

The Trap Of Ace

Chapter 11

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A knock on the door put a break on my non-stop rejecting and selecting the designs from the heap of catalogues. I needed to deliver the final samples to the head designers for the new collection of OC Textiles.

Liza's blonde head poked through the door.

"Sorry to disturb you, but the meeting is just about to begin. And your presence is required there."

My brows furrowed. "But I'm just an employee. What'd I do in a board meeting?"

His shoulders lifted. "No idea. The boss's order."

Why'd Caleb need me in a board meeting?

Sighing, I nodded. "Alright! I'll be there in a few."

"Great! See you there!" With that, she closed the door behind her and left.

I didn't even have any idea what the meeting was about. Nor did I know what to do there or say.

Whatever happens, I just hoped he wouldn't be there. After yesterday's confrontation, I'd tried my

best to avoid him. But his being the freaking owner of this company didn't make it easy.

Since Tobis's revelation about it, I still couldn't get over the shock. The irony! I'd to work in his

company under his orders. And here I was trying to escape him at any cost!

Now I'd this doubt that whatever happened to my job and transfer, he had something to do with it.

Maybe it was his influence that Caleb put me in here?

I let out a huff.

I just couldn't make out what was brewing in his head. It was all so inarticulate.

When I entered the conference room, all entities in three piece suits' eyes trained on me. The head

chair was still vacant and there was no trace of Caleb yet. Flashing a professional smile towards

those mostly unfamiliar faces, I found an empty chair right next to the head of the table.

All the other seats were occupied other than the one I took and the one at the other end of the table.

And the big bald man seated beside it with a creepy face didn't encourage me to go there.

Once I took my place, my eyes kept flickering to the door, waiting for the boss to arrive. Because the curious glances those people inside the room sent, made me fidget and uncomfortable.

Though their reactions were legit as it wasn't a regular thing someone who's not one of the board members joining the board meeting.

When the door opened, only then did everyone take their interest off of me and stood up as someone...

Achilles Valencian walked in, followed by Caleb and Liza.

I sucked in my breath when his gaze landed on me immediately. Those powerful dominating stormy eyes. The whole room went silent: an effect of the commanding aura he carried with him.

Averting my eyes from him, just as I expected Caleb to come and sit at the head of the table, he changed direction and went to the chair beside that creepy big man. And thus, the head of the table was occupied by the devil himself.

Of course! He was the king of this kingdom. What was I thinking? Now I was regretting not sitting beside that bald man.

Caleb sent his regular sunny smile from across the table which I couldn't return. I'd just ask him later why he called me here.

At the king's curt nod, everyone sat down.

"Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to someone who'd be joining in our every board meeting from now on," spoke his deep voice, when I played with the emeralds of my bracelet. A way to ignore him and the irrational fast beats of my heart due to his close presence.

"Meet, Miss. Emerald Hutton, a

very special friend of mine. I'd like you all to welcome her in our company."

My gaze snapped up to him, eyes wide open. What the hell? I'd be joining board meetings with them?

I was just a newcomer employee!

"Welcome aboard, Ms. Hutton! It'll be a pleasure to get to work with you!" I turned to the woman

next to me who greeted me with a kind smile.

I barely could show her my enthusiasm in return. I was too perplexed for that. What the hell was

really going into his head?

While some of the members welcomed me with professionalism, most of them remained quiet. They

seemed to share the exact bewilderment like me.

When they didn't respond well and expressions of displeasure etched onto their faces, great Achilles

Valencian barked out, "Any objections?"

The shake of everyone's heads was immediate.

"N-no objections, Mr. Valencian. I'm sure there must be some reason behind the decision you took

and we respect it. We're just... a little surprised, that's it," said the man opposite of me, on the right

side of him once his sharp gaze fell on that poor man.

He nodded. "Good. The sooner you'll get over your surprise, the better.

Now, you all may proceed

with the meeting."

My eyes kept shooting daggers to him as he leaned back in his chair, listening to whatever the

members were saying one by one. And when his hand slowly slid to where mine were placed on the

table, I jerked my hands down.

The slight crease between his brows told me his dissatisfaction. !

He was trying to touch my hand in front of everyone? The nerve of him.

My features formed into a scowl in disbelief.

Sensing my glare, his fleeting eyes met me for a second. And then the twitch at the corner of his lips

made my fists into balls.

My attention wasn't on the meeting as I was too busy showing my displeasure. But a certain topic

caught my ears.

"This is a matter of concern of how they seemed to have better plans than us in every presentation we're making in our recent deals. It seems like they exactly know what will be our deficiency and they will work right on there," stated the bald man beside Caleb, a frown set between his joined brows.

They were talking about a rival company of ours, some AR industries who were competing in every deal this company approached.

Ace cocked his head at the side. "What do you have in your mind about this?"

That man shifted in his chair, clearing his throat. "Umm, I think..."

"That we've someone between us leaking information out?" He finished for him. It wasn't more like a statement than a question. His jaw ticked as the bald man nodded his head. "Did you try to find out who it is yet?"

The man visibly gulped. "Uh, we thought to discuss it with you first. And we were not sure how to find out the culprit."

His lips curled into distaste. "You weren't sure? Is that how you all have been running this company with Mr. Cooper? Now I see why this company was going down in the market day by day!"

The board members' avoided his furious eyes, keeping mum.

I cleared my throat. "If you all don't mind, I'd like to suggest something." Nervous flutters erupted across my tummy when everyone's gaze turned to me once again. I'd given interviews and presented presentations before the teachers and students back in the college, but talking here before all of them experienced business men professionally, was another thing.

His sharp glare softened as he gave me his sole attention.

"You don't need to ask permission to speak up, Em. Say whatever you want to say," Caleb encouraged me from the other side of the table.

Wetting my lower lip, I started. "To find out who's behind this, we can do a discreet research of the backgrounds and recent activities of the people who're working directly with these projects? Because

irrelevant stuff won't be able to know much of the presentations to disclose." When no one said anything and listened to whatever I'd to say, I continued. "That way, if we find someone suspicious, we could easily replace them with someone more reliable and take legal actions against them once we get solid proofs regarding their offense."

An older man laughed out. "Good idea there, Ms. Hutton. But we can't just go and start searching everyone's full history and recent activities. It'll be too time consuming. And whoever is doing it isn't a fool, once they'll find out about the investigation, they'll get more careful with their moves."

"That's why I said the word 'discreet'. Yes, it might be time consuming, but it'll be for the well-being of the company. Otherwise, I don't think there's any way to find the culprit out."

"Of course there's a way," he argued. "We could just change the whole team instead and appoint only the trustable ones."

I shook my head. "Finding them out is an utmost need for us right now. Because if we let it go and don't do anything about it, it won't be difficult for the rival company to buy someone else again. An example of what happens to a traitor needs to be set before the others." That man snorted. "We know what to do or not right now in this situation. You don't need to point out anything. You're just a newcomer in here..."

"Didn't you hear what she said, Mr. Brooks?" snapped Ace. "I'd like you to start working on this as soon as possible without wasting anymore time!"

"But, Mr. Valencian..."

"Enough! No more discussions. You'll do what my... Ms. Hutton says!" He sneered, cutting Mr. Brooks with his icy gaze. "And from next time, keep your attitude in check while talking to her."

Swallowing, Mr. Brooks nodded his head, shifting into his seat. Though it was good that he supported me, but what's with the rage? As the meeting went on I again went back to silence, twirling my bracelet, only spoke when needed.

Even that was difficult with his intense gaze on me most of the time. As if he didn't come to join the meeting, but to stare at me!

I literally sighed in relief when finally a clerk interrupted the long ass meeting in the middle for a coffee break.

With a large tray of mugs, he started distributing them around the table. And when my turn came, I shook my head at him with a polite smile.

"No thanks! I don't drink coffee."

"No worries, Miss! I got some tea for you," he replied, handing me the cup of steaming tea.

I sent him a surprised look. How did he even know that I preferred tea over coffee?

"How do you know that I like tea?" I queried.

The smile of his face threatened to fall as his eyes flickered around. "Uh, I..."

"You may now go, Gabe. Thank you for these drinks," Ace said, cutting him off; his eyes not moving from me. And Gabe didn't waste a second before hurrying out of the room away from my question.

Casting another glare at him, I sipped on my tea. And again, I was surprised. It was the same way I liked it. Less milk with no sugar.

How did he even know about how I take it?

I looked over Caleb. Did he tell that clerk of my preference? Maybe he found out from Tess? But I didn't think she even knew that I didn't like coffee in the first place. Weird.

"God! I'm so tired! Liza, why don't you ask someone to help me with these report sheets? Because I'm running up dry here now. I need some help with it," said Sierra, a girl from the finance department.

After the meeting, Liza took me on another tour around the office. This time, to introduce me personally to everyone. And when we met Sierra, a good friend of Liza, at her desk, she started complaining.

"Everyone is busy, Sierra. I can't just tell anyone to push their work aside and help you out. I'm sorry!"

Liza apologized.

Sierra's shoulders slumped at that.

"I can help you with that if you want. I've some experience of working on the sheets with my brother," I offered.

Her eyes widened as she sat straight. "No, no! It's alright, Emerald. Thank you so much for your offer, but I think I'll manage."

"No worries, I'm free right now anyway. I'll be happy to help."

I have been free since the meeting. Because no one was literally giving me any work to do. Even choosing those designs in the morning, I'd to request Liza to let me do that. Well, I told her to give me something and she handed me those catalogues. It didn't seem to even a work for me, but I took it anyway. At least I'd something to do.

When I figured out how to do things yesterday, I figured the stuff they gave me to do wasn't even that important. I understood that I was new, but that didn't mean they wouldn't give me any serious job.

Even the other employees. They seemed to be too careful and polite around me. And I couldn't make any sense out of their treating me like a VIP and not one of them.

"But I can't just trouble you with my work..."

"Please, I insist," I said, pleading her with my eyes. My hands were itching to do some real work.

She glanced at Liza behind me with uncertainty, and then slowly nodded her head. A hesitant smile slowly spread across her face.

"Oh, thank you! Tell me, where do you exactly need my help?"

Once it was lunch time, only then we were finished with the work. Sierra was a fun person, so working with her was easy and comfortable. I was glad that apart from Liza, I found another easy to go along person in this office.

"You ready?" Sierra asked, getting up from her desk to go down to the canteen.

Looking up from Beth's messages, I nodded my head. "Yeah, let's go." And just when we were about to get into the elevator, a voice stopped us.

It was Carter, Ace's assistant. A red head with a slim figure. The dark patches under his eyes were the proof of his tiredness. Though I just knew him from yesterday, I pitied him. Due to some unknown reasons, his boss remained in this office all the time. And he, being his assistant, had to run back and forth between Valencian Corp and OC Textiles for him.

"Yes?"

"Miss. Hutton, I'm sorry to stop you. But Mr. Valencian requires your presence in his cabin," he said.

I frowned. "Why? What does he need now?"

He shifted on his legs, pushing the specs up his nose. "Uh, he wants you to have lunch with him."

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I set the papers aside where my designs were printed on, and picked up my phone after it blared for the second time. A smile etched into my face seeing the caller ID.

"It took you a whole week to call me?"

"And it took you two rings to pick up the phone?"

I chuckled. "I was working on some designs. Anyway, what's up with you? How's the job going?"

Since Warner had left for Seattle for his new job and I returned to California, it was our first conversation in this whole week.

"You're working on weekends? And yes, everything is going smooth. Life has never been this good.

Though, the work is hard."

"Glad to hear that," I said. If only my life was a little better. "And yes, but it's not official work. Just some of my ideas I needed to polish."

"About office, how's it going? I hope you still don't have any problem staying in California, do you?"

he asked. He didn't know where I was working.

And what do I tell him? All of this was still so confusing to me.

"Office is good. I've to work here for at least three months until I decide to think of something else," I replied, absentmindedly. Office was good because I hadn't seen him in the whole three days. Never even once he visited after that day, when he ordered me to have lunch with him. Of course, I denied.

And the nerve of him, he sent Carter again to the canteen to deliver me the food he got for lunch!

You should eat homemade food, canteen's stuff isn't good for health. It was the message I got with the food boxes.

And the embarrassment I felt with every pair of eyes on me out there was a whole lot different thing!

Though he didn't come to the office for three days now, the food was always on time. At first, I gave them away to Liza and others, but then, well, I thought I shouldn't push away food like that.

Okay fine! These dishes were heavenly. And now that I was home today, I missed it.

From what pieces of information I'd picked up from Liza and Caleb's conversation, he was busy hunting a new house and renovating it. Why Achilles Valencian needed a house all of a sudden?

"I don't understand what problem do you've staying in that city," he mumbled. "Anyway, I will call you tonight. There's a day out with my office colleagues today, so gotta go now. And, I miss you, Em. I wish you were here."

I smiled. "I miss you too. Don't worry, we'll meet soon at Tess's wedding, you're coming, right? It's in this end of this month."

"Of course, how can I miss it? I'll definitely be there."

"Great. Alright, you go now. Talk to you later."

"Alright, love you!"

The car screeched to a halt and I got out of the car. The decorated gate welcomed everyone who entered though with a big bold 'Felicity Charity Event' hung above. An even for some people to genuinely donate for the poor, and for some people a way to show off.

Dad and Tobias also piled out and walked to me. Our family has been donating to this foundation every year for the orphan kids for the last ten years. I used to attend this function every year in my childhood. And when I heard of it organizing another event today, I tagged along with Dad and Tobias.

"Let's go," Dad said, leading us inside through the red carpet.

Once inside, the first thing that came into my view was a swarm of people roaming around and admiring the fine pieces of art that's been exhibited around the hall. A slow classic music hummed in the background.

"This time they they're holding it differently. They will put these canvases and pictures on auction and whoever wishes to donate, will buy them. Their money will directly go to the charity fund," Tobias explained.

I nodded. "It's a wise way, I must say. This way more people who loves art will donate. And it will be good for those orphan kids."

"Yeah, and I think I'm gonna jam my walls with some today. Look at those beauties." He pointed to the beautiful canvases around. "Who can say no to them?"

I giggled. "I agree."

As Dad went busy conversing with an older man, I let myself explore in the sea of people and arts.

Beautiful arts that each demanded attention. Even if I wasn't a big fan of them, they were extremely eye-catching.

I roamed around to admire each one of them. The colors were blended so well, it felt they'd come

alive at any moment. A small boy was gaping in wonder at a picture standing beside his mother where

a crimson skinned dragon fumed ember flames through his nose and mouth, its eyes sparkled with

rage and menace. On the other hand, a middle-aged man stared at the highlighted cleavage of a

woman with half of face covered with her raven hair in a canvas.

