



Capricorn

Author: *Gemma James*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

Description: Twelve men. A virgin queen. One arranged marriage.

Oliver Whitney.

A man of control.

A master of persuasion.

A shadow in my doorway every night.

He saved me from the dungeon.

Then named his price.

He wants to take me on another trip to the states—only this time, I don't have a choice.

Because Oliver plans to offer me to a secret society, and my virginity is the main attraction that buys him entry.

I've been gutted by grief.

Twisted by self-denial.

Unraveled by men who all want a piece of me.

But I'm not the same.

Not after the cliff.

Not after the dungeon.

Not after Oliver.

I mourned the love of my life with my whole soul.

And just when I surrender to my fate...

He steps out of the shadows.

Part 10 of The Zodiac Queen. Intended for mature readers who enjoy dark and explicit themes. Reader discretion is advised.

Total Pages (Source): 71

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

1

December 17th

Winter air nips at my bare arms, sending a shiver racing down my limbs. In the distance, waves collide with jagged cliffs, and I focus on the rhythm until it storms through me. The darkness steals my vision of the sea, but that sound is a potent elixir, an inducer of the mental fog I crave.

God, it's all I want right now.

Being near the ocean does that to me. Soothes the turmoil. Calms my breathing. Distorts all the things I can't bring myself to face. It's a small mercy, this gift of oblivion.

Beautiful oblivion.

Despite the frigid air, I'm content to stand on the edge of nothing, because I feel nothing here. It would be so easy to let go and fly, to claim the type of nothingness that's permanent.

Eternal.

Does peace exist in such a place? I can't help but think it does.

"Novalee!"

A sharp voice tears through my solitude, and I pivot to find Liam standing behind me on the balcony. In the moonless dark, his coppery hair masquerades as black—a striking contrast to the snowflakes drifting between us. One by one, they land in silent defeat on the floor.

I don't remember how I got here, but I resent him for interrupting the only bit of peace I've had since...

My stomach revolts at where that thought tries to stray.

"How long have you been out here?" Liam's gaze lifts over my shoulder, chasing a view the night won't give him.

The sun must have set hours ago, though that doesn't seem right. Wasn't I just swirling a spoon through thick, tasteless oatmeal at the breakfast table? It should bother me that I can't recall the time between then and now, but it doesn't.

"Novalee." His insistent tone is on the gruff side as he takes my hand. "Did you hear me?"

"What?" Blinking, I fixate on his thumb as it glides back and forth across the back of my hand. That gesture is hypnotic, trance-like...

Going back and forth and back and forth and back?—

"Let's get you inside."

I jump at his voice, which only makes his forehead wrinkle in concern. Gently, he guides me through the door and into my private quarters in the House of Aries. The next thing I know, I'm settled in a chair, cocooned in a warm blanket, while Liam rubs life back into my arms through the soft material.

“How long were you out there?” His brows knit together. “You’re frozen to the bone.”

His jacket and tie are absent, and my gaze stalls on his collarbone. He’s dressed casually for the evening, with the top three buttons of his shirt undone. Something about his skin beckons. Without conscious thought, I work my arms out of the blanket and trail my fingers over his throat.

He’s smooth and warm and?—

“Novalee.” His thick murmur halts my hand. “You’re worrying me.”

“Why?”

“Because I found you freezing in the snow,” he says, brows arching in disbelief, “without a jacket or a pair of shoes. What were you doing out there?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

I’m sure if I think long and hard, I can come up with an explanation, but I don’t have the energy. Besides, the sad truth is...

“I don’t remember.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

Liam's mouth tightens into a thin line, yet his touch remains gentle as he cups my cheek. "Tell me what to do, please."

"There's nothing," I whisper, the emptiness inside me growing deeper.

A soft knock interrupts the grave moment, and my bedroom door opens to reveal Vance. The sudden appearance of the doctor sends a jolt of adrenaline through me, and I sit up straight as hope crashes into my chest, tangling with a complex blend of anger and fear.

Because I don't trust hope—not when it's done nothing but yank me around in unabashed violence since the day I was born.

And yet...

I can't help but ask the only question worth asking. "Did they find him?"

Vance gives his blond head a solemn shake. He normally wears his hair in a ponytail, but now it falls past his shoulders, wild and messy, like he's been running his fingers through it all day.

"No sign of survivors," he says quietly. "Axel's body was recovered a few days ago, but..."

Dread bands around my chest. "But they're still looking, right?"

Liam rises to join Vance, and my gaze darts between them, desperation cresting. No

one speaks at first, and that's when I ache for the numbness of winter air, the crash of waves, the endless dark.

The fog.

God, bring the fog back, because I can't face the answer written in Vance's expression—as if he's trying to swallow the words so he won't have to say them out loud.

“It's been a week, Novalee.”

A week.

Seven days.

168 hours.

10,000 and some odd minutes since Sebastian's plane went down, and my world imploded.

It feels longer.

It feels like it happened five minutes ago.

That day is a blur, just distorted images I don't want to remember, and yet I still recall Liam and the Brotherhood ambushing me in my studio with the news. Can still smell Liam's spicy cologne as he engulfed me in his arms. Still hear the wailing and screaming.

My screaming.

At some point, Vance sedated me, and that's the last thing I remember about that day.

"So?" Hysteria holds my vocal cords hostage for a beat. "I don't care if it's been a month. He could have deployed a raft, made it to an island, or...something."

Pity.

I despise that mask more than anything. Vance wears it now as he crouches in front of me. "They called off the search."

A glacier fist squeezes my heart, and I want to scream against the agony. Pain floods my senses, burning my nose, pounding at my temples, coiling around my neck.

It's too much.

I can't do this.

The clock above the armoire counts the seconds in a stoic rhythm I can't help but embrace.

Tick, tick, tick.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Did you hear me?” Vance slides his hand into my hair, pulling my attention back to him.

“I heard you.”

“I’m so sorry,” he says, his tone a strangled apology.

“No.” I grind my molars, refusing to accept his words. “He’s coming home.”

“He’s gone.” Liam lets out an unsteady breath. “They both are.”

Clinging to denial, I glance at the bedroom door, convinced Sebastian will burst through it and tell me how this is all a huge mistake.

A terrible misunderstanding.

“He’s not coming back, love,” Vance says, reading my thoughts with unnerving accuracy.

The hands on the clock continue their relentless march, but time might as well grind to a halt. Blood rushes through my ears, muting the reality of this nightmare. I can’t accept what they’re telling me.

What if the rescue team didn’t search in the right spot?

What if the flight’s trajectory didn’t go as planned?

What if someone else rescued him, and he's injured, or...or suffering from amnesia?

Tears prick at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. If I break down again, Vance will only sedate me. I force myself to my feet and let the blanket fall to the floor. Grief boils inside me as I make my way to the windows where the vastness haunts me. Sebastian could be out there somewhere, a thousand miles away, washed up on some shore that's hopefully not as cold as here.

He could be bleeding and broken, but alive.

He has to be alive.

The alternative isn't an option. I have to believe he's fighting to survive, counting on a heroic and miraculous rescue. He and Tatum are both relying on us to not give up.

Except everyone is giving up.

Liam's words filter through my head, a mournful chant of inescapable truth. No matter how much I want to, I can't unhear what he said.

He's gone.

A hiccuping sob builds, and I shake my head as the tears I've been holding back cling to my lashes. "I can't accept this."

Vance clears his throat. "You have to."

A scorching tear streaks down my cheek, followed by a deluge. As my vision blurs, I sink to the floor in voiceless, gut-wrenching sobs. My chest heaves and burns, wracked with grief. God, the pain...

Unbearable.

Footsteps rush across the room, closing the distance to where I'm broken on the floor. Letting out a choked sound, Liam reaches me first and wraps me in his arms, squeezing the breath from me as if he can cast out my grief and take it on himself.

"I'm sorry," he whispers into my hair, again and again, rocking me to the ticking of that clock. But time is sadistic, because the thought of enduring another second without Sebastian is more than I can bear.

2

The same tumultuous body of water that stole the man I love now mocks my pathetic existence beyond the windows. I'm hollowed out as I stare at the sea. Minutes bleed together, forcing me through the hours like a forgotten ghost haunting the penthouse floor. Maybe I am an apparition. Spirits don't eat or sleep, and I haven't done much of either since I found out Sebastian's plane went down somewhere over the ocean.

Ghosts don't breathe, either, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I wonder if this pain will vanish if I just...stop breathing.

The morbid notion makes me gasp, and I inhale two quick breaths before letting them out in a slow exhale.

There's a Sebastian-sized hole in my chest, yet my stupid heart keeps beating for him. My mutinous brain won't let go either, replaying our last phone call, tethering me to the phantom echo of his voice.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Remember when you told me you’d never break, not for me or anyone?”

“I remember.”

“Promise you’ll stay strong, no matter what.”

“I’ll be strong when you get home.”

“Novalee,” he warns. “Promise me.”

“I’ll stay strong...as long as you promise to come back to me.”

“I promise, princess. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

I guess we both lied.

Because he’s not here.

And I’m not strong.

The door creaks open, shattering my destructive musings, and Selma steps inside with a tray.

“Good afternoon, my queen.” Liam’s housekeeper sets my lunch on the table in front of me, her smile exuding warmth. “I hope you have an appetite. The chancellor won’t be happy that you didn’t eat breakfast.”

“Where is he today?” I ask, increasingly aware of his dwindling patience for my despondency. Each time he brings me food or tries to coax me into some semblance of myself, the worry etched on his face chips away at my defenses. He hasn’t breached my walls yet, but knowing him, it’s only a matter of time before he busts through.

“The legacy members arrived this morning.” Selma lifts the lid off a silver platter of gourmet lunch offerings. “Chancellor Castle is in a meeting with them now.”

My back stiffens. “A meeting about what?”

A furrow tugs at her brows. “That’s a question for the chancellor when he returns.” She exits the room before I can press her further.

I glance at the artisan sandwich and salad I have no intention of eating. A hunger pang tears through my gut, but the idea of putting food into my mouth, let alone swallowing it, makes me nauseous.

Letting out a sigh, I pick up my fork, knowing Liam will be upset if I don’t at least make an effort. I take a nibble, my gaze drifting to the sea, soothed by the faint sound of waves breaking against the rocky cliffs.

At some point, he returns, and I realize the sky has deepened to a dull gray. Fresh snowfall blots out the late afternoon sun, casting my quarters in shadow. Disoriented and confused, I glance around the room, once again wondering how time passed by without me.

