leans in, kissing my cheek sweetly, and we share a light hug. Feeling mixed emotions, I respond, "Oh, stop it, you. Flattery will get you everywhere. But seriously, you clean up well, Mr. James."

With a playful twinkle in his eye, James replies, "Well, I had to match up to the beauty standing in front of me, didn't I? Now, let's go, dinner awaits."

Just as we're about to make our grand exit, James puts a pause on the plan. He stops me in my tracks in the garage, and there's this mischievous glint in his eye. He slides up behind me and, with his low, teasing voice, says, "Hold on a second, Eliza."

I turn to look at him, ready to question what's going on, but before I can utter a word, he goes, "No, wait." And then, out of nowhere, he whips out a silk scarf from his pocket. I chuckle as he declares, "I've got a surprise for you."

He puts the scarf gently over my eyes, and I playfully protest, "Oh, really? Blindfolded for dinner? You sure know how to keep things interesting, James."

He laughs and fires back, "Who said anything about dinner? Maybe I'll parade you around like this. Blindfold chic is the new trend."

I smirk and tease him right back, "Well, if that's the case, I hope you're leading me to the most fashionable blindfold-friendly restaurant in town."

He guides me with a gentle hand, and we continue bantering back and forth. I wonder what other surprises James has up his sleeve for the night. Blindfold and all, I'm ready for whatever comes our way.

James leads me to the rooftop; every step feels deliberate and full of excitement. I'm navigating the darkness, guided by his careful hand. When we finally reach our destination, James positions himself behind me once again. Slowly, he starts to untie the silk scarf from my eyes.

Before I can fully grasp what's happening, my laughter fades away as I take in the breathtaking scene before me. Fairy lights are twinkling, candles are flickering, and there's this makeshift sanctuary that James has created just for us. A cozy blanket drapes over a chair, plush pillows scattered around – it's like a dream.

I'm left speechless, my eyes wide with amazement as I turn to James and ask, "When did you do all of this?"

He grins, clearly pleased with the surprise, and replies, "I had a little help from the daylight hours. Wanted to make tonight extra special, you know? A rooftop rendezvous under the stars."

As I take in the beauty of the setup, I'm still amazed at the effort James put into this surprise when a familiar melody fills the air. "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You" begins to play softly in the background, and I turn to James with a surprised smile.

He takes my hand and, with a twinkle in his eye, pulls me closer. In a move that can only be described as sexy, he wraps his arms around me. I chuckle at the unexpected dance about to unfold.

"How did you manage to play this song?" I ask, a playful grin on my face.

Still holding me close, James reveals, "There's a speaker in the corner. I played it from my phone. Thought it would add a touch of romance to the night."

He twirls me around with a romantic flair, and as we lock eyes, I can't help but comment, "You know, I've never seen you this happy before, James."

He smiles, his gaze unwavering, and replies, "That's because of you, Eliza. You bring out the best in me."

It's a simple statement, but the sincerity in his eyes makes my heart skip a beat. The rooftop, the music, the dance – it's like a scene from a fairy tale. We sway to the rhythm of the music and I'm feeling grateful for this unexpected moment of magic that James has crafted for us.

After the romantic dance, James leads me to a secluded corner of the rooftop, and with a gentle urging, he says, "Look up, Eliza."

As I gaze upward, I'm met with the breathtaking sight of a full moon, casting its ethereal glow across the night sky. The moon, round and luminous, seems to be a celestial companion to the magical evening James has orchestrated.

With excitement, I exclaim to James, "The moon looks absolutely stunning tonight!" The silver light bathes everything in its gentle radiance, creating an enchanting atmosphere.

But when I turn back to James, expecting him to share in my joy, there's a strange silence. No response. Curiosity turns to concern, and I spin around to find him. And there he is, on his knees with a small box in his hands. I lose my breath, unable to think for a moment. It feels like I've stepped into a dream.

Charming as always, he looks up at me with those warm eyes, and I gasp, unable to believe what I'm seeing. There, against the backdrop of the moonlit sky, James is on one knee, a question in his eyes and a box. I'm left speechless, my heart pounding in my chest, as I realize that this magical night is about to become even more unforgettable.

"Is this for real?" I manage to stammer out, my eyes locked on James, who's still on one knee, teasing smile in place.

He chuckles, a playful glint in his eye, "Well, that depends. Are you up for a lifetime of putting up with me?"

I tease him back, "Hmm, you'll have to be less grumpy if you want to marry me, you know."

But then, James' expression shifts from playful to something more serious and emotional. He takes a deep breath and says, "Eliza, I'm tired of all the facades we've lived in for so long. I genuinely want to be with you forever."

I feel a lump in my throat as his words sink in. His vulnerability catches me off guard, and I playfully respond, "Well, that's a tall order, mister. Forever is a long time."

Without missing a beat, James replies with sincerity, "I'll do anything to spend the rest of my life with you, Eliza."

My eyes start to well up with tears. It's a moment I've been waiting for, dreaming about, and now that it's here, emotions surge through me.

We lock eyes, and I can see the depth of his feelings in that silent exchange. Time seems to stand still for a moment as we both contemplate the journey that has led us to this point.

James then opens the box, revealing a dazzling ring adorned with diamonds and sapphires. My heart skips a beat. It's a breathtaking sight, and I find myself at a loss for words.

The emotions well up within me as James, in a voice heavy with sincerity, asks, "Will you be my forever partner, Eliza?"

Tears of joy fill my eyes as I look into his, and without a moment's hesitation, I reply, "Yes, for the rest of our lives."

James takes the ring from the box and gently slides it onto my finger. The cool metal meets my skin, and it feels like a promise, a symbol of the love we've built together. As the ring settles in its place, James gets up, his eyes sparkling with happiness. Without warning, he scoops me up in his arms and twirls me around, our laughter echoing in the night.

"I love you so much, Eliza!" he exclaims, the joy evident in his voice.

I giggle as he spins me, feeling weightless and full of love. It's a moment of pure bliss surrounded by fairy lights, beneath the moonlit sky, and in the arms of the man I'm going to spend forever with.

"I love you too, James," I declare, my voice filled with genuine affection.

He sets me back on the ground, and I find myself cupping his face, unable to contain the overwhelming emotions that course through me. Looking into his eyes, my heart is ablaze with passion and love for this man who has just made my dreams come true.

"James, you've made this a dream come true for me," I express, my voice tinged with gratitude.

He smiles warmly and replies, "You deserve all of this, Eliza."

Unable to hold back my feelings any longer, I lean in and kiss him.

It's a sweet, lingering kiss that speaks volumes of the love we share. Then I pull James into a tight embrace, holding him as though I never want to let go. As we share this intimate moment, my mind drifts back to the journey we've been on, from enemies to lovers. The challenges we faced, the ups and downs we faced together all flashes before my eyes.

From the days of bickering and crankiness to the deep connection we now share, love has been our guiding force. It's led us through every twist and turn, molding us into the people we are today. In this moment, I only want James and the promise of a happy life together.

I find solace in the fact that we've weathered storms, emerged stronger, and arrived at a place where love triumphs over everything.

As I hold James close, I'm filled with gratitude for the love that has transformed us. I look forward to the countless adventures that await us on this journey called life.

# The End