Shaking my head, I passed him and turned to another row. But a certain painting caught my eyes. A

painting of a single rose, as crimson as blood, bloomed with its velvety petals spread around, a couple of rosebuds facing in directions adorned it. And those tiny drops of water sparkled on the petals reminded me of diamonds.

It was gorgeous.

"Em! See this," Tobias called out, beckoning me to him. He stood before a painting of a mermaid with the upper half of her floating on the water. "What do you think of this? I think she will glorify my bedroom wall with her beauty."

I sighed at my brother. Thank God that the mermaid's chest was covered with her hair. There were children roaming around for God's sake!

"Yeah, it's beautiful," I said, agreeing anyway.

A friend of his called him from among a group of men.

"I'll be back!"

As he strode to the group, I stayed back and appreciated the painting. Suddenly I felt a presence behind me. And the wisp of the familiar cologne that tingled my nostrils had me frozen in my place. My heart stuttered as I felt his body heat behind me.

"You like it?" a deep voice rasped into my ear. An involuntary shiver ran down my spine.

"What're you doing here?" I whispered, not turning to him. His house hunting was finally over?

Wait, why do I care if he was busy the whole week? Right, I don't.

Deep chuckle. "I see, my Rosebud isn't happy to see me here."

I frowned. "You didn't answer my question."

I felt him stepping closer. "Why do people come to events like these?"

I shrugged, feigning not to be affected by his close proximity. "Well, most of them come to show off."

A sharp intake of breath. And then I felt his breath on my neck. The atmosphere suddenly rose higher in the room.

Wait, did he just smell me?

Creep!

"Trust me, sweetheart. I didn't come here to show off. I've much more important things to do than

wasting my time on that." He brushed his fingers on my hip, making me jolt.

Not being able to bear the tension, I stepped away from his overwhelming presence and touch, sent him a glare and walked away with flushed cheeks. But his persistent gaze didn't.

When the bell of the auction rang, we all gathered in the backyard of the building, under the open sky.

Rows of chairs were lined up before the huge stage for people to sit. We took our seats in the second row. And a particular person was missing.

Was he already gone?

Good for me.

A man cleared his throat in the mike, snatching everyone's attention to the stage. "Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the 'Felicity Charity Event' one more time! We all know the holy purpose we're gathered here for. So without any adieu, let's begin the auction right away."

A painting of a phoenix was first put for sale on the stage as the auctioneer began calling for bids. And as the auction went on, things got heated between the bidders to win over a piece of art.

Tobias was extremely disappointed when someone else brought his mermaid's painting with a much higher price than him, where Dad was satisfied with a picture of mother Teresa.

And when the canvas of that blood rose got on the stage, I really wanted to bid for it. But well, my pockets weren't full enough to do that. I could easily ask from Dad, but if I wanted to help someone, I wanted to do with something that I owned. So I decided to just pay them a little amount that I could afford in check later.

"And who wants to hold onto this gorgeous velvety rose over here?" the auctioneer asked. "The bid starts with five thousand dollars!"

"Ten thousand dollars!" a man yelled out from the crowd.

"Ten thousand dollars! Anyone else wants to take it home with a higher price?" queried the bid caller.

"Fifteen thousand dollars!" shouted a woman.

"Fifteen thousand! Anyone else? Fifteen thousand dollars! Going once! Going..."

"Seventeen thousand dollars!" cried out the previous man.

"Excellent! Seventeen thousand!" Everyone started murmuring about the outrageous price for only a mere picture of a rose. I was even surprised. That man must've liked it a lot. Though it was a masterpiece. "Going once, going twice, and so..."

"One million!" a voice spoke over the babbles of the crowd from somewhere behind us. Everything went quiet, gasps of shock echoed around as everyone glanced back to see the insane person wasting a million dollars on a simple painting.

I turned around, and there he was. At the last row, sitting with his utmost ease, not a slight of care that he just spent a load of money after a mere canvas.

Was he crazy?

Even the auctioneer watched him with bafflement. "A-are you sure, Mr. Valencian?"

He stood up and glanced down at his watch. "Get it ready." Leaving a last look at my way, he went to sign the check his secretary handed him as every pair of eyes ogled him with awe and disbelief.

Once the auction was over, we met him outside. Dad was proud of him that he donated that much for those kids while Tobias also appreciated him with a still sullen mood. And then I was left alone with him.

He watched me as I eyed the beautiful canvas lying on the backseat of his car.

"I didn't know you were interested in art that much," I said. "Why this one though? There were a lot of paintings out there from famous artists who'd have been worth the money." I didn't know he'd do it just out of kindness.

"But these weren't what I wanted. I wanted it-" he pointed to the painting, "-so I got it."

"Why it? Anything special you saw in it?" Shouldn't I just walk away? But here I was, asking questions

to him out of my stupid curiosity. As far as I knew, he had never been on any charity functions, let alone donating a million in a day.

He stepped closer, his stormy grey peered into mine. "What do you see in them?"

I tilted my head, my brows creasing. "I- umm, a rose?" I uttered, glancing back at the painting.

"And?" he probed.

"And..." My eyes flickered in the backseat again. "And some rosebuds..."

My eyes widened as realization set in.

"Exactly. Rosebuds and rose, that's bloomed into a beautiful flower," he whispered, easing closer.

"Rang a bell, Rosebud? Or, should I say, my Rose?"

My breath hitched at my throat at his words. He- he remembered. He remembered what he said to me on my ninth birthday.

A shaky breath escaped my lips. If he remembered, then he also knew of the feelings I'd harbored for

him for all these years. I was right, he knew. He knew everything.

"You..." My gulped the lump down my throat, my heart pounding.

"Yes, I remember everything. You know why I bought it?"

I shook my head, still reeling from his revelation.

"Because the moment my eyes fell onto this rose, it became mine. And I don't let go of anything that belongs to me."

A gasp slipped through my mouth. Because even though someone else would think that he was talking about the painting, I knew he wasn't. Because those intense grey eyes of his were on me as declared his claim.

And I don't let go of anything that belongs to me.

Something ticked in my head as I remembered my message to him last week. It was his reply for me.

Just three months, and I will be free of this contract soon. You can't keep me here forever.

How did you like the chapter? Let me know in the comments.

And please give me a follow on my profile and on Instagram to support my author pages, pretty

please? You can find me with [eva_zahan1](#) on Instagram. Thank you!

With love,
Eva Zahan.
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Chapter 13

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"So you mean, he literally declared that he wants you? That you're his?" asked Cassie, with her jaw on the floor.

"He didn't exactly say that."

"But this is what he meant with whatever he said. Even a kid can see through it!" she argued.

I threw the cards we were playing on the table and sat back against the couch, huffing. After the auction I got a call from her to meet at her place. With a feeble flu, she was getting bored out of her mind. So I came to give her company.

"God! I've seen people being crazy in love before. But this? This is insane!" She shook her head in disbelief. "Buying an entire company just to bring you closer to him, forcing you to join the board meetings so that he could meet you more and wasting a million over just a canvas?"

At the mention of the 'L' word, I sat up straight. "There's no love! It's- it just could be a want of possession or obsession of his. I don't know. But there is nothing like that you're implying!"

She raised a brow. "Even Jeff Bezos wouldn't do something as crazy as buying an entire company that would cost him a fortune just to bring a girl close to him he wants."

I rolled my eyes, but the skip of my heart didn't go amiss. After I found out from Tobias that OC

Textiles' owner was Ace, and not Caleb, I was shocked. I even had a doubt that he'd something to do with my transfer, it wasn't just Caleb. Though, I wasn't sure. And when I told Cassie accidentally about this, she got this illusion that he bought that company from Mr. Cooper for me. Even though I didn't want to believe her, but it did make some sense.

"He must've had some other agenda behind it. And it could be a pure coincidence that he found out

I'd be working in that company, and so he told Caleb to transfer me here. That's it." I still denied.

"Really? And what about the message he sent you just the previous night? That you can't escape from him anymore? Your time was over and blah blah? Can you explain that?" I opened my mouth and then shut it. Crossing my hands over my chest, I shrugged.

She gave me a look. And to my utter surprise, she changed the subject. "How's Warner?"

I cocked my head. "Uh, he's good?"

What was she trying to do now?

She nodded. "You guys talk everyday?"

"No. Both of us were really busy the entire week. But he did call this morning." I checked my phone

but there were no calls or messages from him. "He was supposed to call me again tonight."

"So long-distance is already at its work," she hummed.

My brows creased. "What do you mean?"

Her shoulders lifted as she grabbed her coffee mug and took a sip, sniffing. "Isn't it simple? Even strong relationships don't work with long-distance most of the time, and here we're talking about your one sided relationship."

"It isn't one-sided."

"Oh?" She raised her brow. "So you love him?"

Silence.

"Knew it. Look, Em-" placing the mug back on the table, she leaned in, "-you and I both know that

what you and Warner have, isn't gonna last long. And now that you're worlds away from each other, and with your a new, slash old lover is back in the picture, you should take a decision on your

relationship with Warner now. You and he, both are aware that you were never in this. You never had

any feelings for him other than seeing him just as a friend. Yes, maybe he does like you, but trust me,

in deep down, he also knows that you won't be able to love him no matter how much he tries."

I looked down at my lap. "It's not my fault that I can't do it. I tried, I tried my best to love him. But..."

"But your heart still belongs to someone else?"

My eyes snapped up to her. "No! I don't have any feelings for him anymore. Yes, he does affect me

still, but... it's just the awkwardness. Nothing else." I averted my eyes from her piercing ones. "And I

and Warner are doing good, you don't worry about that."

"Don't lie to me. I know you more than you know yourself, Em. You still want him as much as you did

back at your siblings' birthday party that night. You're just scared to get hurt again, that's why your

denying your feelings, aren't you?" she asked. When I didn't answer, she sighed. "Don't you think

you're doing wrong to Warner? Even if he was the one who insisted to try, but you know that you

won't be able to love him no matter it's because of Ace or not."

Closing my eyes, I put my head on my hands. I knew I wasn't doing fair with Warner. It's been eating

me out for a long time now. But I was too selfish to let him go. Though I didn't love him, but his

friendship did give a huge support. Truth to be told, him being my boyfriend helped my mind a little

bit to assure myself that I'd moved on. I could show it to the world, to him. But in deep down, I knew

the truth. I knew I was using Warner for my own selfishness.

My eyes pricked as guilt cut through me. Though even I was thinking to talk about it with him for last

some months, I couldn't do it. My selfishness, fear, fear of facing him alone stopped me from doing it.

"Hey!" Rounding the table, she sat beside me, placing a hand over mine.

"It's okay. I know what

you're feeling. But don't. It's not your fault. Though Warner doesn't know about Ace, but he does

know that why you agreed to be his girlfriend. Talk to him, I'm sure he will understand. He deserves to

know the truth, Em. Tell him everything."

I nodded. "I will talk to him. But not now, I need to do this when we're face to face. He's coming at

Tess's wedding."

"Will you tell him about Ace?"

"No. There's nothing to tell him about Ace." I casted her a glance. "I will just talk to him about us. I

just hope he will still be my friend after everything is over."

She squeezed my hand. "He will, I'm sure!"

After a silence, she shifted and cleared her throat.

"So?"

I turned to her. "So what?"

"Now that the issue of Warner is sorted, will you give Ace a chance?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "So you talked me into breaking up with

Warner so that you can pair me

up with Ace? I can't believe you!"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please! It's not that you weren't going to do that in some time anyway.

Specially now that Ace is here."

I scowled at her.

"What? I'm just helping my best friend with her love life dilemma. You and I both know what's is your

heart's desire. And I know, in deep down, beside the fear of another heartbreak, you were stopping

yourself from leaning towards Ace because of Warner. You didn't want to cheat on him. But that's

now sorted now, right?"

"Are you for real? I'm not going to do anything with Ace. And about

Warner, i still haven't broken up

with him. He's still my boyfriend."

She waved her hand. "He will be out of the picture soon. It will be better for his own good anyway.

Because assessing your Valencian's obsession with you, I don't think he would take this nicely if he has

any competitor in the way of getting you."

"You know what? I'm leaving. I'm not talking to you anymore about

this!" Red in the face, I got up and

collected my purse and phone.

"Do whatever you want, girl. We both know that Achilles Valencian has played his card. And now,

you're stuck in his trap. No matter what you want, you can't escape him.

And you know why?"

I stared at her, waiting for her to finish.

"Because you don't want to escape. Your heart won't let you."

The elevator pinged, opening up for another person to reach their destined floor leaving only me and Liza inside. My one hand was filled with files and the other occupied with a cup of tea. After the small talk with Cassie, her words didn't let sleep last night. Some of my own realization haunted my night. I was beginning to accept my fate, the change and him around me again. It didn't scare me as it did the first couple of days. And it scared me the most. It's just been not more than twenty days I met him again, and I was already thinking about him more and more. I was turning weak again. Just like years ago...

No, Em. Don't go there. You can't fall weak this time. Be strong, use your head. Don't let yourself fall into his trap. You don't know what happened seven years ago. Even if he knew about your feelings, you don't know if he really had anything for you in his heart. But that wasn't possible, if he did feel something, then he wouldn't do that with your sister. But Tess did say that she didn't love him... Then why did they do it? If there was nothing between them, then why? Or there was? Or it could be a moment of heat between them? But do best friends do that? I blew out a sigh. It was all so confusing. I didn't know what to think anymore. All my life I had been thinking that my sister betrayed me, but the truth was she didn't. Or she said she would never hurt me.

I wanted to ask Tobias about it. The truth of what actually happened seven years ago. But I didn't know how to start this conversation with him. Did he even know what happened that night?

"God! It's not even noon and I'm already so tired! The preparations for the meeting with Arabs is taking a real troll on me," Liza complained.

"What's so important about this meeting though? I mean, the way everyone is taking it over seriously, it's not usual."

"It's a very big deal the boss wants to crack with them. He doesn't want it to go to our rival company.

These chipmunks now started a new clothing line when they found out about our new business in this field." She shook her head. "I tell you, these people can't take any success of this company."

Oh! So that's all the fuss about. Then something caught my eyes as we reached the last stop, forty-ninth floor. It was a fifty floor building, then why there were only forty-nine buttons on the elevator panel?

"We're here," she announced, once the doors opened.

"Wait, why there are only forty-nine buttons? It's a fifty floor building, right?" I asked, strolling out behind her.

She bobbed her head. "Yes. The boss's penthouse is on the fiftieth floor, and no one can go there other than his closed ones. So the common elevator doesn't have access there. They go there by the VIP one." Her chin jutted towards the other elevator beside the ordinary one.

The golden one.

I did know that that was for VIPs, but I didn't know only that one had access to the fiftieth floor.