Liam settles into the chair on the other side of the table, where my lunch sits untouched between us. Wait...barely touched, since one corner of the sandwich has a bite missing. I don’t remember eating it, so it’s probably safe to assume I sampled the salad, too.

“You’re still not eating.” He crosses his muscular arms, a preamble to the battle he’s about to wage.

“I tried.” With a gesture at the evidence of the bite I’d taken, I add, “No one else has been here to touch it.”

At least...I don’t think anyone has. Did I nod off in my seat? It would be a miracle if I had, since every time I close my eyes, I see Sebastian the way I left him in Los Angeles over a week ago.

Two weeks ago?

However many the days, he was alive, and he was mine.

With a sigh, Liam runs a hand over the unkempt scruff shadowing his jaw. “You can’t go on like this.”

Shrugging a shoulder, I fiddle with the useless fork on my plate. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to try.”

When I fail to respond, an uncomfortable stillness fills the air.

“The legacy members are here,” he says.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Selma told me.” I give him a pointed look. “Though she wouldn’t tell me why.”

His fingers tap an irritating dance across the table. “You know why.”

Stubbornly, I shake my head. The why is unbearable.

“The auction must go on,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose as his eyes fall shut. “And with Tatum and Sebastian gone?—”

“Stop.”

Please, I can’t do this.

His hooded gaze promises harsh truths, making me squirm in my seat.

“What will it take to get through to you? Because I’m at a loss.” Agitated, he runs his fingers through his hair, tousling the deep copper strands. “I’ve tried giving you space to grieve, stood as your rock when you needed it, but you’ve been impossible to reach. Everyone’s worried sick.”

“Who?” I ask, absently stabbing a piece of wilted lettuce with my fork.

“Landon and Elise, Vance, Ford, Faye...”

“She called?”

He raises a brow. “She spoke to you over the phone. Do you not remember?”

I shrug again, lacking the energy needed to explain how I sort of do, but I can't recall a single detail of the conversation—just like I can't remember what Landon and Elise said when they came to check on me.

“Novalee...” He trails off, releasing a heavy breath. “This isn't healthy. I know you're overwhelmed with grief, and rightfully so, but refusing to accept what happened will only make it harder for you to heal.” He pauses, his words hanging in the air between us. “He's gone.”

“If he's gone,” I spit out, emphasizing each word, “then so am I.”

His complexion drains of color. “What are you trying to say?”

“I-I don't know,” I stammer, my words tinged with a blend of anger and sorrow. “I just...I don't want to be here anymore.”

“But you are here, and pretending otherwise won't change what's coming, because we still have an auction to face.” Liam leans in, forehead creased as our eyes lock. “Everything has changed. I'm brainstorming another plan with Landon, but I need you to try. Your transition into the House of Capricorn is tomorrow.”

“I don't care about tomorrow,” I say through gritted teeth.

Liam drags a hand down his face. “We'll discuss this later. Right now, there's something else we need to address.”

“Something else?” I scoff, my tone dripping with sarcasm. “Is the collapse of my world only a minor inconvenience to be dealt with later?”

He blinks, taken aback by my snark. “Of course not.”

“Then what could be more important?”

“The Brotherhood is hosting a special dinner in honor of the legacy members tonight.”

“So?”

“Your presence is required.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Too bad.” He stands to his full height, arms crossed, his posture immovable.

“Dinner’s in an hour. You need to shower and dress properly.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“You don’t have a choice.” With one swift motion, he pulls me from the chair and hauls me over his shoulder, drawing a startled squeal.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Put me down!” I shout, thrashing against his solid grip.

Ignoring my protests, he strides into my private bathroom, turns on the shower head, and sets me on my feet.

“Can you stop fighting me for once?” Frustration cuts through the question, but then his voice softens. “Let me take care of you.”

We stand close, chests brushing against each other as the air thickens, and in a dizzying moment, I surrender.

“Okay.”

“Good girl.” He lifts the hem of my silk nightgown, and the last of my resistance melts away. I’m held captive as he slips it from my body, discarding it on the floor.

With a silent apology in his gaze, Liam sinks to his knees and hooks his fingers into my panties. His touch is gentle, warm knuckles gliding down my thighs as he strips me bare.

Something dormant and undeniably wrong stirs.

My breath catches.

His does, too.

“Novalee...” he whispers, his irises the color of burnished wood.

It's still there, that pull between us, battling the stormy waters of devastation, grasping for a lifeline as he regards me with love, support, and compassion.

God help me, but his desire sparks the smallest of flames in the most hidden part of myself.

Since Los Angeles, he's been by my side, worrying over the meals I refuse to eat, swallowing his disappointment at the untouched sketchbook he left on my nightstand, and sleeping in my bed to keep the nightmares at bay.

And yet, this growing closeness feels like a betrayal.

A sickening one.

The tension snaps when Liam rises to his feet, and I track the deliberate slide of his fingers as he unbuttons his shirt. Fabric falls to the floor, followed by his pants. I can't help but gawk at his sculpted arms, the sharp definition of his abs. Every detail is carved with raw, masculine beauty.

"Get in the shower," he says, his tone thick with an emotion I can't quite place.

As I step under the warm spray, I sense him reaching for my plumeria-infused soap. With patience, he washes me, his hands tracing over curves and dipping into valleys, pausing at the back of each knee. The brush of his touch exudes tender intimacy, transporting me back to another time, another shower, another man.

The pain returns full force, spreading through my chest until I can't breathe. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to stifle a whimper, but it escapes.

"You're safe with me, my sweet girl." The warmth of his voice almost fractures my protective barrier. Tears burn, threatening to drag me from my mental fortress.

“Don’t make me cry.”

“I’m not trying to.” He frames my damp cheeks, his features weighed down by fear.

“But you’re slipping further away, and I’m scared of losing you.”

Water cascades over us, droplets pouring down my face, some of them salty on my trembling lips.

“I can’t,” I say, barely audible above the sound of the shower. “If I start crying again, I won’t stop. I don’t want Vance to drug me.”

Liam takes me into his arms, and though he doesn’t say anything in response, his silence speaks volumes. He needs me to hold it together.

But I don’t know if I can.

“I miss him so much.”

“I know.” He grips the back of my head, pulling me closer. “He loved you.” A thick gulp travels down his throat. “Sebastian wouldn’t want you to suffer like this.”

Flinching at the mention of his name, I drown in waves of memories, from the fiery arguments to the passionate moments that now make my chest tighten. His voice drifts through my head with a vividness I hope never abandons me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.”

I’d responded without hesitation that day in the elevator, after Landon and Elise’s wedding, with my knees against the gritty floor. I can almost feel Sebastian behind me, holding me by the neck as he drove himself into my ass. The memory should launch me into a black hole of shame, but I’d never experienced such raw passion and desperation until then.

I’m terrified I won’t ever feel that way again.

He’s gone.

I shake my head, casting out the rebellious thought, but a sob bursts free anyway. Liam’s arms tighten around me, giving me the sanctuary I need right now, but as I lean into him, my heart breaks under the burden of betrayal. Another sob escapes, and I will the dam not to bust open.

“This is killing me,” he chokes out. “You don’t have to suffer alone. I’m here. You’ll always have my heart and soul.”

“I know.” I hold on to him with all that’s left of me.

I’m not sure how long we stand under the spray, but at some point, the water begins to cool, the hot stream giving way to icy drops that feel like pins and needles on my skin. Liam releases me, and then I’m standing outside the shower, tucked inside a soft

towel as my feet sink into a plush bathmat.

He tugs on his slacks before grabbing the rest of his clothing. “Can I count on you to get ready for dinner?”

All I can do is nod, my throat too constricted.

“Good girl,” he says, pressing his lips to my forehead. “I’ll wait for you in the sitting room.”

3

Expensive cologne and pan-seared lamb fill my nostrils, making my stomach twist with unease. A thick cloud of tension hangs over the dining room, heavy with anger and grief, a jarring contrast to the opulent chandelier, china, and formal wear.

Then there’s the sheer number of men crowded around the circular table. Some didn’t appreciate our late arrival—especially Sebastian’s father, whose palpable anger struck the instant Liam and I sat down.

Once again, my plate sits untouched, though I’m already on my third glass of wine. The buzz is a welcome escape from this wretched dinner. Conversation fills the room as I take another sip of the bitter red. Liam’s brow furrows, but to his credit, he doesn’t pry the glass from my hand.

A small mercy, since the wine is the only thing making this night bearable.

I’m doing everything I can to avoid glancing at the empty seat where Sebastian should be. Instead, Mr. Stone sits there, his sole purpose to glare at me, it seems. But it’s not his presence that makes me guard my gaze. I can’t bring myself to look that way, because every time I do, I expect to see Sebastian.

Memories of past dinners wind around my neck, cinching tighter whenever someone mentions the plane crash. I take another sip of wine, the spiced oak and cherry notes carrying me adrift on a deceptively calm sea.

“The queen shouldn’t have been in Los Angeles to begin with,” says Pax Monroe’s father, a severe looking man with raven hair and an angular face of hard lines. “If Castle hadn’t stolen time from the House of Libra, my son would have trained her. She’d know her place is here in this tower, serving our boys, not off playing dressmaker.”

“You’re absolutely right.” Mr. Stone’s cold indigo eyes settle on me. “Had she been properly trained, the stupid girl would know her place.”

“And where is my place?” I ask, boldly returning his hostile gaze. “On my knees in the dungeon?”

“Novalee.” Liam covers my hand, his gesture a warning, but I shrug him off.

“He started this.” I point at Sebastian’s father. “So let him finish it.”

Mr. Stone huffs, thick with disdain. “Better on your knees than gallivanting around the globe. Actions have consequences, little girl. If not for your disgrace, my son would still be alive.”

His words slam into me like a physical blow, knocking the air from my lungs.

Elise gasps, her face flushed with fiery indignation. She’s sitting beside Landon, who places a hand on her arm, calming her as he turns the heat on himself.

“You’re out of line, Mr. Stone,” he says, jaw clenched in a struggle for composure.

“I don’t believe I am. She’s the reason Sebastian and Tatum were in the States, which makes her responsible. The fact is, you boys indulge her.” Mr. Stone glances around the table, slowly taking in each house.

Everyone is here tonight, except Ford, who is missing in action.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“I say it’s time she goes through proper training,” Mr. Stone continues. “Before she engages in more reckless behavior.”

“What do you propose?” Mr. Monroe asks.

