

THE SUN WAS JUST BEGINNING TO HIDE ITSELF BEHIND A CROWNING OF FIRS ON THE EASTERN SIDE OF LAMBERT'S HOME, when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

It was her husband, who she'd artfully neglected for almost an hour in spite of every impulse not to.

He gently tugged on her, pulling her toward him. She evanesced to his nook, smelled his familiarity, drank in the muscles that flexed against her. "Hey, you."

"I'm sorry."

He arched an eyebrow in her direction. "For what?"

"For neglecting you."

"Tallie, I'm a grown man. There's no need to apologize. You're in a rich man's home. And when you're in a rich man's home, you pay attention to the rich man. Simple."

"I love you."

"Eh. Do I *really* need to say it back?"

"No. But you can show me how much later."

"I had already planned on doing that the moment I saw you in that dress."

Brandon was leaning down with the intention of kissing her, when they both heard tumult coming from the terrace door.

A crowd had gathered, and Natalie heard Lambert bellowing something in French.

Brandon stood in front of his wife, grasping at her hip to steady her. "What the hell?"

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"I don't like taking those chances with my pregnant wife."

"I'm fine, Brandy."

"You want to go for a walk until shit settles down?"

Natalie narrowed her eyes at her husband. "You're that rattled?"

"No, I really just want to get you alone."

"Liar."

He reached for her hand, lacing his fingers with hers effortlessly. "Maybe, but just indulge me."

So, she did, and Brandon started walking toward Lambert's well-manicured, sunset-sculpted garden beyond the trees. The stringent scent of the firs reminded her of Christmas, and the crisp breeze soothed her. Soon, the sound of the raised voices was just a distant thing.

She was alone with Brandon again. She had returned to Earth.

Then, she felt anxiety in Brandon's clutch, and she gazed up at him.

He pursed his lips and she watched his Adam's Apple bounced upward, then downward slowly. "We're okay, right?"

She was taken aback. She'd almost forgotten. "Yea, I suppose we are."

"That's not a good enough answer."

"That's the only one I can give you right now."

He stopped their slow pacing, and he turned and faced her. His steel blue gaze still made her shudder from time to time. "You're still mad at me, aren't you?"

She flushed, and dropped his hand instinctively. He slowly gazed down at the hasty disconnect between them.

She lowered her head as her heart began to pound. He pinched her chin between his fingers and lifted it once more. "Answer me."

"Why the charade, Brandy? You already know what I'm going to say."

"Goddamnit, Natalie, I was drunk."

She backed away from his reach. "That's no excuse."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"There's nothing you can do."

"What the hell does that mean? You're telling me that you're never going to get over it?"

"I'm not saying anything, Brandon. As usual, you're putting words and actions into this conversation that shouldn't be there."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Do that 'Natalie' thing where you pretend like you're over something, but bring it up when we're arguing three years from now."

"I won't."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you don't know me." She didn't mean to raise her voice.

"Is this what we're going to do right now, Tallie? We're going to argue?"

"I'm not arguing with you. I refuse to. Stop pressuring me into a resolution. You know I don't operate that way."

“Then maybe you should change. It’s never too late.”

“How do you expect me to feel, Brandon? What do you want me to do? Pretend like it never happened? What if I decided to get drunk and call up Anthony? How would that make you feel?”

“I would feel fine, knowing that you never loved him with an ounce of the intensity that you love me.”

She paused. “Fair enough. But you *loved* her. I mean really—“

“I stopped the day I met you.”

A tear escaped her eye. And he saw it. He tried to catch it, but it fell anyway, scurrying down her cheek in a flash.

She blamed her emotions. She blamed her pregnancy, Harper.

He smiled. “That’s the Natalie I want.”

“Weak, submissive, resolved...?”

“Human.”

And she kissed him, got lost in him, drunk of him.

He murmured idle things against her lips, that sounded very much like a despairing chant of, “*I need you...just like this...I need you*”.

She barely heard the rustling of motion beyond the hybrid tea rose bushes. She didn’t stop. She loved the smell of her husband, the feel of his thick, black hair in her fingers, the depth of his groan.

She didn’t stop.

But the rustling persisted, and hushed voices followed, two or three of them, together.

There was laughter.

Brandon stopped their kissing and gazed toward the sound. “You hear that, baby.”

“Of course I do. But I didn’t want to stop.”

He smiled and pecked her forehead. “We could be in mortal danger.”

“All the more reason why we should be kissing in our last moments of living.”

He pulled her close as the noises continued, getting louder as the proximity increased.

Then, a man appeared, youngish with messy waves, bloodshot avocado eyes, a ripped, gray Brooks Brother’s suit, and two scantily dressed women on his arms.

The two women were beside themselves with drunken laughter, but he stopped the moment he saw Brandon and Natalie standing there.

Brandon squeezed her arm. “Interesting.”

She wasn’t sure where or why or how, but she’d seen those eyes before.

The man parted his lips to speak but paused to pull a flask out of his jacket pocket and take a swig.

One of the giggling girls only paused enough so that they could indolently lick the nape of the youngish man’s neck.

Disgusted, Natalie reached for Brandon’s arm and began to tug him away.

She heard the man begin to chuckle. “It’s funny. A girl who almost hits you head-on in the dark of night can't even be bothered to say ‘hello’...even *after* you give her a ride to a luxury hotel...the name's Bellamy by the way...”

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