Once we were with the team that was working on the presentation for the meeting, we drowned our heads in the work to finish the final touches. As Liza said, the boss, meant Caleb didn't want any deficiency with anything. I didn't know these people were that terrified of Caleb. Even the word, 'the boss' was enough to drain color from their faces.

"Phew, finally done! How much time is left for the meeting?" asked Matt, a guy from the management department. He was always paranoid with every little thing.

"Don't worry, Matt. There's still one hour left," said Sierra, checking her watch.

"Yeah, not that much of time. The boss can arrive at any moment and demand a recheck himself." He huffed.

"Anyways, let me print those papers in the meantime," I said, gathering the sheets.

"Alright, but be fast. We're leaving in fifteen minutes. You know Matt and you're joining us in the meeting, right?" Liza asked.

"Yeah, don't worry. It will need only five minutes," I told her, getting up from my chair. But my hand accidentally bumped with the tea mug I had put at the side and the cold content spilled on the table, splashing half of it on my clothes. "Shit!"

"Here!"

Liza passed me some tissue papers, but it was already ruined. The stain marked my white blouse dark.

Damn! Did I have to wear white today?

Cursing under my breath, I threw the tissues in the bin.

"Oh God, we're leaving in fifteen minutes. You need to clean this up fast!" Sierra was up to her feet.

"There's no time to clean it. Even your jeans have some stains. You've to change your clothes." Liza eyed my appearance.

"But where would I find clothes at this moment? I don't have that much of time to go home now." I bit my lip.

Suddenly her eyes lit up as she spoke, "Why don't you go up to the penthouse? Your sister had stayed there a couple of times. I'm sure there's some clothes of her in one of the rooms."

"Penthouse? But what if Cale..."

"The boss wouldn't mind at all! At least not for you. Just go and change your clothes. We don't have much time left." Cutting me off, she pushed me out of the door. "I'll print those papers. You go on."

Heaving a sigh, I went to the golden elevator and hopped in.

There must be some guards up there to control the unwanted accesses. They know Tess, but not me.

Would they even let me pass? Should I call Caleb for permission first? Too late, I was already there.

As the doors opened, my suspicion was right. There indeed were two huge built guards hovering

outside. But much to my surprise, when they saw me, something flashed across their faces as they stood straight and greeted me with a polite nod.

Well, I was allowed?

Flashing a smile to them, I walked through the spacious corridor. But there stopped me a second barrier. A fingerprint scanner beside the door. Damn it! Now how would I go inside?

I should just go back and try to get these stains off somehow without wasting my time here.

Just as I turned to go, one of the guards appeared before me, his eyes on the floor. "My apologies to block your way, Miss. But if you don't know, you've access in the penthouse. You just have to press your thumb on the scanner."

I frowned. I'd access inside? But how? When did Caleb collect my fingerprint for it?

Confused, I turned around and placed my thumb on the scanner. And it did recognize my identity and unlocked the door. Whoa!

Strange.

Still surprised, I thanked the guard and walked inside before closing the door. And I just stood there

for a moment. The entire penthouse did justice to Valencian's name.

Stunning would be an

understatement. The white marble and dark panelling, and the combination of white and grey classy furniture just enhanced its beauty.

Remembering the shortage of my time, I walked upstairs not knowing where to go and entered in a

master bedroom. Not even a single piece of a thing was out of place. It felt like no one really ever

lived here. It definitely wasn't the room Tess visited. Because she wasn't one to keep a place that tidy like this.

Not wanting to waste my time anymore, I padded inside the walk in closet. Seeing the tons of ironed suits and jackets lined up in the rack, I assumed it was Caleb's room. The closet was filled with the smell of laundry. Even the clothes seemed untouched.

I couldn't wear his suits, so I searched for some t-shirts or something that I could fit into. And I did find one in the back. Though it seemed too big for me but I would just adjust myself into it.

Going back into the bedroom, I placed the black t-shirt on the bed and collected some more tissues to pat on the stains my jeans had. They weren't that noticeable, so I just rubbed on the wet patch a few times and let it be. The t-shirt was big enough to cover them anyway. Throwing the tissues into the silver bin, I went back to the bed and removed my sticky blouse off.

Once I was done wiping the dampness on my chest with it, I flung it on the mattress. And just as I grabbed the t-shirt in my hand, the door of the bedroom flung open, and soon followed a curse under someone's breath making me freeze in my place.

Shit!

Oops! The end of the chapter! It was totally accidental guys, don't curse me. Now I'd to add some cliffhanger, didn't I? ·

How was chapter? Did you like it? Tell me in the comments. And who do you think just interrupted Em?

Any guesses? ;)

I'll see you soon, guys! Till then, stay safe and happy!

With love,

Eva Zahan.

The Trap Of Ace

Author's note!

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First of all, I'm extremely sorry that this isn't an update. But I've some interesting news for you!

I've opened a new Facebook page where you can see the mood boards, sneak peeks and other

information about my books. So if you want to enjoy a little sneak peek of the upcoming chapter of

'The Trap Of Ace', then go and check it out! I've just posted it on my page.

The Trap Of Ace

Chapter 14

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First of all, I want to thank CLARA0976 for making this beautiful cover for 'The Trap Of Ace'! Thank you so much, Khadija, for sending me this through Instagram! I'm sorry I couldn't show it to all my readers earlier, I kinda lost your message. And Merry Christmas in advance to you all, my sweet pumpkins! Hope you'll have an awesome holiday! This chapter is your Christmas gift! And lastly, thank you so much to all of you who supported me by liking my Facebook page! Now it's time to read the chapter, happy reading!

Clutching the t-shirt tight against my chest, I whirled around and my breath caught into my throat. There, he stood rigid beside the door, hand clenched around the knob as his darker than ever stormy grey gaze preyed on my almost half naked body. Even with the t-shirt before my chest, I felt naked under his scorching stare. Curse the moment I decided to go braless due to the thick cotton blouse! "W-what are you doing here? Get out!" I screeched, as he stood there immobile, staring at me shamelessly. My outburst seemed to pull him out of his trance. Closing his eyes for a moment, he took a deep breath. Once those grey pools opened again, instead of leaving, he closed the door behind him and stalked towards me. Eyes like saucers, I stepped back. "W-what are you doing? Get out of the room! Right now!" Only when he was inches away from me, then did he stop. Jaws clenched, his gaze went back to roam on my bare shoulders to my bare waist, leaving a tingling sensation behind in their wake. I was frozen in my place, my head screamed to run to the washroom, but my legs weren't moving. I didn't flinch when he raised his hand and tucked a strand behind my ear. Because even if in this whole penthouse I was alone with him, there wasn't any fear in me.

"You're telling me to get out from my own room, Rosebud?" rasped his deep Greek accent. Flaming stare set onto my parted lips. Only then I noticed how his shirt was half done, displaying the fine ripped muscles of his chest.

I bit my lip.

"Don't do that if you want my hands to stay away from you." A groan reverberated into his chest as he pulled my lower lip out with his thumb and touched it sensually. A jolt shot through me, making me stumble away.

With my heart at my throat, I managed to say, "D-do not touch me. Get out or else..."

He stepped closer. "Or else?"

Eyes flickering around, I kept backing away. "I- I will..."

What could I do?

Moving away from him, I ran for the washroom and closed the door behind me. A booming laughter followed behind.

I cursed under my breath. In the mirror, I found myself all hot and red, out of anger, embarrassment and... and something else. Something that I felt when he watched me with those eyes and touched my lip. Something that I didn't want to address.

What was he doing here anyway?

He said it was his room. That meant this was his penthouse, and not Caleb's? But then why did Liza say it was Caleb's... oh! So 'the boss' meant, Achilles? I thought she was Caleb's assistant, so she might refer to him as the boss.

God! I'm such an idiot!

And then something clicked. If Ace was 'the boss', that meant, he made that cabin for me? That beautiful cabin I was so comfortable working in? And here I thought it was Caleb.

I didn't know if I was flattered or irritated. That man vexed and confused me, and at the same time wondered me.

What does he actually want from me? Those roses every morning and gifts, why's he doing all this?

Still weak in the knees, I put on the t-shirt and looked at myself in the mirror. The t-shirt engulfed me whole into it.

It was his...

Without realizing, I took the fabric and sniffed. A disappointment filled me as only laundry powder's smell was what I got.

I shook my head.

What was I doing? I had to be strong. I couldn't let him affect me in that way.

With a new determination set, I took a deep breath and walked out. He wasn't in the room anymore, so was my stained blouse.

Where did it go?

Once I was in the hall, he was still nowhere to be seen. Good for me, I just wanted to disappear from here without facing him again. I could just come later sometimes and grab my blouse.

I almost let out a sigh of relief when I reached the door without any hinders. And just as I touched the knob...

"Going somewhere, Rosebud?"

I stilled.

Turning around, I sent him a glare. He was now changed into a white shirt and dark suit jacket.

"Yes, any problem?"

My eyes widened as the door didn't open when I pulled it. I tried again, but no avail. What was wrong with it now?

Then I remembered about the fingerprint scanner. But there wasn't anything like that beside the door either.

"Why isn't it opening?"

A smirk tugged at his lips. "Because I locked it."

"What? But why?" I scowled. "Open it, I'm getting late for the meeting."

He shrugged. "I'm sure your boss wouldn't mind if you reach there a little bit later."

The nerve of this man! He talked about my boss as if he was referring to someone else and not himself!

"Open this door right now, Ace."

Something flashed over his eyes. Closing the distance, he stood before me. "I missed hearing my name from your lips all these time," he said, tone soft with emotions as his eyes raked over my face with such tenderness.

Something squeezed my chest as the memories we spent together seven years ago when he used to visit our home regularly flooded my mind.

A composure suddenly took over his features, turning him unreadable.

Clearing his throat, he cocked his head. "I will let you go only if you accept a condition of mine."

"Everyone is waiting for me. I don't have time for this," I said, not wanting to accept any of his conditions. I knew, it would be something wicked, just like his intentions. "That's why I'm suggesting you to accept my condition and I'll let you go."

He wouldn't budge, would he? Pressing my lips tight, I glared at him.

"Fine! What is it?"

A triumph look took over his eyes, though he didn't let it show on his face. "You'll come with me, in my car to the meeting."

"What! No! I won't go with you!" No way I was staying alone with him in his car. Right now was more than enough to give me sleepless nights. I didn't want more.

"Then you aren't leaving," his tone spoke finality.

I gaped. "But... you can't do that. If you don't open this door then you can't leave either, you know that right?"

His mouth twitched. "Nice try, Rosebud. But trust me, I don't have any problem spending some more time with you here, alone." He stepped closer.

I raised my hands before me, stopping him. "Alright, i- I'll go with you. Just, open this damn door!" It

was better to be in a car with him than stay locked in this penthouse. God! I hated him!

But when a breathtaking smile appeared on his lips, brightening everything around me, I doubted myself. It felt like I was seeing the same old Ace again. Soft and carefree. Not this rough and cold.

I went speechless when he closed the gap, pressed a kiss on my forehead and whispered a 'let's go' in my ear. He opened the door for us clicking on something on his phone. I didn't know how to react as he held my hand and led me out of the penthouse. And I let him, until we stepped out of the elevator and met my other colleagues down at the lobby.

The car ride was quiet all the way to the meeting. I barely looked at him as my eyes were outside on the road most of the time, ignoring the brooding man. But his overwhelming presence wasn't an easy thing to ignore.

The whole time he was tense, his knuckles were tight on the steering, glancing at me time to time. As if he wanted to say something to me, but held himself back. The only thing he asked was if I wanted to listen to some music. But I said no. I wanted to ask him how he got my fingerprint for the scanner. But even I chose to stay silent. Because I didn't trust myself, once I started asking, I feared I'd ask something that I shouldn't. Once we were at our destination, together we walked inside the sea-faced restaurant where the Arabs would meet us. The whole terrace was booked for the meeting. And the first thing as we stepped onto the terrace was the fresh ocean air greeting us, blowing my long brown locks along.

The Arabs were already there, discussing something in their own language around the big roundtable, four men and two women. And the ladies weren't from there for sure, seeing their western dresses.

Liza and Matt were seated at a smaller table beside them.

Smiling, when I tried to approach them, a big hand held my elbow. "You'll stay with me. Come," he ordered- though his tone was soft, and steered me towards the Arabians.

"And why would I listen to you?" I had to crane my neck to look up at him.

His shoulder lifted an inch. "Because I'm your boss." The teasing in his fleeting glance didn't go amiss.

I huffed silently as the Arabs approached us, all smiling broad.

"As-salamu alaykum, Mr. Valencian! Pleasure meeting you!" the older one of them said, shaking his hand with Ace. Just like other three men, he also flaunted their traditional long white tunic and a chequered head-dress on his head.

"Likewise, Mr. Hakimi! I'm glad you all specially came here for this meeting," he replied.

Though a smile stretched across his lips, his eyes were back to blank. A hollowness that resided into those grey pools even if he was with his closed ones. Another thing that changed in all these years. I wonder what caused him to turn like this.

Well, except me. With me, he was someone else, he'd emotions in his eyes. The emotions that scared me.

After Mr. Hakimi introduced his partners, he then introduced his assistant over this country, Cindy, the girl in a red dress and eight inch stilettos. Eyeing Ace up and down, she flashed him a red lipped smile, batting her fake eyelashes.

"I've heard so much about you, and finally I'm here, standing right in front of you, the infamous Mr. Valencian. It's such a pleasure!" she cooed, shaking her hand with him. I didn't miss how her hand lingered in his more than usual handshake times. My stare hardened. But it seemed he didn't care at all. Retracting his hand, he dismissed her with just a curt nod. Her smile threatened to fall.

"And who is this gorgeous young lady we have here?" asked Mr. Hakimi. Turning to me, Ace pulled me closer by my waist, surprising me. "Meet, Emerald Hutton. A very close friend of mine."

Close friend? I didn't think we were even friends, let alone close. Giving him a look, I smiled at the Arabs. "I'm a designer at OC Fabrics. And just a family friend of his." All of them greeted me with smiles while he just watched me, which made me uneasy. His closeness and touch was already too much for me.

"Shall we proceed now, Mr. Hakimi?" he asked the old man.

But his assistant was too excited to proceed than her boss, as she said,
"Of course, Mr. Valencian!
Please sit."

Annoyance pricked my skin as she unnecessarily crouched down to pull a
chair beside her for Ace to
sit there, displaying her scary cleavage in the process.

Nodding his head, as he went to accept her offered chair, I went ahead
and sat there instead. Surprise
flashed across her face but she covered it with a fake smile. I smiled back
with equal enthusiasm.

"Easy, Rosebud. I've my eyes only for you," his sudden whisper in my ear
had me flush. Him talking to
me like that still managed to shock me. Even though he cleared his
intentions from the day one.