“Well, your son could give her a good flogging. That would be an appropriate starting point.”

“Like hell,” Liam growls. “No one’s laying a finger on her.”

“You say that as if you have the power to stop it,” Mr. Stone fires back.

“That’s enough.” Liam’s father shifts in his chair, the light above casting a glow over his coppery hair, its richness muted with gray. He clears his throat. “This isn’t helping anyone.”

“Castle’s right,” Mr. Harding says from the House of Sagittarius. “Our boys wouldn’t want us pointing fingers. What happened wasn’t the queen’s fault. It wasn’t Tatum’s or Sebastian’s, either. They were honorable men trying to do the right thing by her.”

“The right thing?” Mr. Stone sneers. “Such as parading her virginity in front of a roomful of men? By the grace of Evangeline and the Original Twelve, our queen is still pure, and she must remain that way until after the auction.”

His eyes lock onto mine, intensifying to a midnight blue that sends a chill down my spine. “Enjoy your last night in the House of Aries,” he says, tone sharp as a blade. “Because things are about to change in this tower.”

I'm on my feet before I can think it through, apprehension and guilt warring over the pieces of my heart. In my haste to escape both, I topple my chair. It's a horrid ruckus, just like the words spoken so cruelly around the table.

Like the chaos in my head.

"Novalee?" Liam stands as well. "What are you doing?"

Instead of answering, I turn on my heel and flee. Liam calls after me, but the alarm in his tone hardly registers as I rush out of the dining room, driven by Mr. Stone's threats and accusations.

The portrait of Evangeline Castle haunts me down the hall, but I ignore her eerie face and stab the button for the elevator. Hysteria is close to pulling me under as the doors slide open, ushering me into private solitude. Blindly, I hit the button for the penthouse floor, then blink back tears as the car carries me upward. The ride makes me nauseous, my stomach churning with too much wine, and I swallow vomit as the elevator stops.

The doors slide open, and three people stumble inside, laughing and reeking of alcohol. In the hall, techno music blares from the open doors of the House of Scorpio. I'm not sure why I do it, but right as the elevator is about to close, I stick my hand out and escape into the hallway.

I'm not thinking straight as I enter Ford Stryker's house. The living room is a wild tangle of half-naked bodies, every piece of furniture claimed by some form of debauchery. Sweat, smoke, and alcohol taint the air as I navigate through the writhing crowd.

A beer bottle topples at my feet, and I stop to scan the room, my gaze landing on a girl draped across a couch. Her head hangs off one end, creating the perfect angle for

a guy to use her mouth. Another man kneels with his head buried between her thighs as she moans around the girth of the other guy's cock. The sight slams into me, dredging up a memory, and icy fear surges through my veins.

Axel.

The past crashes into my consciousness, as loud as the pulsating music in Ford's great room. My heart pounds faster, breaths uneven and shallow. I brace a hand against the wall for stability, but the flashback is relentless.

I remember being weightless in Axel's arms, my limbs too heavy to fight as he carried me down a dim hallway. Most of that night is hazy, but one image cuts through the fog...an open door to a shadowy room, where three figures lay tangled on the couch in a whirl of sex and drugs.

That fleeting glimpse sears into my mind, followed by the horror of my attacker taking me into the next room. After that...

Forceful hands.

Terror.

Darkness.

I shove the flashback into the deepest corner of my mind and look for Ford, needing the presence of someone safe and familiar before I start hyperventilating.

But he's nowhere to be found.

Desperate to stifle the panic, I snatch up a half-empty bottle from the table and take a long swig, the bite of alcohol stinging my nose.

“Ford?” I call out over the music. No one hears me. No one cares. Clutching the bottle tighter, I stagger through the smoke and bodies, my vision blurring from booze and the threat of tears. His bedroom door stands wide open at the end of the hall. I stumble toward it, full of anxiety as I reach the threshold.

Ford is sprawled on a sofa, his shirt unbuttoned, knees spread as a petite brunette crouches between them. Her head bobs a constant rhythm in his lap, but he’s unmoving, his expression dazed. Does he even realize what’s happening below the belt? Or is he too far gone to grasp the situation?

As I watch the woman exploit his intoxication, a surge of fury rises in me. Setting the liquor bottle down on a table, I step forward and grip her long brown hair, twisting hard enough to pull a yelp from her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Get out,” I say, tone jagged like a serrated blade.

“What the hell?” She stares at me with wide, startled eyes. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m the queen of this God-forsaken tower.” Releasing her hair, I give her a dismissive look. “And you are leaving.”

She hesitates, eyes narrowing as if she might challenge me. But then, with a frown of uncertainty, she scrambles to her feet, and I barely notice the door slamming upon her hasty exit.

“Baby girl?” Ford squints at me. “Are you really here, or am I that high?”

“You’re beyond high, but I’m really here.”

“But why are you here?”

“I don’t know.”

He crooks a finger. “C’mere.”

Driven by the buzz coursing through my veins, I let him pull me onto his lap. His chest is solid and hot against mine. I inch back and run my palms over his feverish skin. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better.”

He doesn't ask if I'm okay. It's obvious that neither of us are. Instead, he wraps his arms around me. "Sorry about the hard-on. Can't really control it when you're sitting on me like this."

"It's okay." I bury my face in his shoulder, inhaling his scent and finding a calming wave of relief. With him, there are no expectations or complicated histories. No pressure for something I can't give.

Ford is just here, warm and in the flesh, offering refuge when such a gift is scarce in this tower. He cares about me...but he isn't in love with me.

Not like Liam is.

And I find freedom in that.

I nestle as close as possible, seeking comfort in Ford's presence. My head is fuzzy as my hands wander over his abs, tracing the ridges of muscle and smooth skin. When I graze the open fly of his jeans, his body goes taut.

"What are you doing?"

I'm not sure what I'm doing. I only know I crave closeness and connection—a way to drive away the hollowness inside me. Grief and impaired judgment collide, thrusting me into a dizzying headspace of desperation and impulsive decisions. Shifting, I let my hand drift lower, and Ford sucks in a ragged breath.

"Novalee," he warns, his fingers digging into my hips. "We can't do this."

"Why not?" I trail my thumb over the head of his cock, drawing a strangled moan from him.

He grabs my wrist. “Damn, baby girl. You have to stop.”

“Don’t you want me?”

“Of course I want you, but we’ll be in a shitload of trouble if we’re caught.”

“You don’t want to bid in the auction anyway, so why does it matter?”

“Forget the auction. I don’t want to get my ass whooped for touching you. Besides...” He lets a beat pass, his glassy hazel eyes boring into me. “It won’t take away the pain. Deep down, you know that.”

His words drown me in a tsunami of renewed grief, and I climb off his lap. Before I’m able to pull away completely, he settles me on the couch beside him. Charged silence hovers over us, the seconds taking up a full minute.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re really here?” he finally asks.

With a sigh, I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes. “I just want to wake up from this nightmare.”

“I wish you could.” He winds an arm around me, tucking me against his side. “I really do. But that still doesn’t tell me why you’re here.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“I didn’t want to be alone, but I didn’t want to be in that dining room either.” I pause. “Liam wouldn’t let me skip it. You’re lucky you weren’t there.”

“I thought about going. Everyone expected me to, but I didn’t want to face them...or you.”

“Me?” I lift my head, eyes squinting in confusion. “Why?”

“If I hadn’t flaunted your virginity in front of Axel, he wouldn’t have hurt you. And Sebastian and Tatum...” His throat works hard, thick with emotion. “They’d still be here.”

My breath stalls, and the guilt gnawing at me finds an echo in Ford’s confession, binding us in remorseful unity. I grab his jaw and turn his face until our eyes meet.

“It’s not your fault,” I say, voice cracking. “It’s mine.”

“You know it’s not.” He shakes his head. “He wouldn’t want you to blame yourself.”

The way he says it, gentle yet confident, breaks me open. The tears I’ve been harboring all night escape down my cheeks in unstoppable rivulets. I choke out a sob as his arms come around me.

“I know it seems impossible,” Ford whispers, his words warm against my ear, “but you’ll get through this.”

“I don’t want to get through this. I want him back.”

He tightens his hold. “I know, baby girl.”

It’s not fair. First, fate stole my parents from the sky, tearing them away in a flash of fire and wreckage. And now, it’s taken him too.

Acceptance threatens to drag me into an even deeper state of despair, so I cling to the only thing I can.

Searing need.

The promise of escape.

Beautiful oblivion.

I need it more than the air in my lungs. More than the sunrise tomorrow or the crash of waves against the shore. There’s only one thing I need more than life itself, and he’s not here.

But Ford is, and he’s more than capable of making me forget, if only for a while. Letting out a stuttering sigh, I press my lips to his and silently beg him not to reject me again.

For five long seconds, he freezes, then his mouth is moving against mine.

Soft yet firm.

Both gentle and persistent.

Promising exactly what I need.

Whatever held him back before is gone. Raw hunger drives him now, his tongue

savage as he deepens the kiss.

Endless moments pass before he inches back, fingers threading through my short locks. “What do you need from me, Novalee?”

“Whatever you can give. Just...take it all away for a while.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Ford settles me on my back, and I almost expect panic to take over, putting a stop to this before it begins. But the weight of his body isn't suffocating. Instead, it's the strength that grounds me in a place where pain and fear reign.

“I've wanted you for so long.” His quiet voice amplifies the confession.

“Then why didn't you do something about it, when you had the chance?”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

He searches my face, hesitation tugging at the corners of his eyes. “You made me rethink things I wrote off once I understood how the system works.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Monogamy. You almost made me reconsider my views on it.”

“Almost?”

“I’ll always be a fuckboy, baby girl.”

I cradle his cheek, taking in his sad, intoxicated stare. “You’re more than that.”

A tease of a smile, then his lips trail down my neck, igniting every nerve in their path. He bites lightly through the silk bodice, teeth closing over a stiffened peak, and I fail to breathe as his hand glides up my thigh, fingers skimming the edge of my panties.

“Don’t stop,” I plead, tilting my hips toward him.

As he slips a finger under the hem, the door to his bedroom bursts open, and I find the silhouette of Liam, towering on the threshold like a sentinel.

4

“Remove your hands.” The words cut low and lethal, infiltrating the space with every ounce of Liam’s authority. Ford springs to his feet as the chancellor enters the room, and my gaze darts between them. He opens his mouth to speak, but Liam halts him

with a lift of his hand.