Taking the vacant chair beside me, he threw me an amused glance.
God! He must be thinking I was jealous. Which I wasn't! I just didn't like
that girl. And like that, my
eyes again went to glare at her, but subtly this time.

As the meeting went on, that red witch continued to laugh and flirt with
him. She would even ask
irrelevant questions throughout the conversation leaning forward over
the table to see him properly,
as I was in the way.

Even his stoic face didn't discourage her. My hands were tight in fists
whenever her eyes shamelessly
devoured him in front of everyone. I didn't know how I resisted myself
from clawing those eyes out of
her.

When a hand landed on my thigh, I looked up at him, surprised, even
confused. But when he
squeezed gently, I turned red again realizing that he noticed my
reactions, all of them. Even that old
man sent me a mischievous smile, his aged eyes flickered from me to
Ace.

Embarrassed with my reactions and disturbed with my own feelings, I
excused myself and left down
to the washroom.

As the cool water touched my hot face, it felt soothing. But the ugly
green monster still raged inside

me. I didn't know I'd react like that seeing some other girl even eyeing him with interest. And it wasn't the first time, I felt the same when I saw that red head friend of his with him that night. Even more to say.

I was getting tired of fighting off my own feelings. But I didn't have the strength to accept them. I just couldn't.

Tapping my face with a tissue, I rechecked my appearance in the mirror, blew out a breath and went out. The washroom on the terrace had some work going on, so I had to come downstairs.

As I walked through the busy restaurant, a fuss behind me made me halt and turn around.

A tray filled with food was spilled on the tiled floor as the waiter gaped at the scene with horror. The man standing beside him, apologized. Getting out some cash, he handed it to the baffled waiter and hurried out of the door, his movement tensed as he kept looking over his shoulder.

Wait, I knew him. I saw him before somewhere. But where?

Scrutinizing, my eyes followed him even outside as he walked to the parking lot. The walls were made of glass, so I could see him properly.

Tall frame, grey hair peeking out of dark locks. Yes, it was the man I bumped into back in NY, at Mr.

Cooper's office. How could I forget that strange man?

What was he doing here?

The Trap Of Ace

Chapter 15

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I shook my head. Why did I care about what he was doing here?

I should just go back to the terrace.

Once back upstairs, I found the meeting was over and everyone was now enjoying their drinks, except

Ace. He simply drank a glass of plain water.

And... that witch was now in my seat!

But his attention wasn't on her, instead those stormy eyes were searching around for something.

Until they landed on me. Was that relief that flashed over them?

He beckoned me to him with his head, but I turned around and went to Liza who was talking to two of the Arabs beside the railings. Matt wasn't here, he went to attend a phone call right after me when I left for the washroom.

"Hey, where did you go?" Liza asked.

"Washroom," I replied, standing next to her. Nodding her head, she returned to the conversation.

One of the Arabs' eyes locked with mine as he flashed me a smile. I remember his name was Fazza. At twenty something, with dark hair and tanned skin, he didn't look bad. But the interest in his brown eyes didn't match mine.

But out of politeness, I smiled back.

"How long are you working for Mr. Valencian?" he asked.

"Umm, it's been just a week." I averted my eyes from his awkward stare.

"Oh, so you're new here," he stated. "Though mine working in this field isn't that old either. I just joined some months ago."

"You're a designer too?"

He nodded. "Yep, loved doing these drawings with paper and pencils from my childhood."

This time my chuckle was genuine. "Well, I still draw the designs with them. Doing it on the computer doesn't feel connected."

A grin spread across his face. "Looks like we're on the same page then." He glanced at my hand.

"You're not having anything. You need a drink?"

When I was about to answer, an arm around my waist cut me off. A gasp slipped through my lips as I was pulled against a hard frame.

"Sweetheart, what took you so long? I was waiting for you," he said with jaw tight as stone, casting a look of frost at Fazza. And I just stood there dumbfounded.

"You- you guys are together?" Fazza's eyes fell where the arm that was wrapped around me possessively.

"Yes, she's taken," Ace replied, but it came out much like a hiss. Though his expression was cool, his eyes were hard, as if warning him off, staking his claim on me.

Fazza put his hands up, eyes wide. "No bad intentions here, Mr. Valencian. I was just talking. Anyways, I'll just take your leave now."

Once he was gone and so did the others, I tried to wriggle out of his hold but he only tightened it.

Huffing, I glared up at him.

"What are you doing? And what did you mean by I was taken?"

He cocked his head. "Because you're. You're mine."

My heart stopped at my chest, breath caught at my throat. The intensity of his eyes held me

speechless. And then my heart started racing, blood ran hot in my veins as something soared into my chest.

I gulped. "I- I'm not yours."

"You aren't?" He leaned closer, stormy grey eyes held me prisoner.

The shake of my head was vague.

"You sure, Rosebud? Because your eyes are saying otherwise." His hot breath fell on my lips as his

fingers dug into my flesh, sending shivers down my spine.

"Why did we stop here? We were supposed to directly go to the office, right?" I asked, glancing at the mall standing tall outside of the car window.

"At least you said something," he remarked, eyes amused.

Pressing my lips, I scowled. After he declared his claim on me back at the terrace, all I could do was

get out of his arms and run away from him. Then my plan to return with Liza and Matt failed as they

already left me assuming I already had a ride. And I'd no way but to get into his car with him again.

Throughout the whole ride I hadn't spoken to him. Even when he tried to grab my hand - the nerve of him!

"Well?" I crossed my arms over my chest, snatching his smoldering gaze on there. Blood rushed to my ears.

Inhaling a deep breath, he brought his eyes back to mine. "Caleb and Tess's engagement is on this

Sunday night. And I need your help to choose a gift for them."

I raised my brow. "It's your cousin and best friend you're talking about. You don't know what to get for them?"

A sour feeling appeared in my mouth as the picture of him and Tess from that night flashed in my mind. Did they really have anything at all between them? If they did, then he should've at least felt some discomfort that the girl he used to date was going to marry his cousin, who was more like a brother to him. But it seemed like it didn't affect him, at all. And if there wasn't anything like that, then what was that I saw? The intensity between them, the passion...

My hands balled into fists, my chest constricted. But I managed a calm facade before him. Years of practice, how could I not manage?

"I've got something in my mind for Caleb, but I don't know what to get for Tess. Yes, she's my best friend, but as her sister, and a girl, you'd know better." He regarded my face with assessing eyes, as if searching for something in there. Did he know of my inner turmoil? The turmoil that was getting more difficult day by day to cage in.

I stayed silent, lost in my own thoughts.

You're mine.

What did he mean by that? All of a sudden, after years, the years he maybe didn't even care where his best friend's little sister was. And now out of nowhere he called me his? He wanted me? When did this happen? Because I didn't believe he just fell for me after just seeing me at that party.

"Here, I'm sure you'll love this one, Ma'am. This is one of the best pieces of necklace in our store," said the manager himself of this renowned jewelry outlet. And why not? The great Achilles Valencian was in his store.

I rolled my eyes in my head.

Yes, I was here with him, helping him find a gift for my sister. I thought of declining, but I couldn't just

say no to those in need stormy grey eyes. I knew, I was being stupid and weak. But... I couldn't help it.

And we were here because Tess was obsessed with diamonds and clothes.

Shaking my head, I passed another piece of necklace. They were too heavy. "Show me something light and contemporary."

At Achilles' nod of head, the manager took off to show me some more of their collections that I finally might like. I didn't know much of Tess's choice, but I knew she was fond of trying the brand new designs in the market.

Twirling the bracelet on my wrist, my eyes went around to the jewelries on display. Then something caught my eyes. A simple pendant with a diamond cut emerald in the middle with tiny rubies adorned around it. It was gorgeous.

I wasn't that fond of emeralds before, but the tiny ones in my bracelet had won my heart.

I wonder who's left this beautiful bracelet before my door that day...

"You like something for yourself?" Came his deep voice close to my ear.

My step away from him was

swift. This man just didn't know of personal space.

"No. We're here for Tess, not me, remember?"

He watched me for a moment and then nodded his head.

"Mr. Valencian, please take a seat. Let us show the latest collections of our store," the manager urged,

with two assistants behind him carrying dozens of boxes in their hands.

With a curt nod, he wrapped his arm around my waist and led me to the sitting area. I tried to wiggle

out of his arm, glaring at him. But he kept a firm hold, pulling me more into his warmth.

I huffed, giving up, not wanting to create a scene. And the thing that I felt in his arms, his scent, could be another reason why I didn't pull away.

He was tampering with my head, as well as my heart.

After I was done choosing something for Tess, finally, he maneuvered me to another store. This time, I was thrown to hunt for a dress for her.

When I told him our dressing style was a lot different, I couldn't help him in that. He said,

"I trust your decisions, Rosebud. I'm sure, whatever you choose, will be the best. And don't worry, I'll help you make the decision."

I had just frowned in confusion. Whatever he said, had gone over my head. What did he know of my decisions and choices anyway?

Though I wouldn't admit it, I was thankful that this woman who helped us find a dress wasn't staring at him like a puppy craving for a bone, like the other shops we visited. She was polite and professional, not dancing her eyes around. And when I told her what type of dress I wanted, she'd handed me over two dozens of expensive gowns. For wedding occasions, they'd be best: suggested the woman.

I ran my hand over a pink satin, checking its florid designs.

Suddenly it was snatched from me. Looking up, I found a displeased Ace glaring holes onto that dress.

"We're not taking it."

"Why? What's wrong with it? I think it'd be perfect for Tess. And pink is also her favorite color."

He raised his brow. "What's wrong? It's too short."

"So? She has no problem with short dresses."

"But I've!" His lips tightened.

Something nagged inside me. Why did he care if Tess wore short dresses or not? My temper suddenly flared as I grabbed the dress back from his grasp.

"I liked this dress for her, so we'll be taking this. You told me to help you and I'm just doing that. And if you don't like my choice, then be my guest and help yourself of your own!"

My sudden outburst didn't seem to bother him as he was too busy eyeing me up and down.

"What're you doing?" I frowned.

"How do you know Tess'd look good in it? You didn't see it on her, did you?"

"I don't need to see it on her. I can tell, this will be perfect for her."

"But I'm not that certain," he said, tilting his head. "Why don't you try it on you, and see if it really

looks good?"

My eyes widened. "What? Why'd I do that? And how can you decide if she'll look good or not seeing it on me? I'm not her!"

He shrugged. "But both of your height and weight are almost the same. So I don't think there'd be a problem."

"But..."

"No buts. You're only wasting our time arguing over this. Just try this out, let me see you and get done

with it," he cut me off. But when he mentioned of seeing me, a goosebump crawled up my arms. And

it didn't help as his stormy grey eyes were a lot more stormier.

"Fine! Let's just get over it!" Glaring, I walked to the changing room.

There were people around the shop, men more than women in our section.

God! I'd have to walk out in this thigh length sleeveless dress.

Slamming the door shut, I cursed under my breath for agreeing to help him and started undressing. I

didn't even know if it'll fit. It looked tight.

It did fit. And it was tight, as hell. I could barely breathe in it. He was wrong. Tess and I weren't of the

same weight. She was thinner than me, where I was the curvier one.

Well, it was obvious as she was

the girl who spent hours at the gym.

Once I was ready to go out, I tugged at the ends to somehow drag them a little lower and opened the

door. I didn't find him outside the door as I expected. In fact I found him sitting comfortably on a

couch, with his elbows on his knees.

And the most surprising thing was, the whole shop was empty except the sales girls of the shop

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Where did everyone disappear all of a sudden?

I was looking around in confusion, until I felt a pair of scorching eyes on me. Turning to him, I found

his gaze following every curve of mine and cuts of the dress, that exposed my sudden ultra sensitive

skin to him.

I bit my lip, not wanting to fidget under his stare. "Is it okay?"

With a tight nod, he beckoned me to him. Confused, I glided near. Still his eyes on my body, he handed me a black dress.

"Try this."

When I unfolded it, my eyes widened. It was even shorter than the one I was flaunting right now. And

as a cherry on the top, it was off shoulder and backless. What the hell?

He could just instead pick a

bikini for her!

"I'm not wearing it!"

One of his eyebrows arched. "Why not? It's a classy branded gown. I think Tess will definitely love it."

"But it's too short!" I argued.

I wanted to slap the tilting of his at the side. Whenever he did it, I sensed a challenge was thrown

towards me. "Why? Now you're having problems with short clothes?"

"I don't. I just... I can't wear it before you," I stuttered.

"Are you being shy before me right now, Rosebud?"

The warmth of my cheeks were embarrassing. Yet again, I rose my chin high. "I'm not being shy or

anything. You know what, let's just get over with it." I knew I was going to regret it, but I clutched the

dress and turned around.

And I was indeed, regretting once I looked at myself in the mirror. It fitted perfectly, not too tight, not

even loose. The end of the dress reached just an inch above my mid thigh. The long cut neckline

displayed my cleavage on show, where the back cut just stopped three inches from my butt!

Though it was out of my comfort zone, it did look good on me. I looked... sexy. The smooth fabric

clung to me like a second skin, manifesting every curve and dip of mine.

Even at the thought of going

before him with this on, flutters erupted in my tummy.

I didn't know why I was even doing it.

A knock landed on the door. The sales lady's voice floated in, asking if the dress fitted or if I needed a

hand.

"No, everything is good. Just a second," I replied, tugging the neckline a little higher.

Come on, Em! You can do it.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and walked out. I found him assessing a beautiful red gown displayed on a dummy. But I couldn't decipher the look he'd on as he brushed a finger on the fabric, gaze intense.

And then his eyes tore from the gown and fell on me.

His shoulders tensed as the muscle of his sharp jaw clenched. His hands fisted in balls. The storm in his eyes turned wild with his smoldering gaze touching every inch of my body, lingering longer on the deep neckline.

Blood rushed to my cheeks and ran hot through my veins under his flaming stare. It had me squirming in my place.

"Turn around," he said. The dominance and huskiness of his rich deep Greek accent made me obey.

And as soon as I turned, a low curse reached my ear and followed a sharp intake of breath.

When he didn't speak for a moment, I fidgeted my fingers. "A-ace?" Even the sales woman was

nowhere to be seen. We were alone in the whole section.

And then I felt him behind me. His hot breath fanning my bare shoulder making my breath hitch. A

brush of warm fingers glided down my bare back, erupting goosebumps across my skin. My heart

pounded as his hand slipped to the curve of my waist, to the front of my stomach, to my bare shoulders.

A slow rumble reverberated his chest.

Struggling not to close my eyes and feel his touch, I let out a shaky breath.

"W-what are you doing?" I whispered, as big hands fell on my hips. I should've asked the question to myself. Why was I still not pulling away?

I heard a murmur under his breath. Though I couldn't pick out most of the words, I caught something like: driving him crazy.

When I was at the verge of leaning into him, the woman strolled in, making me jump away from his heat.

Her eyes widened, flickering back and forth to me and Ace. "Uh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean any interruption."

My cheeks turned crimson, when all he looked was, extremely disturbed. The woman turned pale under his hard glare. What's wrong with him?

"I- i'll be back in a minute..."

"No! It's alright. You didn't interrupt us at all. We were just about to call you anyway." I cut her off.

When he didn't speak and kept scaring that poor woman, I cast him a look.

He gave a curt nod, still glaring. "Yeah, we're done here. Pack that pink dress, and..." Turning to me,

he raked his eyes on me one more time. I shivered. "This one also."

He'd give it to Tess?

Again, the same nagging feeling rose in my chest. Though I knew it was ridiculous. She was getting married to his cousin. But still...

Once I was back in my comfortable jeans and his t-shirt, I padded out and waited for the woman to

hand us the bags. Then my eyes fell on the dummy where that red gown was on. It was now gone. No

one was here in the shop, then who took it?

When he told me to wait for him in the car while he did the payments, I didn't wait a second longer. I

was dying to get some fresh air. His consistent presence around me was overwhelming me. I needed

some space to keep myself in check.

Once he was back, we got in the car and drove away. But after a while, when he didn't turn to the

road that would lead us to the office, my brows creased in confusion.

"Where are we going? We were supposed to turn Right."

"We're on the right path. Don't worry," he replied, eyes on the road.

Can he ever answer a straight question?

"We're supposed to go to the office. No, actually home, because it's almost night."

"I know. But I want to show you something."

"What?"

"You'll get to see it yourself, soon."

What was running in his head?

"But where are we going?" I asked, dreading inside for the more time I'll be spending with him. It wasn't good for my heart.

And as an answer, I only got a smirk. "Patience, Rosebud. We will be there soon."

Groaning, I sat back against my seat and looked outside.

"We're here," he announced, making me open my eyes. I was almost at the verge of being asleep after half an hour's drive. It'd been a long day. Getting out of the car, he opened the door for me while I stretched my legs and let out a yawn. But the sleepiness cleared out of my eyes the moment my gaze fell onto the structure that stood across the vast lawn.

A beautiful two story modern villa. One whole side of it was covered with glass, while the other side was a combination of dark wood and white marble. The lawn was surrounded by a colorful rose garden, a small adorable sitting area was situated in the middle. It was gorgeous.

"You liked it?" Came a low voice close to my ear.

I nodded, eyes still not moving away from the beauty. "Whose house is it?"

He stayed silent, I could feel his gaze on me. Once I looked up at him, he said, "I bought it last week."

"It's yours?" I turned to the villa again. So this was the house he was busy buying and renovating. "It's beautiful. But why did you need to buy a house when you already had so many?"

He watched me, intent gaze locked with mine. "They were just houses. I wanted a home for myself. So I bought one, for the near future."

I blinked. For his future? A family home?

"Come, let me show you inside." Securing my hand in his, he took me within the building he wanted to make a home out of. And I let him, still admiring the structure.

And again I was left speechless. The interior was more stunning than the exterior. Though not much furniture was spotted there. Only some stuff laid on the hardwood floor, yet to unpack.

As he led me upstairs, still holding my hand, I asked, "How many rooms exactly are there?"

"Five bedrooms, two guestrooms, two extra for library and office, and another for gym. In total, ten.

Six downstairs and four upstairs. And yes, three more in the basement." Thirteen rooms!

"What in God's name will you do with so many rooms?" I gaped.

Letting out a husky chuckle, he opened the doors of a room. A master bedroom. "I want a big family,

Rosebud. And children need a big home to play and grow up."

At the image of him with little Ace's running around the house, my heart bloomed with an unknown

emotion, but it withered away as soon as I thought of some girl who'd be the mother of his children.

"This is where my beautiful future wife will be living with me. Our very own personal bedroom," he said.

My chest squeezed as my eyes roamed around the beautiful vast bedroom with a round bed in the

middle. She'd be living here with him, sleeping with him on this bed...

But he said he wanted me...

Just because he was interested in me didn't mean he'd see his future in me.

The nails digging in my palms brought me back to my disturbing thoughts. The possessiveness and

hurt I found in my inner thoughts unnerved me.

Why did he even bring me here to see his future home? One moment he declared that I was his, and

the next moment he showed me his and his future wife's bedroom?

"Is there anything else you want me to show? Because I want to go home now. I'm hungry and tired."

My tone clipped.

A small crease formed on his forehead sensing my sudden change of mood. And then something

flashed over his eyes, the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Yes, there's. Come with me."

Even after my protest, he dragged me to the adjoined balcony. And when I saw the view, my complaints died down. The balcony was right above the rose garden. Soft night breeze blowing across the open meadow ahead of us, touched my face. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the sweet mild fragrance of roses. The full moon hung high right up in the sky. "It's more beautiful during the day. Even the meadow is filled with flowers," he spoke, standing close behind me. Suddenly I wanted to come here during the daylight. But with what right? The right of a family friend that he might be interested in and gonna forget soon enough? A pressure built at my throat, choking me. My eyes burnt with emotions crashing on my chest. I shouldn't have come here. "I arranged dinner for us. Let's go downstairs." When he aimed for my hand, I stepped back, crossing my arms over my chest: suddenly feeling cold. A frown etched between his brows. "I want to go home now. Can we just do that?" "Emerald, you..." "Please, Ace. I'm tired." I cut him off. I was tired of my emotions, my lack of control. I was tired of my constant fighting. With jaw tight, he nodded his head and led me outside. Again, holding my hand in his. It seemed to become his habit. I tried to get away, but again, he didn't have any of my protests. On our way back outside, I saw a huge portrait leaning against a wall, in the open room he said will be his office. The portrait was covered more than half with a white sheet, but I could see the end. Only a pair of feminine hands could be seen, a ring of blue diamond adorned her ring finger. Whose picture is that? I wanted to ask him, but chose to stay quiet instead. I just wanted to get away from here right now.

A gasp slipped through my lips as I was pulled against a hard frame.
Strong arms wrapped around my
waist, crushing me against his solid chest.
Soft warm lips touched the curve of my neck, sending shivers down my
spine. Rough stubbles poked
my skin, making me giggle.
"Ace! Don't!" I complained, but my eyelids went shut as his warm mouth
sucked on my skin, big hands
roamed around my body. A whimper left my lips as hot sensations ran
through my veins.
"You like it, Rosebud?" his husky voice murmured in my ear. And my
arching my body towards his
touch was the reply. A low chuckle vibrated at my back.
I took a deep breath as another kiss landed just behind my ear. "Ace..."
And then all of a sudden I was cold. Alone standing in the middle of his
master bedroom. I looked
around in confusion.
Where did he go?
A moan snatched my eyes to the bed which wasn't there a while ago.
Two figures were wrapped
around a white sheet, tangled with each other in a passionate kiss. More
groans followed. And when
his face peeked out of her shoulder, my breath hitched.
Her hands were roaming over his chest, while he had his one hand
around her in a possessive hold,
and the other gripped the blonde locks of her as he pulled her for
another kiss. Her moans filled the
room.
I choked out a gasp as I felt someone gripped my heart and squeezed it
hard. I felt the same pain I felt
years ago. My heart shattered in a million pieces, and at the same time I
wanted to destroy something.
Destroy her. The scene before me.
But I couldn't move. As if I was paralyzed in my place. I tried to close my
eyes but I couldn't move a
muscle. Panic started to rise in my chest. I wanted to scream, but no avail.
I opened my mouth, but
nothing was coming out.
And then his stormy grey eyes met mine, and all of a sudden, he was
right in front of me. That girl was

nowhere to be seen.

He gave me his hand to take, but I couldn't move my hand. I didn't want to let him go. Go to that

woman again. I wanted him to stay with me.

Tears ran down my eyes as I struggled with the force that held my body.

I wanted to ask him for help,

but I couldn't. I wanted to call out for him, but I failed.

When I didn't take his hand, he gave me a sad smile and stepped backwards, slowly vanishing in the

air.

My eyes widened. No, no, no! Don't go! Don't leave me alone! Not again!

More tears ran as I tried to reach out to him but I was still in my place.

And then he vanished in the air.

I couldn't see him anymore.

He was gone.

"Ace!" I jerked awake, frantically looking around. A tear had slipped down my eye.

"Emerald? Jeez, are you alright?" I found him right beside me, looking back and forth to me and on

the road. Concern latched into his face. "What happened, baby? Are you okay?"

I let out a shaky breath. My heart thudded in my chest. Closing my eyes, I ran my palms over my face.

I was dreaming. What kind of dream was that?

"Rosebud?"

I looked at him. He threw me worried glances, forehead creased. He was right here.

"I'm fine. Just a bad dream."

His frown deepened. "What was it?"

I turned away. "Nothing." I didn't even want to replay it in my head.

"You called out my name."

"So? I could call out anyone's name. Not everything is about you! So that's none of your business!"

My temper flared. I didn't have any control on it.

His jaw clenched, his eyes hard on me. "You're pretty shaken up. What did you see?"

"I said that's none of your business!"

"Damn it, Emerald! Can't you just answer my question? I want to know what scared you that much!"

he snapped, gaze on the road.
I didn't answer. Instead, I looked out of the window.
"Emerald!"

Silence.

With a curse, he cupped my chin and made me turn to him. His touch was soft as he brushed his thumb on my cheek.

"What happened, Rosebud? Please, tell me. What did you see?" His gentle tone soothed something in me, as his patient eyes watched me.

Those grey eyes compelled me to admit.

Gulping, I opened my mouth. He nodded in encouragement.

"I, I saw you with..."

A light fell on my eyes, blinding my vision, followed by some blare of loud horns. Cursing under his breath, he turned the wheel to the right. The tired screeched on the pitch as the car lost its balance, before crashing against something, hard.

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Chapter 17

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Happy new year, my sweet pumpkins! I wish all of you a very happy and prosperous new year!

Thought to give you all a new year surprise, so enjoyyyy!

A knock descended on my door.

"Coming!"

Putting the lipstick down on the dressing table, I attended it. Judy, our house help stood there with a white box in her hand.

"Sorry to disturb you, dear. But this has come for you," she said, handing me the parcel.

For me?

"What's in it? And who sent it?" I glanced down at the box.

Her shoulders lifted. "I've no idea, dear. A courier boy just gave me the parcel and left. Anyways, I'll

leave you to this. A lot of chores are on the hand."

Nodding, I flashed her a smile along a thank you and closed the door.

I searched for a name on the box, but there wasn't any. Who could've sent it?

Biting my lip, I unpacked it.

A gasp slipped through my lips as my eyes landed on the red gown lying in it. Taking it out, I unfolded it. It was the same gown I saw him checking out that day. A note that was placed beneath the gown, caught my eye. With a skip of my heart, I picked it up. This one was left out from trying. So I want to see it on you tonight.

A

So, he... bought it for me?

A warmth surged through my chest as I ran my hand on the beautiful cold shoulder gown. The fabric felt smooth under my palm.

Holding it against me, I stood before the mirror. It looked... beautiful.

But why did he get it for me?

Flashes of that night on the road floated in my mind. That horrible night we'd almost faced the death...

My hands clutched the dress tight.

A car had lost balance and strayed up in our way. To save us, he'd to avoid a collision and our car ended up hitting a street lamp.

I closed my eyes as the fear of that moment hit me back.

How he'd put his arm over me to save me from getting hurt, not caring for himself. Even after the

seatbelts, I was about to hit my head with the window glass if not for him. The hit was that severe.

Good thing that both of us didn't get any major injuries. I got a small scratch in my leg. But his

shoulder was hurt. The jerk of the crash and the way he stretched to protect me, had his shoulder a muscle injury.

I was so rattled after the incident that he'd to clutch me to his chest for almost half an hour until I gained some composure.

I hated that feeling. The fear I felt at that moment. The fear of death, the fear of losing him...

I shook my head, shaking off the inauspicious thoughts.

I shouldn't be thinking of that. Everything is alright now. Today is Tess's official engagement night, so I should just concentrate on that.

I looked back at my reflection.

This dress.

Shouldn't I be mad that he sent another gift for me? But I wasn't. The red tint on my cheeks proved that.

A sigh left me.

What was I doing? I was wandering away from my goal: avoid him until the three months passes and I can finally go back to NY, away from him.

But... it's just a dress...

I bit my lip.

"Em? You ready?" Mom called out from downstairs.

"Just give me five minutes!" I yelled back, my gaze returning back to the gown, admiring it.

Should I?

Securing my hand in Dad's arm, I took a deep breath and walked down the red carpet that led us inside the Valencian Mansion. It should've been called a castle instead, because that's the vibe I get every time I visit here.

The party was in full swing. A typical rich, classy, sophisticated, yet contemporary and dazzling atmosphere. And why not, after all it was Tessa Hutton's engagement. In the swarm of all dolled up people and rushing waiters, we found her at the tail of the grand staircase at the middle of the vast hall, surrounded by a group of her friends. Flaunting a sea green mermaid gown, she looked gorgeous. And the groom stood along, with a three piece posh suit. He didn't look any less.

As soon as her gaze caught us approaching her, she rushed to us followed by Caleb and threw herself on Mom and Dad. Both of my parents had moisture in their eyes as they hugged their elder daughter with love and affection.

I smiled, standing beside. And then came my turn.

"Em!" Instead of her regular sandalwood, the fragrance of Jasmine filled my ambience as she engulfed me in a hug. Pulling away, she eyed me up and down. "This isn't fair! Only the bride should look that

gorgeous in her engagement, not her little sister!" she complained, frowning. But then an involuntary grin stretched across her lips. Mom, Dad and Caleb laughed along. I couldn't help but smile back, shaking my head. "Yes, and that's why you're the one who's radiating the evening with your beauty. You look stunning!" Then my eyes fell on her neck. She wore the necklace we chose for her, it went good with her attire. "Especially this-" I pointed towards the piece of jewelry. "You're looking beautiful in it." Glancing down, she grazed the oval shaped diamond that dangled down the slender platinum necklace.

"All thanks to you! I'm sure if only Achilles had chosen it, it wouldn't be that beautiful. He wouldn't even go to the mall, just order an expensive one randomly online!" She rolled her blue orbs.

He told her?

Seeing my surprise, she nodded her head. "He told me how you chose it for me. Thank you, Em!

Otherwise I don't think I would be wearing my best friend's gift tonight."

I chuckled, my eyes sneaking around to get a glimpse of someone. The flutters that have been dancing in my tummy since we left home still stormed around.

Where is he?

"How did you like the dresses? I hope they weren't that bad," I asked, remembering those outfits.