“Leave us,” he commands, voice ice-cold and unyielding. His fists clench, tension coiled tight beneath his suit, but it’s the narrowing of those deep umber eyes that flips on the loudest of alarms.

“You’re in my house,” Ford points out, squaring his shoulders.

“I wasn’t asking.”

A silent stand-off ensues, fraught with unsaid threats, until Ford gives voice to them.

“Are you going to summon the Brotherhood?”

“That isn’t necessary.” Liam folds his arms. “Now get out before I change my mind.”

With a heavy sigh, Ford casts a remorseful glance at me before making his way into the hall.

As soon as the door shuts, Liam lowers onto the couch beside me. “I only need to know one thing,” he says, letting the moment stretch. “Did he use force?”

“You know he didn’t.”

He hangs his head, then glances at me again, unable to hide the accusation in his pained gaze. “We’re going to walk out of here as if nothing happened. No one can know about this. Do you understand?”

My stomach twists with nausea as I try to shake the weight of my actions, but it clings to my chest. “I understand.”

Releasing a long breath, he stands and holds a hand out to me. Mine is shaking when I slide my palm into his. As I follow him through Ford's house, stumbling past a drunken threesome in the throes of passion, my legs tremble.

Liam ushers me into the elevator and hits the button for the penthouse floor. We don't speak, but his brooding presence saturates the space with tension. I steal a glance at his profile, yet he keeps his gaze fixed ahead.

We reach the House of Aries seconds later, and he slams the door behind us, the sound cracking like a gunshot.

"Of all the reckless, foolish things you could do...what the hell were you thinking?"

"I don't know. I guess I wasn't thinking."

"Clearly," he snaps.

The alcohol sends my head spinning, and the marble floor wobbles under me. I brace a hand against the wall. "I just wanted to forget for a while."

"With Ford?" He advances on me, his body vibrating with anger. "He was higher than this damn tower."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“He was there for me.”

My words stop him short, incredulity widening his dark eyes. “And I haven’t been there for you?”

“You have.”

“But?”

Gnawing on my bottom lip, I blink back tears. “You micromanage, and it’s suffocating. You won’t let me be.”

“Because when I leave you alone for any length of time, you revert to a state of stupidity!” He drags a hand through his hair. “There’s grieving, and then there’s this. It needs to stop.”

“Well it’s my heart that’s bleeding, so stop trying to dictate how I should grieve.”

“What do you want me to do?” He spreads his arms. “Let you wither away? You’ve barely eaten in days, you won’t shower or dress unless I force your hand, and now you’re drunk from three fucking glasses of wine.”

“It wasn’t just the wine,” I mutter without thinking.

All color bleeds from his complexion. “Tell me you didn’t take drugs.”

“What? No! I only drank.”

“Of course you did. Anything to fuel the self-destruction, right?”

I glare at him. “Why do you even care?”

“Are you serious?” He takes me by the shoulders, jolting my body as if he can force some sense into me. “I care about you, and in case you’ve forgotten, Sebastian’s father will be the first to string you up in the dungeon. All he needs is a goddamn reason!” His words explode between us, illuminating the seriousness of my actions. “But maybe that’s what you want. Maybe you’re trying to punish yourself for Sebastian’s death.”

“Don’t,” I warn through gritted teeth. I shrug him off, but he crowds in anyway, undeterred.

“That’s why you’re destroying yourself, isn’t it? You’re hogging all the blame.”

I shake my head, but for every inch I put between us, he closes the gap, refusing to let me retreat.

“There’s plenty to go around, Novalee. I could’ve sent him home and gone after Ivermann myself. God knows I wanted to make that bastard pay for what he did to you.”

Emotion grips him mid-spill, eyes haunted with guilt and hindsight.

“I should’ve stayed, but I didn’t. I should’ve been selfless, but I wasn’t. I didn’t want to leave your side then, and guess what? I sure as hell don’t want to now. But watching you fall apart like this...”

He looks to the ceiling, as if searching for a prayer.

“I’d trade places with Sebastian in a heartbeat if it meant seeing you whole again.”

“Don’t say that,” I whisper, fraying around the edges.

Liam stomps right over my plea. “Why not? It’s the truth. I’d do anything for you, so if you need someone to blame, then blame me.”

“I blame my stupid virginity!”

Liam gapes at me. “Why would you think such a thing?”

“Because it’s the reason Axel targeted me.” Angrily, I dash the tears from my cheeks. “The thing that you want so badly has brought me nothing but heartache, so take it, because I don’t want it.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying I want you to fuck me.” At my bitter demand, his shock intensifies.

“You’re a wreck, not to mention drunk.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“C’mon, Chancellor,” I taunt, chest heaving with each breath, anger overflowing as the walls seem to tilt toward me. I hold onto his arm to keep myself upright. “On that island, you said you’re selfish, so be selfish. Take it! I know you want to.”

“I want you.”

“Well I’m right here.”

His eyes sweep over my face, lingering on the tight lines of anger, the moisture streaking my cheeks, the tremble in my lips. “No,” he says, slow and certain. “You’re not here, Novalee.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you need to sleep it off...alone.”

“I don’t want to sleep it off,” I snap, despising the desperation in my tone, but the thought of sleeping without him makes me shudder. I grip his sleeve, white-knuckling my way through the panic. “Can you just come to bed and hold me? I don’t want to be alone.”

“I think alone is exactly what you need right now.” Liam peels my hand from his arm. “We’ll talk about this in the morning when you’re sober.”

“I don’t want to talk,” I spit out. “I want you to take my virginity. You wanted it bad enough to blackmail me, so here it is. Why wait until my birthday? What’s the fucking point?”

With a low growl, he swoops me into his arms and storms down the corridor to my quarters. Heat radiates off his skin, coaxing me to press my nose to the place where his shoulder and neck meet. His spicy aftershave surrounds me, forming an illusion of comfort that keeps the pain moored where it can't reach me.

"Get some sleep," he says, unceremoniously dumping me on top of my unmade bed.

"Please, Liam." As he steps back, I grab his hand. "Don't go."

"If I stay, we'll both regret it."

"We won't. Please." My tug brings him one step closer. "I want you."

With a harsh exhale, he closes his eyes. "You didn't want to give it to me then, and you don't now."

"Stop telling me what I want, or what's good for me, or what should be done in my honor." I scramble to my knees and pull the dress I wore to dinner over my head. "I'm not a child, Chancellor."

His gaze lowers to my breasts, heat flaring at the sight of my erect nipples. "You're the most exquisite woman I've ever laid eyes on, but you're vulnerable and not thinking clearly. Sex isn't going to fix this." He pauses, letting a pain-filled beat pass. "In the morning, he'll still be gone."

His words shatter me with the strength of a sledgehammer, destroying the last of my sanity, and I launch a pillow at him. "Get out," I scream, rage taking over. "Just go!"

"Novalee—"

"Get out!" Another pillow flies toward his head. "You're right! It should have been

you on that plane.”

The line of his mouth turns severe, but his eyes glisten, hinting at how my verbal assault struck the bullseye. Silently, he shuts off the light and leaves, closing the door behind him.

But the evidence of his heartbreak hangs thick in the air. Instant regret snakes around me, for as long as I live, I’ll never erase his devastated expression from my mind. There aren’t words in the dictionary to describe the amount of emotional warfare I launched at him.

Shivering in the darkness, I hug myself, naked on the bed where he left me, little more than a pile of shame. Regret compounds by the second.

“I didn’t mean it,” I whisper.

But it’s too late to take it back.

5

It’s only now, as my mind begins to clear, that I realize I’ve never seen snow before. I mean, sure, I remember seeing it on holiday cards and on the big screen, but to watch each large flake coming down in isolated sorrow?

Not until this moment.

Logic tells me this can’t be true, since the sky has been spewing snow for days, so the obvious conclusion is I’ve seen snow. But if that’s the case, then why am I only now noticing this beautiful and icy phenomenon?

I have no explanation.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

Huddled inside and wrapped in my bedspread, I'm sitting with the balcony door cracked open. The touch of winter cools the tears on my cheeks, and one hour bleeds into two, then three and four, until sobriety is the harbinger of agony once again.

It should have been you on that plane.

Those eight words won't stop looping in my head, searing me with even more guilt. What I said was cruel and unforgivable, though I have no doubt Liam will forgive me.

You don't deserve him.

The accusing voice in my head sounds like my own, uttering a merciless verdict that drags me to my feet. No matter how hard I try, I can't escape my own mind or the chaos it holds. Panic claws at my windpipe, making each inhale a hard-won victory. I'm so exhausted from hurting, fighting, and surviving inside these isolating walls.

Circular walls without end.

Just like this pain.

And yet, even as I drown, my limbs move on instinct. My chest heaves as I secure the blanket around my shoulders, fingers gripping soft cashmere. I'm not sure how I end up in the elevator, but the trip to the main floor passes in a frantic blur. I fling myself outside, bare feet sinking into powdery snow, and the panic subsides by a degree. There's only one way out of this nightmare.

Escape.

Freedom.

Painless existence.

Those four words are my mantra, driving me forward with every beat of my shattered heart. My footsteps taint the perfection of untouched snow as I trek across the grounds, and despite the blanket of white powder covering the terrain, the scenery is achingly familiar. My soul recognizes this path, finding meaning and home—so much so that the core of my being senses the ghost of its mate.

Because I feel Sebastian watching me from the ninth floor of the tower, his crystalline gaze following my every move. The House of Leo has never been so barren, yet his essence wraps around me in a warm and loving shield. I imagine him painting my grief-stricken likeness onto a canvas, and the corners of my mouth creep up. I can see it so clearly, his portrait of my cold existence stroked to life in shades of dreary grey.

Winter melancholy.

Somehow, Sebastian would make such a scene beautiful.

“It’s going to be okay, baby.”

Whether it’s a memory, wishful thinking, or the whisper of his ghost, I want to believe that everything in my world will be warm and light and whole again. As I approach my favorite spot on the cliffs, I do believe it, because the thunderous ocean always soothes me.

Icy wind sends my hair flying, stinging my cheeks, but I don’t feel the cold anymore.

Waves crash against the rocks with a fierceness that mirrors the storm on my heels, but in this violent collision of water and stone, I find the impossible.

Peace.

Tilting my head back, I close my eyes and let the thick snowflakes cleanse my skin. The blanket falls off my shoulders, and I take a step forward, unafraid for the first time since Liam said the most horrifying words of my life...

“Their plane went down.”