Confusion fell over her face. "What dresses? What're you talking about?"

I frowned. "The dresses he got for you along your necklace. He made me try them to see if they'd look good on you."

She shook her head. "No, he didn't give me any dresses."

If he didn't give them to her, then what did he do with them?

Did he... buy them for someone else?

I bit my lip, clutching the purse tight in my hand as a pang burnt in my chest.

"Oh, umm, maybe he had some other plans with them," I said, forcing a smile on my face.

Something flashed over her eyes as they widened a bit. Mumbling something under her breath, she put a hand on my shoulder. "Maybe he wanted to give them to me on other occasions? You know, he bought all the gifts altogether so that he could give me one by one at my other wedding ceremonies?"

That made sense.

A heaviness in me suddenly lifted off as I nodded my head.

Why couldn't I just not care? She mustn't have missed the sudden change of my mood.

A clear of throat behind Tess pulled everyone's attention. And when Tess moved and that person appeared in sight, my lips parted in surprise.

The man I bumped into at Coopers Fabrics, back in NY, and saw at the restaurant that day.

What was he doing here at this engagement party?

Dark eyes stared right back at me with a smile on his face as Tess and Caleb welcomed him with side hugs.

"Hello, Mr. Hutton. It's been a long time!" He said, shaking his hand with Dad.

Dad smiled. "Yeah, it's been months. You finally got free of your busy schedule, huh?"

He shrugged. "Work is work. You can't avoid that."

"True," said Dad, as that man shared pleasantries with Mom.

"Em, meet Arthur. Achilles and Caleb's uncle." She introduced him to me.

"And Arthur, this is Emerald, my sister."

"Ah, the infamous Emerald Hutton. I finally got that lucky to have the pleasure of meeting you!" He grinned. Taking my hand, he placed a kiss on the back of it.

Ace's uncle?

What a coincidence that I already met him twice before our official meeting.

I gave him a hesitant smile. "Nice to meet you too! By the way, we've already met if you forgot."

Tess and Dad raised their brows at that.

"You guys already met? Where?" queried Caleb.

"Oh? We did?" He tilted his head, dark eyes puzzled. Why did it look so fake?

"Yeah, at Coopers Fabrics, NY?"

Thinking for a moment, he then shook his head. "Sorry, dear! I'm a little lost here. Maybe I forgot. It's the proof that I'm getting old now."

Everyone cackled with laughter, but I couldn't. I didn't know why but, something was off about him.

When he looked at me again, something flashed over his eyes. But it was gone as soon as it came.

Averting his gaze, he went back to the conversation.

"Where's your prince charming tonight? I don't see him anywhere," asked Casie, sipping on her drink.

She arrived just minutes after we did, and without Beth. Again, she'd her boyfriend problems.

I threw her a look. "He's not my prince charming," I replied, holding back the urge to look around myself, for the upteenth time. It's been almost an hour, and he wasn't still here.

I didn't like the frustration building inside me at all. I'd be happy that he wasn't here. But... he wouldn't miss his cousin and best friend's engagement, would he? Then where the hell was he?

Is he alright?

"Yeah, right! Do me a favor and go see your face in the mirror. The dullness in your eyes due to your missing lover is unmistakable." She snorted.

Pressing my lips together, I glared. "They're not dull at all!"

When she noticed someone familiar in the crowd, raising her hand, she waved. "I think I got my prince charming for the night. Why don't you just call him and ask where he is instead of playing 'I don't care'?"

My brows creased as she bounced off to a pretty guy and disappeared through the mass of people.

I wasn't playing any game. He was. I was just trying to protect my heart from getting another heartache.

Swiping my eyes around for one more time, I walked towards the bar and grabbed a cocktail for me.

The night did feel dull tonight even after the chatter, laughter and music around me.

While sipping on my drink, I caught Arthur, Ace's uncle, at the other side of the hall talking and

laughing with some suited men.

And then his gaze locked with mine. A smile stretched across his face as he gestured cheers with his glass. Even from afar, I could tell his facade. The smile of his didn't reach the eyes.

But I smiled back anyway and turned around.

From what I knew, him, means Ace's uncle handled a lot of important loads of the company. He was one of the liable persons at Valencian Corp and Ace's life. But even then, I couldn't just get comfortable around him like I should've.

That day at the meeting with Arabians, we were all at the terrace, then what was he doing downstairs?

Did he have any other work at the same place?

Maybe. It could be just a coincidence. I was thinking too much.

Then all of a sudden, I felt it. Goosebumps crawled up my skin as I felt his gaze on me. He was here.

The abrupt silence around the hall and whispers of girls, the annoying sound of their giggling proved my suspicion right.

The party was back in life after some moments while I just kept standing there, fidgeting in my place, forcing my eyes not to look behind.

I don't care! I don't care! I won't look.

Chanting the mantra in my head, I managed to glue my attention on my drink. I was stronger than this.

"If I knew you'd look that beautiful in white, I'd have chosen this color instead of red for my

Rosebud," a deep voice rasped in my ear.

I stilled, my heart stopped in my chest.

Deep breath, Em! Deep breaths!

Inhaling deep, I searched for my voice. "You were mistaken if you thought I'd wear the dress you sent

for me." I decided to wear another dress I'd bought with Tess the second day I returned here, instead

of the one he bought for me. Even how much I'd liked that gown.
Wait, did he just call me his Rosebud again?
"And I'm not yours!" Tilting my head, I looked up at him over my
shoulder. And it was a mistake. My
breath hitched as soon as my eyes struck on him.
He wore both of his hair and beard longer tonight. I hadn't seen him in
two days, and his thick stubble
was so grown today, giving him an extra look of edge and roughness. His
dark hair touched the collar
of his shirt. My hands itched to run over his covered jaws and smooth
hair. While his stormy eyes
remained the same, intense on me, dark and dominant.
His heady sharp cologne with his signature smell of a hint of smoke
along, tingled my nostrils.
Something tugged in my lower region as I filled my lungs with him.
Suddenly I felt him against me, his arms caging me around the bar.
When did he come so close?
A groan reverberated into his chest as he brushed a strand away from
my face; his intense gaze
latched onto my parted lips. "And again I'm going to repeat that,
Rosebud." Leaning in, he brushed his
lips on my earlobe. "You're mine."
A shiver ran down my spine, another tug in the forbidden area had me
mortified. Averting my eyes, I
tried to break his cage and fly away, but he only pulled me closer,
binding me in his arms again.
The music began in the background indicating the dance had started
while I continued to scowl and
wiggle in his arms. And he just watched me in amusement.
The look in his eyes did something to me. He watched me as if he was
looking at the most precious
and beautiful thing in the world. His usual hollow eyes had light and...
happiness. A serene tiny smile
was etched on his lips.
When my struggle finally died down, he took my hand in his. "Dance
with me?"
"No," I said, but not moving away from him.
I was turning weak again, I knew. I couldn't help it. He made me like this,
he made me weak for him.

Ignoring my answer, he gently kissed my hand and pulled me into the dance floor among the other couples who were already swaying under the slow music. And all the time, I felt a pair of eyes on me. And this time, it wasn't a warm feeling. The shiver that ran down my spine was chilling.

The Trap Of Ace

Chapter 18

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"This is not a way to dance. No one dances like this," I complained, huffing.

"I'm not anyone, Rosebud. I'm Achilles Valencian. I don't follow rules, I make them," he said, pulling me deeper into his arms.

Sighing, I gave up.

While the others moved around the dance floor, he didn't let even an inch of distance between us.

When his one hand should be in one of mine and the other on my waist, both of his strong arms were firmly wrapped around me, keeping me against his chest. And mine were locked around his neck. He

wouldn't even move freely, just slow sways. As if no one in the world was watching us. But the glares of both single and taken women were unignorable.

When my neck started to hurt, craning to look at him all the time, I rested my cheek on his chest.

Closing my eyes, I let him move us around in slow waves. His scent with every intake of breath lulled me to peace.

I remained silent as he played with my hair. "Don't cut those hair ever again."

My eyes opened, but I didn't move my head from his warmth. He was talking about that time when I'd cut them short, assuming he liked it that way.

"Why?" I whispered. I didn't have any plans to do something I'd done years ago out of my naivety. I was my own person now.

"Because it looks beautiful on you. And, this is the real you. I don't want you to change for someone else."

I froze. So he did notice my change for him? He noticed how I became into someone else just to catch his eyes?

His words touched something deep inside me. He didn't want me to change for anyone, even for him?

Not that I was gonna do anything for him.

His fingers brushed against the fabric of my dress after he was done playing with my hair. Even if he did mind me not wearing his gift, he didn't show it. Though the appreciation in his eyes for my appearance was clear.

And I hated to admit it, but I liked it. I liked the way he looked at me every time we met. I hated to love it all. His gaze on me, his touch, his warmth, his scent, his dominance, everything single thing.

And I'd no idea how to stop myself from adoring these feelings.

My hand snaked to his left shoulder. "Does it still hurt?"

"No. Just a little sore, that's it."

I nodded, still roaming my hand from his shoulder to his chest. The sharp inhale of his pulled me out of my trance. Pulling away from his chest, I once again tried to maintain some distance. And this time, he let me. But just to some inches.

It was better than nothing. I could at least breath.

Glancing over his shoulder, I caught Caleb and Tess moving with the rhythm of the music. Love and adoration shone in their eyes as they whispered and laughed among each other, lost in their own world.

Some unsought memories again crawled back into my mind.

I moved away from his grasp, making him narrow his eyes.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I need to use the washroom," I mumbled, already walking away, not waiting for his response. He didn't follow, but his gaze did until I was out of the sight.

Dodging the strolling people and rushing kids, I kept moving. I didn't know where I was going. But I didn't want to stay near him anymore either.

Why do I always forget that what pain he can cause me again? His unintentional act occurred

irreparable damage to my heart. And what'd happen when he'd do it on purpose?

No, I can't live through another one.

Gulping the pressure in my throat as I turned the corner, a hand grabbed my elbow, turning me around.

"Stop running away from him, Em. You're hurting yourself by doing so."

I shook my head. "I'm protecting myself, Casie. If I don't run away, I will definitely get hurt. And this time, I don't know if I can handle it."

When I turned to leave, she stopped me again.

"You can't know what'll happen until you give it a chance. And for that you'll have to stay. Stay and

see where your heart takes you this time," she said, eyes serious.

"I can't!" I snapped. Why didn't she understand my point? Didn't she know how much I suffered?

"Yes, you can. Just because something bad happened in the past, doesn't mean it will happen again.

You don't even know the whole truth of what exactly happened that night and why. You're having this doubt that something is missing here, don't you? Then why all of this?" She exhaled a long breath,

eyes softening up. "Look, Em. You know really well what your heart desires. Even after years you

couldn't move on from him. And now that your life is giving you another chance, don't let it go."

I clutched the bracelet, and blinked away the tears that threatened to well up.

She placed a hand on my shoulder. "He already took his steps towards you. It's your turn now. Don't

let your fears steal the one thing that will worth it in the future."

I looked at her. "When did you become so sensible?"

The side of the lips twitched as she lifted her shoulders, her strawberry blonde locks bouncing along.

"I was born sensible. Now don't change the subject. You're getting what I'm trying to say?"

I sighed. "I don't know what to do, Casie. I'm confused."

"Then clear your every confusion. Go and talk to him. And if not, then talk to Tess. I think other than

Achilles, only she can answer your every question."

After I was done in the washroom, I rechecked my appearance and decided to join the party again. I'd taken extra moments than I needed considering the advice Casie provided. I didn't know what fate would bring out of Ace and my relationship, even if there was something, but I wanted to know everything that had happened in the past. Because hearing Tess's confession that night on the rooftop and observing Ace's behavior and hints of knowing of my feelings years ago, forced me to think beyond. There was definitely something I didn't know. And even there wasn't. Even if whatever I saw was true, maybe they... could have something in them, or maybe it was just a heat of a moment, whatever it was, I wanted to know everything. Because until I didn't know the truth, I'll continue to suffer thinking of the possibilities. Maybe I should just talk to Tess. Walking down the hallway, I stopped at my track. When everyone was enjoying the night, he stood there before the huge window, alone. Hands in his pockets, he stared out into the dark sky. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes illuminated an emptiness... loneliness. My heart tugged at this. I wanted to reach out and wash away the emptiness in him and bring back the light I used to see in his eyes. A long sigh caught my attention. Caleb and Tess stood aside the pillar situated near the staircase. They watched Ace just as I was a moment ago. Tess put a hand on Caleb's shoulder as a sadness washed over his face, his gaze fixed on his cousin. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have been forcing him again and again to come here. Even after knowing how much this place gives him pain, how much he hates this mansion." She rubbed his back. "Don't blame yourself, Cal. You just wanted your brother to stand beside you in your happiness, that's all. And see, even after everything he came. Maybe he's finally ready to move on from his past? He can't always live into that darkness, can he?"

A light chuckle left him. "We both know why he came here both at that celebration night and this evening."

Her lips turned up into a smile. "Yeah, for his Rosebud."

My heart stopped in my chest. F-for me? And they knew about it?

When I glanced back at him, he was gone.

Where did he go?

My eyes roamed around the vast mansion that he grew up in. How could the place he spent most of

his life give him pain? And what past they were talking about?

Then I remembered.

His father's suicide. His father killed himself when he was just eighteen.

Though he was never that

close to his dad, I remembered how he looked up to him as his hero, an inspiration. And after his

sudden demise, his life changed, he changed. I still remembered how he grew distant with everyone,

even with Tobias and Tess after that incident.

Maybe that's why he chose to leave this mansion when Caleb decided to stay back. He didn't want the

memories of his father to haunt him.

Something squeezed in my chest. I couldn't even understand how much he must have gotten hurt

coming back here. But he did. For me.

My legs started to move even before I knew, eyes searching around for any glimpse of him. I wouldn't

give any explanation why, but I wanted to be there for him right now.

Maybe I could give him some comfort?

But where was he? He wasn't anywhere in the party.

Looking up, I got a fleeting shadow of his disappearing into the first floor.

Not wasting anymore time, I

followed. Climbing up the stairs, I strode to the way he went. But all I found was an empty hallway.

I just saw him come here. Where did he go all of a sudden?

My eyes searched for him some more, but there was no trace of him.

Then the east wing came into my view.

Maybe he went that way?

Not hesitating, I entered into the east wing. Even the shadowed corridors didn't stop me. Though it did look eerie. I didn't know how Tess and Caleb stayed here alone in this huge Palace.

From what I remembered from last time I came here, everything was changed now. From the antique furniture, to the colors of the walls, everything was replaced with modern contemporary interior.

Gone the old house that they got from their ancestors.

I halted in my steps as something caught my peripheral vision. Stepping back, I stood at the head of the hallway. And there he was.

What was he doing in front of that door?

His hands still remained in his pockets as he stood there immobile. But this time, his frame was rigid, eyes darker than I ever encountered. The hatred his gaze held as he stared at the door sent shivers down my spine.

But other than hatred, there was... pain and something else that I couldn't decipher.

Another tug in my chest urged me to go near him. But I stayed still. Something about his tensed demeanor warned me to stay away.

But I couldn't just stay back and watch him like that.

So I moved. But as soon as I started to approach, he turned around and stormed away.

"Ace!" running ahead, I called out for him. But he was already gone.

I glanced at the door he was staring at with such hatred. While all the other doors were replaced and new, this one remained the same, old crafted dark wood door. And... it was locked.

Whose room is it? And why is it locked unlike every other room around here? This can't be a storeroom either, because storerooms are in the basement.

Touching the lock, I tried to budge it knowing it was useless.

"I'm afraid Achilles wouldn't like it very much if he finds out you're snooping around in a place, where you shouldn't."

Who do you think it is? And what secret Ace is hiding into his past? Tell me your guesses in the comments!

And eager for more? Want to know what happens in the next chapter?
You can take a look of the
sneak peek of the next chapter on my Facebook page. I already posted it
there! You can find me with
Eva Zahan, or go to the link I have in my bio.
And don't forget to give it a like!
I'll see you guys soon!

With love,
Eva Zahan.

The Trap Of Ace

Chapter 19

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Jumping in fright, I whirled around, with my heart at my throat.
Dark eyes met mine as he stood right in front of me.
I sighed in relief. "Oh, Arthur. It's you." My gaze flickered around, no one
was nearby. The hallway lied
eerie.

What was he doing up here?

A small smile tugged at his lips, expression tight. "You shouldn't be
wandering here and there alone,
dear. Especially in this wing. Achilles isn't very fond of it if someone
enters here."

My head tilted. And why was that?

"Uh, actually it's been years since I last visited here. So I thought to take
a look around." I shrugged.

"Whose room is that anyway?"

Glancing at the door, something washed over his face. But he masked it
soon enough, not letting me
understand anything. But whatever it was, it was... dark.

"It was his mother's room," he said, attention back on me.

Was?

"You mean, Ophelia?"

He nodded.

I remembered that woman. Though she was sweet, I never saw her
spending much time with Ace and
Caleb. Both her and his father would be away from home most of the
time. I wondered where she
was now.

"Where is she?"

With an empty look, he replied, "Away."

Just as I opened my mouth again to ask for an explanation, a voice hindered me.

"Here you are, Arthur. I was looking for you everywhere. Thank God a waiter saw you coming this way," said Caleb, sending me a brief glance. "The Simpsons are asking for Achilles, handle them, will you? Because I'm so done giving excuses to everyone of where he suddenly got missing leaving the party."

"Of course!" Turning to me, Arthur nodded at me. "I'll see you later, Emerald. And remember what I told you."

That this place is not for wandering.

At the corner of my eye, Caleb's attention peaked at that as his brows furrowed.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, tone polite. What was in this room that they literally marked this wing as restricted? And if everyone was prohibited to come here, then what was he doing here in the first place?

Flashing me another of his vague smiles, he walked away.

"What was that?" asked Caleb, watching his uncle's retreating form.

"What did he say to you?" The subtle look of his at the locked door didn't go missed.

"That Ace won't like it if he finds out of my being here, in the east wing." Rubbing his neck, he looked at me. "It's not like that, Em. It's just that, a lot of his memories are connected to this place. Good and... bad. And he doesn't want anyone to peek into them."

He meant peek into this room?

"Anyway, the ceremony is about to begin. Let's go!"

The sudden change of topic hinted that he wasn't comfortable talking about this subject. So I let it go and accepted the arm he offered me.

Walking away, I glanced back over my shoulder one last time at that room. What so bad happened here? And in his mother's room?

After the engagement was done, the cake was cut and served. And the last dance of the night began.

My eyes still looked around for him. He wasn't there even during the engagement. Did he already

leave? He did look extremely roused back in the east wing.

"This isn't fair, Dad! You won't dance with your daughter at her engagement party?" complained Tess.

She has been pestering Dad to dance with her so that she could take some pictures, but Dad kept denying due to his lack of experience.

"Sweetheart, you know I can't dance. Why don't you go and dance with Caleb?"

"Right, we just got officially engaged and she already got bored of me," commented Caleb, earning a scowl from Tess.

"I've already danced with him twice. Now I want my dad to dance with me. Come on, just one dance, Dad!" She fluttered her puppy eyes.

He let out a sigh. "Alright, but for only five minutes. No more."

"Done! Thank you so much!" Squealing, she gestured to the photographers to get ready and dragged Dad along after her.

"Now that my fiance left me alone here, can I ask my gorgeous sister-in-law for a dance?"

I laughed as Caleb bended a little and gave me his hand.

"Sure! Who can say no to my handsome brother-in-law." Rolling my eyes, I took his offered hand.

"Oh, I'm flattered!" Grinning, he led me to the dance floor.

As the song continued, we started to move with the rhythms. A lot of other couples also joined at the last dance. Even Tobias and Mom went along with the beat.

While dancing, Caleb's eyes went to Tess every few seconds. And the same went with her. In between talking to Dad, she threw adored glances at her fiance. Felicity radiated off her face. And I was happy for her.

At least someone got the love of their life.

"You know, even just some months ago, I never imagined that I'd be living my dream one day," he said, eyes still on her.

"What do you mean?"

His chin pointed to where Dad was swirling Tess in an awkward way.

"Tessa. Due to some complications and my idiocy, we were always on and off. There was no certainty between us. And at one point, we thought that we'd have no future together. Until six months ago when we decided to give us another chance. And I finally got the balls to ask for her hand last month."

I heard he'd problems committing in relationships. And Tess needed one. They had a lot of misunderstandings and argument over it, until everything turned out good. I didn't know why he'd such fear of commitments, but I was glad he sorted it out and gave Tess what she wanted.

"That's because you never stopped believing in your love. It's your heart that brought you guys together again." I smiled. "I'm really happy for you guys. Tessa is lucky to have you. And I hope you won't disappoint me in the future for feeling that."

He shook his head, eyes genuine. "I won't, I promise. And it's the other way around, trust me. I'm the lucky one to have her."

I shrugged. "That's true."

He laughed, looking back at my sister.

Then something struck my mind as I cleared my throat. "Umm, when did you guys start dating?"

He turned back to me. "I liked her the moment Achilles introduced her to me. And after a time, I got to know that I wasn't alone in the boat, she also had some feelings for me. And just a month before her nineteenth birthday, we started dating."

"You guys were into each other for that long? How come I'd no idea?" I asked, surprised.

"Like I said, we were never sure of anything. So we decided to keep it quiet to see where it goes."

I raised my brows. "Secret relationship, huh?"

He chuckled. "You can say so."

Shaking my head, I laughed along. And then realization hit me, threatening the fall of my smile. A month before her nineteenth birthday?

Meant, a month before that night?
Something churned in my stomach. She was already in a relationship
with Caleb when she kissed Ace
that night?
My eyes fell on her. She was laughing at something Dad said.
Did she... cheat on Caleb?

Some continuous vibrations pulled me out of my raw sleep. Groaning, I
pulled my phone out from
beneath my pillow.

Who's it calling at the middle of night?
After rubbing the sleep off my eyes, I squinted at the screen.
Ace?

Every ounce of drowsiness left from my body with the skip of my heart.
Why was he calling me at this
hour of the night?

Should I receive it?

Of course I should!

But just as I swiped the green sign, the call went dead. Disappointment
filled my chest as I stared at
the screen, hoping it'd ring again. But it didn't. I glanced at the clock. It
was twelve thirty.

Why was he calling? Was everything alright?

I couldn't sleep until a while ago. Thoughts of him didn't let me.

Everything that happened in the night.

His past, his mom's room, Tess and Caleb. So many things were nagging
my mind continuously.

I even thought of calling him when I heard he left without informing
anyone. But then I decided

against it. What'd I say? I couldn't just show how much I was concerned
for him.

And right now I was in the same dilemma.

Should I call back?

Maybe he'll call back if it's necessary?

My thumb hovered over the dial option, my insides urging me to tap on
it. But then I threw my phone

in its previous place. I couldn't just call him like that. I'd to remember
that I wanted to keep my

distance. Maybe he just wanted to irritate me again?

Biting my lip, I lied back. But my eyes set on the phone, heart awaiting, hand ready to grab it if it rings again. Receiving the call wouldn't go against my decision, right? And I kept waiting, but the phone didn't ring again. Even after an hour he didn't call. And eventually darkness slowly pulled me back into a dreamless sleep.

Tapping my feet on the floor I tried to locate any faults into the new designs we got for next season's fashion. But all I could think was about him. When I woke up this morning, I'd immediately checked my phone. There were five missed calls from him. And all of them were early in the morning. And then I couldn't hold myself back. I'd called him. Again and again. But his phone was unreachable. And since then, concern was rattling in my mind like a hurricane. The thought of if he was okay ate me out. Even in the office, I sat in my cabin with one single catalogue in my hand for half an hour. He didn't even come to the office today. "Will you stop doing that? It's disturbing," said Liza, glancing up from her files. We'd to finish some work together on the upcoming project, so she decided to work from my cabin today with me. And while she was so lost into her job, I was lost into my own world. "What?" She pointed her eyes to my still tapping feet. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was actually thinking of something," I apologized, halting the dancing of my leg. Placing the pen down she placed her elbows on the desk, giving me her full attention. "What's it? I've been seeing you lost since the morning." "Nothing. Just some stuff," I lied. Now how could I ask her about him? She must've had some information. Oh yeah, right. The meeting. "Uh, when is the meeting again? Is everyone prepared for it?" "It's after lunch. And yes, everything is done," she said. "Are you sure there's no issue?"

I flashed her a smile. "Yeah, don't worry." Nodding her head as she went back to her work, my mouth opened again. "But how would the meeting take place if Ace is not here. He was supposed to be present there, right?"

"Yeah, but since he's not present here today, Caleb will handle the meeting," she replied, not moving her eyes from those files.

Couldn't she just say where he was?

"Do you have any idea where he is?" I probed.

She shrugged. "Not entirely sure. I'd called his PA this morning and he said the boss would be away for a couple of days. He left early this morning."

Something dropped at the pit of my stomach. Left? For a couple of days? Where? And why? Was everything alright?

Looking up, a thoughtful expression etched over her face. "Maybe he went to the UK again."

"UK? How do you know that he went to the UK?" Something dimmed inside my chest. He'd be missing for days?

"He often goes there and stays for some days. I don't know why though, maybe for vacations. He

actually needs it. Most of the time all he does is work." A shake of head.

"Does he have any business over there? Or any friends?" I don't think he'd go there for vacation.

"Nope. He's a very closed person, you should've known that as you're his close family friend. He

doesn't have any friends other than your siblings. And nor does he have any business over there. It's all in America."

Nodding my head, I looked down at the catalogue again. Now I was feeling more guilty for not responding to his call sooner, and not calling him back last night. Maybe he wanted to tell me something?

What happened all of a sudden that he'd to leave like that? Yes, he did this often, but I didn't feel it right. He was so disturbed last night.

After finally finally finishing with the work at hand, I delivered it to Matt and called him again. But again, his phone was switched off.

A heavy sigh left my lips.

Where are you?

The landline on my desk rang snatching my attention.

"Hello."

"Emerald, hey! It's Matt. Can you please get me the files I sent to you this morning? I'm a little busy

here. It'd be a great help," he said from the other side of the phone.

"Sure, I'll be down in a minute."

"Alright, thank you!"

Putting the phone down, I grabbed those files and walked out of my cabin. But my steps halted

spotting Tobias talking to Linn, a girl in the HR department.

"Tobias!" I approached him.

Excusing Linn, he met me in the middle of the way. "Hey! How's day going?"

"Do you know where Ace is?" I was straight forward, not wasting my time even asking what he was doing here at this time.

"Whoa! Calm down there," he said, watching me. "What happened? Why are you so riled up?"

Calm down, Em! Compose yourself!

I scratched under my ear, clearing my throat. "Uh, actually he called me many times last night. But I

couldn't answer them as I was sleeping. And now he's his phone switched off. So I was just wondering

if he's alright."

A gentle smile tugged on his lips. "Don't worry about him, Em. He's alright. He left for the UK at four

this morning and will stay there for some days. Though he doesn't keep any contact when he's there,

I'm sure he'll call you no matter what."

So Liza was right. He did go to the UK.

"Do you know why he left all of a sudden?" I asked, ignoring the last line he said.

A somber look crossed over his eyes. "He always goes there whenever he needs some time alone. But

don't worry, once he thinks he's ready to return, he'll come back."

"Oh. I was just asking because..."

"Em," he cut me off, peering into my eyes. "I understand. You don't need to explain anything."

Gulping, I nodded my head and silently walked away.

So the reason behind his leaving was he needed some time alone. And it must have had something to

do with his last night's visit to the mansion.

Did he want to share something with me last night? And being me, I didn't even return his calls.

With the pressure in my chest, I went down to the third floor and

handed those files to Matt and

returned back to my cabin. To bury my head into the loads of work that was thrown into pending by

me since this morning.

I needed to busy myself into them unless I wanted to lose my sanity in thinking of him.

When I was halfway finished with my pending work, it was already dark outside. But I didn't have any

time to think of the time if I wanted to go home before midnight.

My phone buzzed on the desk.

Without looking away from the sheets, I put the phone on speaker.

"Yes?"

"I'm at the studio for another of my ad shoots. And guess who the producer turned out to be?" Came the chirpy voice of my best friend.

"Who?" I went along, not really interested in the answer.

"Trent, Leyla's husband."

That red head friend of his?

"What a coincidence. You called me to inform this?"

She snorted on the phone. "Of course! It is a surprising news. And I thought you'd be interested in

knowing her more as he's a special friend of his?" Her tone teasing.

Yeah, he'd another friend other than my siblings.

"I'm not. You told me they were just friends. So what's more to know in there?" I shook my head,

going back to my work. And here I was trying to distract myself from his thoughts.

"Oh, you're so boring!"

And then she started to ramble on how she met him and introduced herself as a close family friend of

Ace to make some connections with him. It could get her new offers.
"And I got to know that she's a physiotherapist. I'm thinking about how a film and ad producer met a doctor. What an interesting pair. But I'm wondering how they manage their so long distance relationship. When he and his job is here, his wife is oceans away in the UK."

I stopped whatever I was doing. Now that caught my attention.
UK?

Now that was a long chapter, wasn't it?