The freezing air swirls around me, whispering dark promises, and I brace myself to just...

Let go.

I sway forward, my heart failing to beat, and that’s when I’m yanked back by two strong arms.

“No!” I cry as someone drags me away from the edge. For five endless seconds, I can’t get my vocal cords to work, and then...

I’m screaming and struggling with every ounce of strength I have in me. “Let me go!”

“Never,” Liam says.

“Put me down!” I shout, digging my nails into his forearms.

“No!” he roars right back.

My legs scissor through the air, causing him to stumble. “Why’d you have to follow me? Just let me go!”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

With a growl, he sets me on my feet and spins me around by the shoulders, his hands clamping down to keep me in place.

“Did you think I’d let you leave in the middle of the night,” he says, shaking me, “in the middle of a goddamn snowstorm, and not come after you?” Liam’s fury is powerful like the frigid wind, deeper than the ocean’s secrets, and as thunderous as the waves slamming into the cliffs.

Before I can react, he grabs the discarded blanket from the ground, and then I’m back in his arms, bundled in his warmth. He stomps toward the tower, and by the time we reach the penthouse, my teeth are chattering.

The instant the door shuts, his anger seems to bleed from his bones, replaced by a low, anguished grunt. His knees buckle as my name dies in his throat. Even as he breaks down, he’s still protecting me, his body cushioning my fall as we collapse into a tangled mess of heightened emotions and quaking limbs.

“Losing you would kill me.” He grips my cheeks, rich brown eyes smoldering through his tears. “If you want to go over that cliff, you’ll have to take me with you.”

“Don’t say that.” Cold-soaked fear shakes me to my core. “I didn’t mean what I said earlier.”

“Maybe not, but you meant to jump.” Several seconds pass, long pain-filled beats that snowball into a momentous amount of heartache. “You love him so much that you’d die to end the pain of losing him. I feel the same way. There is no me without you, Novalee.”

“But he’s gone,” I sob, my spirit cracking right along with my voice. I want to rescind the words and lock them in a place where they can’t be heard, because they reek of acceptance.

God...no. Please, I’m not ready.

“But I’m here.” Liam gives a hard swallow. “I need you, so if you can’t keep going for you, then do it for me.” He shakes his head, sending snowflakes tumbling from his coppery hair. “Because I can’t lose you.”

“It just hurts too much. I can’t...I can’t hold on. I’m falling apart.”

“Then let me hold on to you.” He slides a hand into my hair, tucking the damp strands behind my ear, and I draw a sharp breath. Suddenly, I’m hyper aware of how close we are.

My chest pressed to his.

Our lips inches apart.

And in that instant...

I’m no longer cold.

Not as long as he’s warm and solid, his frame shielding me from the chilly floor, the rapid thumps of his heart binding me to the moment. Awareness hangs between us, as dangerous as a live wire, dormant but never forgotten.

“Liam...” His name comes out in a hoarse whisper, a prelude to the inevitable collision of our mouths.

He meets me halfway, and every stroke of his tongue demands my surrender. I match him, lick for lick, desperation unraveling me as my nails bite into his shoulders.

A groan rumbles through him. “What are we doing, Novalee? I just pulled you back from a fucking cliff.”

“I don’t care.” I yank his lips to mine again.

“Well, I do.” And yet the nip of his teeth down my throat says otherwise. He blazes a wet path, each rough kiss detonating something deep inside me.

Frantic, I reach for the waistband of his pajama pants and expose his cock. Curling my fingers around the growing length, I move my fist up and down his velvety flesh in steady, firm strokes.

“Damn,” he says, teeth clenched, eyelids drifting shut to hide his weak grip on control.

But a man as passionate and possessive as the chancellor can only take so much.

With a swift motion, Liam rolls me onto my back, and the blanket slips away to leave me bare. His intense gaze searches my expression, drinking in every nuance—the tremble in my lips, the flush in my cheeks, the plea in my stare.

The world comes to a standstill, the air between us thickening with unspoken words.

Undeniable need.

Our eyes stay locked as he dips two fingers inside me, and a flood of energy bursts from my core. My mouth parts, drawing his focus as I release a soundless gasp.

I can't remember the last time he touched me like this. On his private island, after he kidnapped me for my own good? Some other forgotten, stolen moment since then? The preceding weeks stream through my conscious mind, but it's all too much.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

Too much pain.

Too much betrayal.

Too. Much.

I'm tired of thinking. I only want to feel.

Only want to lose myself in the sweet ache of his touch, the featherlight drift of my thoughts, the quiet way his soul reaches for mine.

As I arch into his hand, chasing the friction and dizzying highs, he bows his forehead to mine. Our breaths tangle, my exhales becoming his inhales, while his fingers work their way deeper, venturing as far as my virginity will allow. My hips move in rhythm with each thrust, greedy for the promise of release.

“More,” I plead. “Make me forget.”

His face darkens. “Does this make you want to live?” Liam’s harsh question drips with renewed anger. “My fingers inside you? Does it make it all better?”

“It makes it bearable.”

His gaze falters, and just like that, the bitterness drains from him. I can almost hear his internal struggle, feel the weight of what happens next pressing on his shoulders. He withdraws his fingers and lowers his head to my chest, warmth spilling across my skin, his muscles knotted with restraint, silence louder than words.

Because he wants this as much as I need it.

“Please, Liam.”

“If we’re going to do this,” he says, lifting me into his arms, “it won’t be on the floor.” Then he takes off, heading for his quarters and the place of no return.

6

Liam carries me into his bedroom, and though my legs instinctively wrap around his waist, everything about this feels wrong and forbidden. I shouldn’t want this, and yet there’s no denying the unending truth.

We fit.

We’ve always fit, like pieces from different puzzles, their edges whittled down by time and pain until they have no choice but to interlock.

Setting me on the edge of his platform bed, Liam shoves his flannel pants down toned, muscular thighs, and a chiseled masterpiece stands before me, his skin glowing in the soft light from the lamp on the nightstand.

My attention veers to his erection, and my jaw unhinges. I expect him to take my mouth first, because it’s his thing, a tradition steeped in our strange dynamic.

“Lie back,” he says instead, voice thick with desire.

I blink, caught off guard. “But I thought you’d want?—”

He presses a finger to my lips. “What I want is for you to do as I say.” His command sends a shiver through me, and I surrender without protest, sinking into the mattress.

“Now what?” I whisper, my knees trembling between us.

“Spread your legs.” He nods toward me, and I part my thighs, baring the apex of my glistening sex.

His pupils darken. “You’re drenched.”

“It’s your doing,” I breathe, swallowing the guilt.

“I know. But seeing you like this...” He grips my ass, dragging me to the edge of the bed, and then sinks to his knees. “It makes me want to drown in you.”

His exhales tease my center, making me throb, and I count the staccato beats as I wait for the molten brush of his mouth. I’m so wound up, all trembling limbs and fluttering pulses, that I bite my lip to keep from begging.

Anticipation coils tighter, every second a razor’s edge.

Liam drapes my legs over his shoulders before dragging his tongue over my clit, circling with slow, torturous pressure.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

A cry rips free, pulled from the depths of my being.

“God, the taste of you,” he groans before delving into my slick entrance. “I could eat you out for the rest of my life.”

The rest of my life...

A life that was supposed to be spent with Sebastian. I go still, fighting to keep the pain at bay, determined to moor it for the night.

Just one night.

But the ache in my chest won't be ignored. It builds in tandem with the pace of Liam's tongue, splitting me in two until I want to gasp and cry, scream and moan.

I clutch his head, desperate for him to stop.

Desperate for him to never stop.

His mouth stalls against me for a moment, then he lifts his head, dark eyes unreadable in the low light. “You're holding back,” he says, calling out my internal struggle as he pushes a finger inside me. “I want every sigh and whimper, Novalee. Every single one.”

“Liam...” His name breaks on a lust-filled whine.

“That's it, my sweet girl. Your pussy's leaking all over me.” He adds another digit

and pumps in and out, stroking that magical spot that sends my mind reeling. With each slippery plunge, I stretch a little more.

“Oh God,” I moan, still not ready to give in. My cries launch from deep in my throat, but still, I hang on, trapped in self-denial.

“Give it to me.” His growling demand vibrates against my clit. “Come all over my face.”

Whatever he does next is pure sorcery, because I can’t think or form words. Of their own accord, my hands fall to the bed, and I fist his royal blue comforter.

Air locks in my lungs.

Fire bursts to life on my skin.

And the earth?

I’m positive it’s spinning out of control. No, I’m the one spinning high above the clouds, suspended in the unrelenting pleasure of his mouth and fingers. I haven’t begun to come down when he tangles a fist in my hair.

“I’d give anything to be inside of you right now.”

“You said you’d make me bleed.” I meet the fierce need in his eyes. “Why wait until my birthday?”

“That isn’t the plan anymore.”

“It’s not?”

“No.” A triumphant smile tugs at his lips. “You’re going to bleed for me on our wedding night.”

“What are you talking about?—?”

Flipping me over, he silences me, mid-word. “On your knees. Tuck them under you.”

Even as I’m panting in shock, my body does his bidding. I rest my shoulders on the mattress, ass in the air, and wonder what he’ll do next. A drawer squeaks open, and I twist my head to watch him in the dim light.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking you the only way I’m allowed.” He uncaps a bottle I’m all too familiar with and pours some of the slick fluid into his palm.

“But—”

“No buts, Novalee.” He applies the lube before crawling onto the bed behind me. “Marrying you is back on the table, and I’m not blowing it this time.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

I don't have time to process the revelation. He's already dragging the head of his lubed cock through my wetness, sparking me to life all over again. His slick digits probe my back hole, an uncomfortable yet arousing way of preparing me for him. One finger, then two, easing in and out with a measured rhythm, coaxing me open until I'm groaning from the stretch.

I try to relax and match his rhythm, but tension flares as I brace for more. Then, with a low grunt, he pushes into my ass, and despite the preparation, it's an abrupt intrusion that's far more painful than I remember.

"It's too much!"

"Relax, my sweet girl. Breathe through it. Let your body take me in." Liam's voice has never been so gravelly or strained. Holding my wrists to the mattress, he drives himself deeper.

"Fuck, that's good." His voice roughens as he shudders through the sensation. "Do you feel that? You're taking me so well."

I bite my lip to stifle a whimper and try not to bear down, but the burn is relentless. "It hurts."

"I know it does, but you have to get through the pain to find the pleasure. So feel the pain, hate it with all your soul, but know it's necessary." His gruff words brush my nape. "Give in and accept it."

As he continues to open me up, his thrusts quick and urgent, I can't help but

understand the double meaning of his words.

“I can’t accept it.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I can’t!”

“I won’t let this grief kill you. Sebastian wouldn’t want that.”

Sebastian.

His name roars through my ears, awakening the agony all over again. Unbidden, a sob bursts free. But I don’t want to cry anymore. I don’t want to hurt anymore.

Liam’s determined to make me do both. “Cry until you can’t cry another second.” With every deliberate thrust of his cock, he drags out another sob. “Remember him and accept the pain. Embrace it until it no longer hurts.”

Memories of Sebastian flood my mind—his teasing blue eyes, the way he painted my portrait like I was special, how he felt inside me, claiming what he could. His touch and his love had filled me so completely.

Just like Liam’s doing now.

I wail harder than I ever have, my ass taking the brunt of his cock. Acceptance tears me open, bulldozing through my walls as if they were never there at all.

“He’s gone.”

Liam slows his pace, his thick shaft gliding between my cheeks as he brushes a hand

over my hair. His thumb strokes my damp cheekbone, wiping away liquid grief.

“He’s really gone,” I weep.

“That’s it. Let it go.” His words follow the cadence of his thrusts, edged with a tenderness that sends a familiar shiver down my back. It’s unsettling, the way every hard inch of him moves inside me, his groin rocking against my backside, steady like the sea.

“He’s not coming back.”

“No, he’s not.” His warm lips hover at my ear. “But you’re going to be okay, because you’re the most astounding woman I’ve known, strong and capable of great things, and this will not break you.”

His fervent vow heats my stomach, igniting a spark in my core, dulling the burn.

“Liam...you feel...”

“Tell me.”

“You feel good.”

“You feel perfect,” he rasps, his hips building rhythm again. “Perfect and mine.”

I can’t be his.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“No.” The objection echoes in my thoughts, and I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“Yes,” he hisses, on the threshold of climax. “You can. You are.”

I can argue with him until I’m out of breath, but my body doesn’t lie. Whether I like it or not, Liam Castle will always have a hold on me.

As my bitter tears soak through the bedding, something raw shudders down my spine, fraying me with dangerous abandon.

“Make me come,” I choke out, the words heavy with regret and shame. Both press into me like Liam, each thrust a fierce mark of his ownership.

“You feel so damn amazing. Hell, you drive me out of my mind. I have no control.” His muscles tense, and with a final thrust, he locks into place. A guttural sound rips from his chest as he spills into me, deep and unrelenting—as if claiming every inch of what’s finally his.

Still riding the tail of his orgasm, Liam rolls to his back and takes me with him. He parts my legs, slips two fingers inside, and lets his thumb become a merciless tease on my clit.

“I need more,” I say, bowing my spine, bringing his touch deeper.

“Greedy girl.” He tugs on my hair, then slides his hand to the back of my neck. My head tilts under his control as he takes my mouth in a desperate kiss, his tongue thrashing against mine. I can’t help but rock into him, chasing every ounce of friction

he'll give me.

Abruptly, he breaks our lip lock. "You'd better come before I want round two." Even as he issues the warning, his spent cock twitches against my ass cheeks, threatening to grow once more.

"Please, I need..." Biting back a whimper, I move to the pace of his hand, my hips straining for release. His skilled digits guide me to the peak, where I cling to the edge for what seems like an eternity before I finally...

Let go.

It's an endless fall, an inevitable surrender, an agonizing renewal. My second climax of the night is more earth-shattering than the first, the waves trapping me in the throes, making speaking impossible.

Liam is not so silent.

"I'll love you until I die, and then some." His mouth presses against my cheek as he wraps his arms around me, shifting us onto our sides.

I'm still humming with aftershocks, but as the fire in my blood cools, I struggle to keep my eyes open. The landscape of my mind is blissfully empty, my limbs sated and heavy with exhaustion.

"I've got you," he whispers. "Sleep, my sweet girl."

7

Harsh, unrelenting light penetrates my lids, sending jabs to my temples. Even before I open my eyes, I sense the absence of melancholy grey beyond the windows. As sleep

fades, the cloudless sky and snow-covered trees come into focus, and I blink against the glare, shifting under a royal blue comforter.

This isn't my suite in the House of Aries.

The thought sinks in as my hand drifts to the other side of the bed. The sheets are cool to the touch, the space beside me empty. I sit up, clutching the blanket to my chest, and scan the room for Liam.

He's slouched in a chair in the corner, head buried in his hands, elbows braced on his knees. Tension simmers in his motionless shoulders. For several seconds, I watch, silent as the morning, while fragments of last night take shape.

I almost jumped.

The memory slams into me like a wave, stealing my breath. Sleep dulled its edges, but now awareness washes over me.

What they say about the cold light of day?

It's true, and brutally cruel in its honesty. A small part of me wishes I'd gone over that cliff after all.

"Liam?"

He doesn't move right away, and the silence curdles something sick in me.

"Are you okay?" I say, though it's an absurd thing to ask after what I put him through.

With a sigh, he lifts his head, and our eyes meet. His are bloodshot, rimmed with

heartache and exhaustion. “I have no idea what I am.” A frown pulls at his brows.
“How much do you remember?”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“More than enough.” Nausea rolls through me as I fold my arms over my midsection. The memories are blurred, softened by alcohol and sharpened by grief, but I remember the cliff. The bite of the wind, the sting of snow, the second I chose to let go. The moment he yanked me back.

And then later, when he made me unravel in a different way entirely.

Another kind of shame takes hold, heavier than the first, because what happened in this bed wasn’t just blind hunger—it was a betrayal to the man who will always have my heart, even though he’s...

Gone.

Liam and I stare at each other, the same unsettling memories hanging between us.

Fear. Anger. Desperation. Then finally...

Acceptance.

With every kiss, caress, and thrust, he’d launched me to the highest summit of grief.

The final stage.

And then, somewhere in the middle of it all, he’d dropped a revelation on me.

At the time, I let it slip by, too consumed with need to register his words. But now, with sobriety clearing my mind, they echo with clarity.

Marrying you is back on the table.

“So you’re back in the auction?” I force the question out before I lose my nerve.

“Yes.” Liam leans back in his chair, chin resting in one hand, revealing nothing.

“How?”

“As a proxy for the House of Sagittarius and...” Glancing away, he lets the sentence hang.

A jagged pang rips through my chest. “What does Landon think?”

Liam’s gaze snaps back to me. “What do you think?”

Even if I wanted to, I can’t respond. Nausea rises, unstoppable, and I shove the comforter aside to sprint to the bathroom. My bare feet slap against the cold marble floor before I fall to my knees and grip the toilet. The retching comes hard and fast, each heave leaving my stomach raw.

I feel him before I see him, his presence grounding me even as my body purges last night’s mistakes.

“That’s it,” he says, gathering the short strands of my hair, rubbing soothing circles on my back. “Get it all out.”

Minutes pass as the waves subside, leaving me drained and trembling. Purged of pride, composure, and strength, I sag into his waiting arms. I should move, put some distance between us, especially after last night, but I don’t have the strength.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he says, breaking the quiet.

“Do what?”

“Let you go for the next three months. It was hard enough doing it the first time.” His sigh drifts across my hair. “Now it’s unbearable.”

Guilt twists in my gut. “Can you give me a few minutes?” I lean forward and slip from his grasp, needing some space to find my composure.

“Take your time.” Liam rises to his feet. “I’ll order some breakfast. Something light.”

The door clicks shut behind him, and I push myself upright and face the pale, hollow-eyed girl in the mirror. Heartache and too many sleepless nights shadow her face, cheeks gaunt from lack of proper nutrition. The acrid scent of vomit hovers in the air, mixing with the stale trace of alcohol.

It’s a reminder of how far I’ve fallen.

I step into the shower and let the scalding water pound against my skin, trying to wash away more than just the remnants of last night.

It's not enough.

No matter how hard I scrub, or how much steam fills my lungs, I can't ignore this new reality.

Liam is back in the auction.

Water streams between my fingers as I drag a hand down my face. The nausea may have passed, but the finality of his reinstatement aches in my throat. Of course, I'd choose him over the others, but to admit that, even to myself, feels like another betrayal.

I focus on the rhythm of my breaths, and by the time I shut off the water, my skin is flushed. I wrap myself in a robe and return to the bedroom, where the scent of fresh-baked bread and eggs reach my nose.

Liam stands next to the small table by the balcony doors, pouring tea into a delicate cup. "I thought this might help." He gestures at the food.

"Thank you." I sit across from him and choose a croissant from the tray.

He's downright haggard as he watches me eat with the same stoicism that puts Mr. Bordeaux's disposition to shame.

"Please say something," I plead after I can't take the roar of his silence anymore.

"What do you want me to say?"

“I don’t know. Something...anything. Just stop looking at me like that.”

“How am I looking at you?”

“I don’t know, but it’s unsettling.”

“Unsettling?” His voice is tight, pulled like a rope on the verge of snapping. “You almost threw yourself off a cliff last night. How am I supposed to look at you?”

As my face burns, I set the half-eaten croissant back on the plate. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

Any of it. Wishing him dead, trying to end my life, or letting him inside my body.

“Whether you meant to or not, it doesn’t change the fact that you almost did.” His words slice through me like a scalpel. “And I’m supposed to hand you over to Oliver like I’m not terrified you’ll try again?” Clearing his throat, he drags a hand through his coppery hair. “Tell me, Novalee, after almost losing you to that cliff, how am I supposed to let you out of my sight?”

“I’m sorry, I...” The apology falters on my tongue.

“Sorry doesn’t cover it.” He shakes his head, voice cracking. “What if I’d shown up thirty seconds later?”

“It won’t happen again.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Yes.” Except I have no idea how to make him believe it when I don’t even trust myself. “I won’t leave you like that.”

The gravity of his stare softens, though disquiet remains. I pick at what's left of my croissant, take a couple bites of eggs, sip the tea he poured for me, but my appetite is as absent now as it was yesterday. I push my plate aside, barely touched.

"You need to eat more," Liam insists.

"I'm not hungry."

"I don't care." His attention sweeps over me, lingering on the sharp angles of my collarbone. "You've lost too much weight."

My weight means nothing to me, and the croissant tastes like nothing as I tear off another piece and chew. I swallow, then force down a bite of eggs, if only to smooth the worry between his brows.