How did you like the chapter? What do you think of Ace's mother? What happened to her? Tell me in the comments!

And eager to know what happens in the next chapter? Go and check out the sneak peek of chapter 20 on my Facebook page! The link is on my bio.

With love,

Eva Zahan.

The Trap Of Ace

Chapter 20

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The aroma of fresh spices and sauce wafted across the kitchen, proclaiming the deliciousness getting ready for the special Italian dinner. And the provoking sweet goods that baked inside the oven had me salivating.

The hunger of my tummy spiked more at that. The result of not eating the whole day. And how could I when all my mind was spiraled with one suddenly vanished man's thoughts?

"I'm happy that you came here, Em. In all the preparations of the marriage, we couldn't get enough

time to spend," said Tess, adding some basils in the spaghetti.

I nodded. "Yeah, but don't worry. I'm not going anywhere for sometime. So we've a lot of time to fix that."

Something flickered over her eyes, but then she smiled. "Right. Anyway, how was your day?"

"It was good."

Not good. At all. After last night I hadn't got any peace. What Caleb said, about their relationship, about her involvement with Ace kept my mind busy. And then he suddenly vanished from the country.

In the evening when I got Cassie's call and got to know about Victoria's being in the UK, it'd raised a lot of questions in my mind. Like he'd literally no one out there except her, so the suspicion that she could be one of the reasons for his frequent visit there wasn't unrealistic. Even if I didn't have any right to feel vexed about it, but I did. But then, somehow I knew that he wasn't there for her. There was nothing between them like I thought at first they had. They were just friends.

That's what you thought about Ace and Tess too.

That was the main reason for my being here. I wanted answers to my questions. And at this moment, only Tess could enlighten me. I'd lose my sanity if she didn't.

Fidgeting in my seat, I cleared my throat. "Uh, I was thinking to ask you something... umm, I..."

She looked up from salads. Observing my hesitation, an understanding etched into her features. "You can ask me anything, Em. I'd try to answer them as long as it's about me."

I took a deep breath. There was no point to beat around the bush now. "Did you cheat on Caleb with Ace seven years ago?"

A gasp slipped through her lips as her eyes widened in fraction. "What? What are you talking about, Em? I never did such a thing!"

"Look, I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't ask you these questions. It happened years ago and I should just keep it there. But I..."

"It doesn't matter if it's years ago or not! I've always loved Caleb. I know we were never sure of anything, and also dated other people after our first break up. But I'd never cheated on him. And especially not with Ace. He was my best friend for God's sake!" She cut me off, disbelief filled in her eyes.

"So, there was nothing going on between you two?"

"Of course not! Why'd you think that?" A frown set between her brows.

And then realization hit her

as she went quiet, guilt flashing over her eyes.

"I saw you kissing, Tess. If there were nothing between you two, then

what was that?" I queried, a

sudden desperation rolled my insides. "Caleb told me you and him

started dating just a month ago

before your nineteenth birthday. Means you were with Caleb when

you... what do I think of that?"

I'd no right to ask her these personal questions. It was all in the past. But

I needed to know.

Both of them knew of my feelings. That other night on the terrace, she

told me she'd never hurt me

on purpose. Ace's words and actions proved that he remembered every

word he said to me and

somehow meant it, that's what I saw in his eyes every time he called me

his. I wasn't sure if he did

harbor any real feelings for me back then, but he didn't think I was a fool

in love with him. He cared

and respected me and my feelings.

That's what I understood from his all crazy actions and other things. And

even if they didn't have

anything between them, then why would they do that? Why'd I found

them wrapped around in each

other's arms like that?

What was the reason he became so distant with me all of a sudden and

didn't even call or ask of me

once after that night? Not even when I shifted to NY. Yes, after his

father's death, he did get distant

with everyone, but he never did with me. Even for once in a while, he

used to visit me. Until one day,

it stopped. And then came that ominous night. The night my heart

broke.

All these things have been nagging me after Ace suddenly out of

nowhere began to appear in my life,

declared his claim on me, after my talk with Tess that night, and finally

after what Caleb told me last

night.

"Tell me, Tess. Why did you kiss the boy you knew your sister had lost her heart to?" Tightness clogged up my throat, burning my eyes. "Even after loving someone else, even after Ace was just your best friend, even after you didn't want to hurt your little sister as you claimed that night. Why?"

Closing her eyes, she rubbed her face. "I can't tell you that Em."

"Why?" My voice rose. Couldn't she see how desperate I was to know the truth? The truth they were hiding.

"Just as I said, I will answer your questions as long as it's about me. And it's not about only me here, Em. Nor is it my secret to tell. Only Ace can give you these answers." She blinked away the unshed tears in her own eyes. "But know that Em, there was never anything between me and Ace except just friendship. And I'd never, ever cheat on Caleb. It's not always what it appears to be. Sometimes, you need to see beyond it."

Her eyes pleaded me not to ask anymore questions as I sat there silently, taking in her words. What did she mean?

It was not what it appeared to be? Then what was it? Maybe Ace had the answer to this question.

Though my confusions still remained unsolved, her stating that there wasn't anything between them ever did something to my heart.

"Em?" Her voice snatched my gaze back to her. "I hope you understand why I can't tell you anything.

It's not my place to tell you this. I'm sorry."

I nodded. "It's alright. I understand."

She placed her hand on mine. "I know how important for everything to clear up to you to take your next decisions of your life, Em. So I'd suggest you ask him yourself. I think the time has come for you to know everything."

Surprised, I watched her in perplexion. Did I really want to know everything to take my next steps in my life with him? Was I really considering Casie's words to give us another chance?

And what did she mean by it was the time for me to know everything?
Why did it feel like the truth
that I was going to know soon would change my life forever?
The blare of my phone distracted me from my thoughts. It was Beth.
"Hello," I said, picking up the phone.
"Hello, is it Em I'm talking to?" a male voice spoke from the other side of
the phone, some hubbub
buzzed at the background.
"Yes? Who is it? And why are you calling from my friend's phone?
Where's she?" I frowned.
"Miss, I'm calling you from Dakota's Bar. Your friend here is drunk and
alone. She's refusing to leave
and we don't know her address. So we got your number from her
emergency dial list and called you.
We'd be grateful if you come and get your friend, she's in a pretty bad
state and we don't know what
to do with her."
"Oh God! How long has she been there?" I asked, getting up from the
chair.
"Approximately four hours, miss," replied the man.
"Alright, can you please have an eye on her until I reach there? I'll be
there as soon as possible."
"Of course, but be quick, miss. We're about to close our bar for the
night."
"Alright, thank you!" I put the phone in my purse.
"What is it? Who was that?" asked Tess, concern latched into her eyes.
"It's Beth, she needs me right now. I'll tell you later everything, I've got
to go now," saying, I grabbed
my coat and hurried out.
"Call me once you're free. And stay safe!"

Turning to another turn, I took the car through an almost empty street,
my gaze continued their
connection with the GPS tracker of my phone. I'd never heard of that
bar's name before, and after
tracing Beth's phone, I found it was at Northern Avenue. The street
infamous for old buildings, illegal
casinos, small cafes and bars. And most importantly, hundreds of alleys.
I'd no idea what the hell she was doing here at nine of the night!

And seeing the eerie silence around, I felt people of this area called it a night much earlier than others.

Once I was finally outside at the destination at the middle of a narrow road, I double checked the location and the bar's name. A big 'Dakota's Bar' was written on a white board, red fairy lights lit at the edges. And the wobbly two rugged men that stumbled out of the bar rose the scale of my uncomfortness higher.

I'd just pick her up and flee out of this uncanny area.

When I was about to park my car at the small parking lot at the corner, I found it full. And the casino beside it explained the reason. I'd just park my car outside the bar, but a big no parking sign stopped me.

Sighing, I went ahead and turned to another narrow road and found there a place to park. Keeping my car there, I took my phone and went back to the bar.

Cold air pricked my skin as I walked along the footpath, brown locks of mine swayed with the breeze.

Distant music coming out from the casino's closed doors was the only sound I could hear other than some dogs barking afar.

As soon as I entered the bar, her sprawled figure came into my view. With a large bottle in her hand, she sang something in her not so pleasant slurry voice; her dark curly head rested on the rounded table at the corner. It was a small bar, so finding her wasn't a hassle. When I approached her, a man in white shirt and red bow around his neck greeted me.

"I guess you're the friend of hers I called, right?" he asked.

"Yes, that's me. Thank you so much for informing me about her! I'd no idea she would be here at this moment," I said, genuinely grateful. At places like this, she could fall into a wrong man's hand. Thank

God, this man, who must be a bartender here, turned out to be a gentleman!

"No problem, Miss. She's actually here for the last four hours, drinking and crying non-stop. And when

it was our time to close the bar, we asked her to leave but she wasn't in a state to leave alone, so we'd to call you."

Crying? What happened to her?

"Alright! Again, thank you so much for taking care of her until I arrived," saying, I hurried to her and called out her name.

Blinking her red swollen eyes at me, recognition flickered over her face as an uneven smile stretched across her lips. "Emmm! You're 'ere! I was soooo lonely." She tugged at my hand. "Come, sit 'ere!

Now we're going to drink together!"

I brushed her unkempt hair out of her forehead, her cheeks were streaked with dried tears and smudged mascara. She looked like a mess.

What happened to her? God, I hoped everything was alright. I'd talk to her once she was sober. But I needed to get her out of here first.

"No, Beth. You'd had enough drinks for tonight, you aren't having any more. Let's go, we're leaving." I

tried to get her up by her shoulders but she shrugged me off.

"Nooo, I don't want to go! Need more drinks, an' you'll drink with me," she slurred. "Hey, you! Gimme another bottle!"

The man shuffled in his place, eyeing his wrist. The whole bar was empty, he was just waiting for us to leave so that he could close the bar.

"Beth! Come on, get up! We need to go!" Forcing her to stand up, I wrapped one of her arms around my neck and snaked mine around her waist.

"No! I want a drink!" she complained, but walked along me with swaying legs anyway.

"I'll give you one once we're back home. Now let's go," I said to her and then glanced at the man. He offered if I needed help but I denied. Paying her bill, I thanked him again and carried her out of the bar.

Once outside, I glanced around, leading her the way my car was parked. Some wobbling figures

appeared and disappeared around the corners. In the whole area, only us two girls could be seen on the street.

As I dragged her along, she started crying again, mumbling something incoherent under her breath.

"Shh, Beth. It's alright. We're almost there."

A sudden shiver ran down my spine as I felt eyes on me. My gaze flickered around, but there was no one. Only two dogs passed across the road.

I tried to ignore it, but it was too strong. And when I heard footsteps behind me, I'd to turn around. A

fleeting figure moved behind a black car, making my heart skip.

Someone was following us. And then my gaze fell onto the other black Range Rover standing at the

other end of the street. But there was no one in there. It was the same car that was behind me most

of the time during my arrival here.

Was someone following me even before I came here? No, it must've been another car. There

wasn't only one Range Rover out there. But that man...

With my heart at my throat, I turned around and urged Beth to walk faster. But her being drunk

hindered our pace.

When we passed the head of an alley, I almost ran when a whistle reverberated across the street.

Some middle-aged men huddled under the shadow, I could feel their gaze set on us. When one of

them pushed against the wall, standing straight, I tightened my grip on Beth and dragged her as fast

as I could.

"Come on, Beth! Walk faster! We need to move fast!" I urged her.

She groaned. "I don't wanna go home!"

"We're going to my place, don't worry. Now walk faster!" I said, glancing over my shoulder. No one

there.

As we turned to the road I had my car parked on, I almost sighed in relief.

Until footsteps behind us

reached me. And this time, there wasn't only a pair, there were several.

My heart pounded in my chest as I walked as fast as I could with her along. With another hand, I

fished out my pepper spray and phone from my pocket and kept it in my hand.

Shit! I shouldn't have come here alone. I at least should've taken the bartender's help.

The footsteps sounded more closer when we were almost near my car. My brain screamed at me to run, but I knew I couldn't. Fear gripped my chest in a tight grip, making my knees wobble. But I didn't stop walking.

I almost screamed when one of them yelled out something in a foreign language as they neared closer and closer, their footsteps faster now.

Tugging the door open with shaky hands and pounding heart, I pushed her inside and whirled around, the pepper spray ready to blow out.

But to my utter surprise, I found no one. As if they suddenly vanished into the thin air. Just like that.

The entire street echoed silence.

What the hell did just happen?

Not wasting any more time standing there and waiting for another trouble, I ran inside the car and drove off. And when we were out of that area, away from those alleys, only then I let myself to breathe in relief.

While Beth slept next to me, I messaged Tess about us heading home. I was so definitely going to talk to this friend of mine about the stunt she pulled tonight tomorrow morning. While I felt like I just escaped a heart failure, she was sleeping in peace. It was just sheer luck that we got out of there safely.

But what I wondered was, where those men suddenly got missing all of a sudden?

"Good morning, Alfred!" I greeted the old doorman as I entered through the glass doors inside of OC Textiles.

A warm smile pulled on his face, the sides of his eyes crinkling. "Morning, Ms. Hutton! Have a good day!"

Smiling back, I hopped into the elevator and pressed button number forty nine.

Sipping the tea in my hand, I checked my phone again. Yet no calls or messages from him.

Is he ignoring my calls on purpose?

I've even called him this morning after waking up, but again, it was switched off.

Sighing, I typed a message to Beth instead, about our pending discussion after my work.

When I took her home last night, Mom and Dad were stunned seeing her in that state. Among three

of us friends, she was always the sensible one and never really drank. So it was really a matter of

shock for them to see her like that, and the matter wasn't any different for me.

When I left home this morning, she was still asleep. So I couldn't talk to her. I'd informed Cassie of her

condition last night and she said she'd pick her up from my place after breakfast. Even she'd no idea

what happened to her.

Once I reached the forty-ninth floor, I headed directly to my cabin, but Liza met me on the way.

"Morning!" I smiled at her. But it slipped when I saw the paleness of her face.

"Thank God, you're here! I was just about to call you to ask what's taking you so long!" she said, eyes

wide.

I frowned. "As far as I know, I'm exactly on time. Why? What's wrong?

You're looking pale here. Is

everything alright?"

She shook her head. "Forget everything. You need to go to the penthouse this instance."

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of the penthouse.

"Why?"

"The boss is here. And he demands your presence, right now!"

Damn! Our Ace is back!! What do you think will happen now? I shouldn't have finished it here, but I

had to, hadn't I? Don't be upset guys! The next update will be up soon!

Till then if you want to know more what happens in the next chapter, go check out the sneak peek of

chapter 21 on my Facebook page. If you haven't liked my page yet and don't know how to find it, go to the link on my bio. You'll find it there. ·

With love,
Eva Zahan.