But he's still frowning. "I'm serious. You need to take better care of yourself."

Biting back a snort, I set my cup down, fingers tightening around the porcelain. The tea does little to settle my nerves—not with just a few hours left before my well-being is no longer Liam's concern.

"Is he kind?" The question tumbles out before I can stop it.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

Liam stiffens. “Oliver?”

“Who else?”

“Well, he’s not cruel.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Mr. Whitney is...” Liam exhales, dragging a hand across his jaw, as if choosing his words with careful consideration. “He’s very controlled.”

“Like Mr. Bordeaux?”

“In a way, yes, but not as harsh.”

“Will he...?” I swallow hard, forcing myself not to squirm. “Is he expecting to touch me?”

Liam taps his fingers against the table, gaze fixed on the window, his profile concealing whatever he’s thinking.

What doesn’t he want me to see?

“Liam,” I press, my tone insistent, “what does Oliver want from me?”

“I don’t know.”

Unease curls in my gut. “You don’t know?”

“Oliver has...specific tastes. Needs he takes care of elsewhere.” A beat passes. “But that doesn’t mean you’re safe.”

The tea turns bitter on my tongue. I should be used to this by now.

Walking blind into the hands of another man.

Adapting to whatever waits for me in his domain.

But I’m not, and I don’t think I ever will be.

8

Liam’s been in the library for what feels like forever. I pace the corridor, the soles of my flats scuffing the polished marble.

Forward. Pivot. Back again.

That closed door taunts me. I don’t know how much time has passed. Ten minutes? Twenty? Regardless, every second drags, stretching my nerves to the breaking point. My thoughts spiral through the worst possibilities...

Oliver Whitney’s expectations.

The details Liam might be sharing.

And the looming threat of the dungeon.

The toast and eggs I forced down this morning want to make a reappearance. I hug

my rebellious stomach and turn on my heel once more, and that's when the door creaks open.

Liam steps out, followed by Oliver, who's even taller than I remember, easily clearing six feet. The precision of his tailored suit clashes with the unruly fall of midnight hair grazing his ears. His brown eyes, lighter than Liam's by several shades, sweep over me.

"I'll give you a minute to say your goodbyes." Oliver strides toward the elevator and stops a few feet away, allowing us space to breathe.

As Liam closes the distance between us, a strained silence lingers. He clears his throat, as if he's trying to dislodge something heavier than words. "I don't know what to say." His hands slide into the pockets of his light grey trousers, shoulders stiff. "I'm not ready for this."

My gaze lowers to his rustic brown shoes. "Did you tell him about last night? I mean the cliff."

Page 23

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“He’s aware. We also came to an understanding.”

“What kind of understanding?”

“We agreed that you need to see Dr. Price.”

“Who?”

“Dr. Sullivan Price, from the House of Pisces. He’s a psychiatrist.”

“I don’t need a shrink.”

“Oliver disagrees. So do I.”

“You can disagree all you want.” I fold my arms, the picture of petulance. “You might be able to drag me there, but you can’t make me talk.”

“Then you’ll be very bored.” He lifts his chin. “Because you’re not leaving Sully’s office until you cooperate.”

“You can’t do this!”

“You’re right. I can’t. But Oliver can.” Liam’s stare is unwavering. “He’s also assigning someone to watch you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I snap.

“Your stunt on the cliff says otherwise.”

“I said I wouldn’t do it again.”

“I know what you said.” He scans my face, studying me as if I’m a puzzle he can’t quite solve. “And I believe you meant it, but I have to be sure. Until I know you’re not a danger to yourself, the babysitter, as you called her, stays.”

The fates must be laughing, because a woman rounds the corner from the tower’s grand foyer, the tap of her heels sharp against the floor. Dressed in navy slacks and a fitted cream blouse, she carries herself with a no-nonsense air that sets my teeth on edge.

Oliver rejoins us, his gaze settling on the woman I assume is my babysitter. “This is Astrid,” he announces. “She’ll be staying with you.”

The woman gives a single nod, her face an unapproachable mask. She’s tall and poised, the embodiment of composure, with her dark hair swept into a sleek bun.

I press my lips together and fight the impulse to argue. Objecting outright won’t get me anywhere, not with Liam’s mind made up, so I shift to Oliver instead.

“I understand the concern, but is this really necessary? I’m sure Astrid has better things to do.”

“Better things than her job? She’s a professional, hired to keep you safe.” Oliver adjusts his cuff. “And I agree with the chancellor. We can’t risk you, my queen.” His words leave no room for debate, so I bite back any further protest.

If I’ve learned anything from these men, it’s that resistance is pointless.

Liam meets my gaze, and though he says nothing, emotion swells behind the quiet. The message is clear.

Don't forget your promise to me.

Only then does he look away, his voice rough as he turns to Oliver. "Take care of her. I'm counting on you."

"Of course."

Liam hesitates, jaw set, his earth-toned eyes revealing too much. Without another word, he turns away, and I can't bring myself to watch him go.

A beat of disquiet hangs, but Oliver doesn't extend the moment. "Follow me." He moves forward like a man used to being obeyed.

I fall in step beside him, Astrid trailing behind, and no one speaks during the short elevator ride to the fourth floor. When we enter the House of Capricorn, I'm not prepared for what awaits.

The space is the opposite of the penthouse's contemporary design, and while its layout mirrors the other floors of Zodiac Estate, Oliver's taste for antique decor sets it apart. High end pieces of mahogany furniture define the sitting room, each sofa, chair, and accent table carved with meticulous detail. A grandfather clock marks time in quiet, deliberate beats, and low lighting glints off crystal decanters on a sleek bar cabinet.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

But the true centerpiece of the room isn't the furniture or the clock.

It's the walls.

They're nothing short of scandalous, adorned with life-sized paintings of the same faceless woman in intricate forms of bondage.

The provocative imagery isn't what stops me cold. It's the devastation that follows, stealing my breath, because I'd recognize that beautiful, exotic style anywhere.

"Sebastian painted these." It's not a question. His signature, SAS, haunts the bottom right corner of each canvas, etched as permanently as the scars he left on my soul.

"Yes," Oliver answers, matter-of-fact, as if he doesn't notice how the sight of those paintings tears me apart. "As artists go, he was the best."

I stumble after him, exhaling in a rush, and force myself to keep pace as he moves through the fourth floor with brisk efficiency.

"Kitchen. Home office. Gym." He gestures at each area as we pass, then pauses at a great room. "I call this the solarium."

Beyond the towering wall of glass, the sea sprawls in endless motion. I've watched those waves a thousand times, crashing against the cliffs, always in flux. Last night, I almost saw them up close and personal.

But there's no time to dwell on my mistakes.

Oliver is already moving again, and just as I catch up, he falters in front of a set of double doors. “This is the library. You’re welcome to use it whenever you like.”

With a touch of awe, I take in the towering rows of books. The collection spans classics and thrillers...and, surprisingly, romance novels. My fingers itch to reach for one and disappear into someone else’s story for a while.

He continues past the library, stopping next at a heavy door. Dark engravings spiral across its surface, elaborate patterns twisting into something almost hypnotic—until my gaze snags on the keypad embedded in the frame.

“This room is off-limits for now.” He swings his gaze from me to the door. “Until I decide otherwise.”

I tilt my head, more curious than wary. “What’s in there?”

His lips curve, amusement sparking in his chestnut eyes. “Something you’re not ready for.”

He’s got me there, because I’m not ready for any of this. I never am.

We continue deeper until the hall opens into a large suite. “This is where you’ll stay for the month. I’ll have an extra bed brought in for Astrid.”

Stepping past him, I take in my surroundings. Rich cherrywood furnishings, a massive bed dressed in a charcoal-gray duvet, and a sitting area near the fireplace, its warmth painting the walls in burnt amber. An arched mullioned window seat promises the perfect place to disappear into a book.

Or zone out into nothingness.

The babysitter enters behind me, while Oliver stalls on the threshold, assessing each detail to ensure it meets his exacting standards.

“I had some of your things brought in.” He motions to the writing desk. “Sketching supplies, a few of your books. The wardrobe has some of your clothes as well.”

I glance at the familiar items, and my stomach tightens at the unexpected consideration.

Kindness from these men always comes with strings.

Before I can decide whether to reach for my sketchbook or pretend it doesn't exist, he's speaking again.

“I'll come for you in two hours. Stay here until then.”

“What happens in two hours?”

“Your first session with Dr. Price.”

I fold my arms, already tired of this routine. “That will make me late for the monthly dinner.”

Crossing his arms to match my stance, he leans against the doorjamb, but the smirk I expect doesn't come. Instead, his jaw tightens. “How do you figure? It's a ninety-minute session.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Liam said I can’t leave until I talk.”

“Then I suggest you talk, or you’ll be there a while.”

“Hence,” I say through gritted teeth, “why I said I’ll be late tonight.”

“Good thing dinner’s been cancelled, then.”

I blink. “Cancelled? Why?” Not that I want to attend another gathering, but I prefer it to having a stranger prod me into spilling my guts.

“We held dinner last night...though you had other priorities.” His clipped words simmer with reproach.

I gape at him, thrown by the severity of his tone. Before I can make sense of it, he straightens in the doorway.

“Two hours,” he reminds me, holding up two fingers. “In the meantime, I’ll have lunch sent up.” His smooth voice drops. “Don’t make me come looking for you.”

“Where would I go?”

His gaze veers toward the window and the cliffs beyond, and a dark cloud hovers over his expression. “Nowhere. Be here when I return.”

He leaves the door open, and my pulse stutters as I watch his retreating back. I don’t know what rattles me more—the bite in his tone or the eerie sense that, somehow,

what happened on the cliffs is personal to him.

And I'm left wondering whose pain I brushed against without meaning to.

9

The babysitter is definitely not here to be my friend. Not that I want one right now, but that doesn't mean I enjoy someone watching my every move. Her presence is inescapable as I pick at my lunch alone, because sharing a meal with me isn't part of the job.

Her rule. Not mine.

When does she even eat? In the dead of night? While I'm in the tub? Except...she followed me into the bathroom once already, much to my dismay.

I don't have time to dwell on her schedule, though. Oliver returns as I'm setting down my fork, signaling it's time to send me off to the shrink.

The ride to the main floor is quick, punctuated by Astrid's nonverbal form of communication. I'm on autopilot as I navigate the halls, the babysitter keeping pace behind me.

But as we pass a familiar door I haven't dared approach in weeks, my steps almost falter.

Sebastian's studio.

A jagged pang rips through my chest. I don't stop, but that closed door hovers in my periphery, dragging me back to a time I'd give anything to go back to.

The day he had me sprawled in a chair, shy and innocent, yet somehow wearing my nudity like power beneath the heat of his ocean eyes. I'd savored the way he brought me to life on his canvas. God, how he painted me.

Not like a girl, but a woman.

A woman with undeniable sensuality.

A woman he wanted.

Sebastian saw me, his brushstrokes a possessive caress, discovering every curve through his art. Those hours weren't forbidden or stolen, but they were ours.

Now the shadows of what could have been haunt me down the hall. My pulse wavers, throttled by regret, and I don't fight the fog waiting to swallow me whole.

It's the only way to survive.

I reach Dr. Price's office and find it oddly empty. Untethered without instruction, I hesitate before sinking onto a plush velvet settee as Astrid melts into the background. Still, the weight of her surveillance remains, blending with thought, time, and the cushion beneath my thighs. Unsure of what else to do, I press a thumb into my damp palm and give myself over to a mindless rhythm that erases the world.

"Miss Van Buren?"

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

A deep baritone cuts through the haze, snapping me back to awareness, and I register a man sitting across from me, hands folded in his lap. His eyes are an unusual shade of grey, almost colorless in the soft light of the room. Vaguely, I remember seeing him last night at dinner.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“You were looking right at me.”

I muster a lift of my shoulder.

“It’s unfortunate we’re having our first proper meeting under these circumstances.” He rests an elbow on the armrest, his square jaw framed by a well-manicured hand. The crisp navy of his suit is free of imperfections, each stitch a tailored work of art. “I’m Dr. Price.”

Another shrug.

“I’m here to help you, Novalee.”

“Are we dropping the formalities already?”

His brows pull together. “What do you mean?”

“Sixty seconds ago, you addressed me by my surname.”

“Is it important that I use your surname?”

“No, just an observation.”

Several beats pass.

I stare at him. He stares back.

“Are we going to sit in silence to pass the time?” he asks, leaning forward. “Or will you indulge me in a conversation?”

My lips press together.

“I don’t mind. Silence can be as telling as words.” His lips curve into something resembling a smile. “I’ve cleared my schedule for the night.”

The insinuation threatens to yank me into surrender. Oliver, Liam, the doctor—they hold all the power. If I don’t cooperate, I’ll be stuck here indefinitely. Still, I can’t bring myself to take the bait.

Dr. Price exhales through his nose, an enduring sort of amusement in his gaze. “Or we can play the silent game.” He dusts an imaginary speck from his knee. “You might win, for a while.”

With a sigh, I take in the room, from the cozy fireplace in the corner to the mullion windows facing the grounds. Astrid is gone, so I’m guessing she left upon his arrival.

I turn back to Dr. Price. “Is this session confidential?”

“Outside of the Brotherhood? Of course.”

A humorless laugh bursts free. “Of course.”

“You don’t trust the men in this tower. That much is obvious.”

“Perceptive,” I mutter.

“And yet, I imagine you’re perceptive as well.” Unfazed, he shifts toward the edge of his seat, fingers raking through his thick blond hair, trimmed short at the sides. “Tell me, Novalee, what do you think I’m here to talk about?”

The question sinks into the quiet, an invitation and a trap all at once. I hold my tongue, stubbornness and self-preservation fighting to win.

“I’ll make it easy for you,” he continues, his gratingly smooth voice pushing through the stillness. “Why don’t we start with last night?”

The room shrinks, walls closing in, as images tumble through my thoughts like shuffled film reels.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

Liam, pulling me back from the brink.

Our desperate union in his penthouse, afterward.

His heartbreaking devastation.

I picture him buckling to the floor, dragging me with him, both of us trembling from cold and adrenaline. Regret slithers through me, and a chill skates across my skin. I brush my fingers over the gooseflesh rising on my arms.

“Your resistance is telling.” The doctor’s tone takes on a thoughtful cadence. “If there was nothing to be ashamed of, you’d have no trouble talking about it, would you?”

I snap my attention back to him, teeth clenched. He commands the space with practiced authority, but his words fall with a casual edge that shoots unease through me.

“Guilt often takes the shape of silence,” he says with a wave of his hand. “Or maybe it was something else. A cry for help? Is that why you were on the cliffs?”

I push the memory of last night’s snowy trek aside and focus on the fireplace, where the flames dance in pirouettes.

“I want to help you through this, Novalee, but I can’t do that unless you meet me somewhere in the middle. It doesn’t even have to be halfway, but I need you to give me something.”

“Last night was...”

Blurred from alcohol.

Drenched in grief.

Sharpened by guilt.

“Cold,” I finally answer.

He purses his full lips. “What else?”

“And dark.”

“Are you afraid of the dark?”

“Last night, I wasn’t.”

Numb to the core, I’d found the kind of darkness I’ve never experienced before, with its void inviting me into the fold, promising to swaddle me against pain and tragedy. In that moment, there wasn’t a scary thing about it.

“What prompted you to venture outside?” he asks, as if the answer is simple. As if he’s not dredging up the words I can’t unsay to Liam.

The guilt I can’t outrun.

I want to squirm, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

“When was the last time you felt in control?” he asks, steering the conversation in a new direction, his voice gentler now, laced with persuasion.

“You mean...since I’ve been here?”

Never.

“I mean in your life, your body, your emotions.”

My lips part, but no answer comes.

“I imagine it’s been a while, but that’s what grief does, Novalee. It steals control and makes you powerless.”

“How do I get it back?” Instantly, I want to rewind time and tape my mouth shut.

“By understanding that it’s not about avoidance. Desire, grief, pain...” His fingers drum against the armrest. “Ignoring these emotions won’t make them disappear. They’ll just show up in other ways.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“How so?”

“They can manifest as self-destruction, isolation, even resistance.”

“Resistance to what?” Unable to hide a scowl, I cross my arms. “To you?”

“Resistance to healing.”

“Oh, so you have the cure for that, do you?” I let out a mocking laugh. “That’s a good one.”

“Not a cure. A method.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

He nods, as if he understands. “Will you close your eyes for me?”

“Why?”

“Please, indulge me for a moment.”

Hesitation takes hold, but his patience lasts until my eyes flutter shut.

“Good,” he says. “I want you to think back to last night. You’re standing on the cliff. Tell me what you feel.”

Tilting my head back, I’m torn from the settee and thrust onto the icy ledge.

“Snowflakes. They’re falling on my cheeks. I should be cold, but I’m not anymore.”

“Why aren’t you cold?”

“I’m not sure. The waves bring me comfort. I just feel...”

“Describe it.”

“I feel numb, and a...a sense of peace.”

“Let’s go back. Now you’re walking through the snow. What are you thinking about?”

“Sebastian.” His name escapes, raw on my tongue.

“Keep going,” he urges.

“I feel his ghost watching me.” Grief crushes my heart all over again, and my eyes pop open. “I don’t want to do this.”

Dr. Price studies me, peeling away my defenses, layer by layer. “You’re still standing on that cliff, Novalee. Even in this room.”

A blink sends hot drops down my face. “I don’t want to be.”

“Are you sure? Because you did try to jump, did you not?”

I should be indifferent, not crying in front of this man. But his questions cut deep, carving out every flimsy excuse.

“I don’t know why I did it. I just wanted to stop hurting so much.”

“What if I told you I have a way for you to let go of the pain?”

“I’m all ears, Doctor.” Sarcasm coats my words, but deep down, I want to believe there’s a way.

His focus sharpens, latching on to the fraying threads of my resolve.

“I’d like for you to explore the concept of delayed gratification.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Delayed...what?” Doesn’t he know I’m already an expert, baptized in denial my first month here?

“It’s a controlled response, a way to ease the mind and body into recognizing that pleasure, like pain, isn’t something that controls you. You control it.”

Shameful heat spirals low in my belly. “What do you suggest?”

“Tonight, when you’re in bed, I want you to bring yourself to the edge of orgasm. Picture the cliff. But this time, instead of jumping, you’ll take your power back.”

I swallow, fingers gripping the cushion beneath me. “You’re telling me not to...come?”

“Control is yours, Novalee.” A twitch of a smile pulls at his mouth. “The longer you hold out, the stronger your power grows. Don’t climax tonight, or even tomorrow. Draw it out. You’ll know when it’s time to let go.”

“This method sounds...” I search for the right words. “Strange, coming from a shrink.”

“I specialize in sexuality.” He glances at the clock. “And unfortunately, that’s all the time we have.”

“I thought you cleared your schedule?” I hold his gaze, brows arched in challenge.

“You gave me exactly what I needed. There’s no need to keep you.”

I blink, momentarily thrown.

A game. That's what this is.

An illusion of choice.

The quiet manipulation of my mind.

And I'm already playing—my queen's piece moving across the board before I realize the match has begun.

10

The sun is slipping below the horizon when I return to the House of Capricorn. Golden light slants across the floor, while the richness of seared steak and garlic butter drifts through the air. For the first time in weeks, my mouth actually waters.

I'm hungry.

I follow the scent, Astrid trailing behind, but Sebastian's paintings catch my eye. The session with the shrink left me too raw to face them, so I push past the urge and step into the kitchen. Dirty pots and pans clutter the counter beside the stove.

Did Oliver cook?

That's unexpected. He seems the type to have his meals sent up by the staff. I make my way into the dining room, and there he is, seated at the head of an oblong rustic table. In the center, fluttering candles surround a vase of white carnations.

Oliver glances up, fork halfway to his lips, and smirks. "I figured you'd be famished after all the not talking you did during your session, so I took the liberty." He nods

toward the spot at the other end, where a plate awaits beneath a silver lid.

Sliding into the chair, I eye him with mock skepticism. “I didn’t realize the men in this tower knew how to cook. Should I be impressed or concerned?” I lift the lid to find a flawlessly browned steak, roasted potatoes, and tender carrots bathed in a glaze. “Or was this more of a ‘supervise while you drink’ kind of effort?”

A twitch of amusement pulls at his mouth. “I can work up a sweat when motivated.” His gaze drops to my cleavage, eyes darkening to warm espresso, and something unwanted stirs between my legs. I’m so caught off guard, I don’t notice Astrid’s voice cutting through the charged moment until it’s already breaking the spell.

“I’ll take supper in the queen’s suite,” she says, reminding me we aren’t alone.

Oliver doesn’t acknowledge her, but I catch the flick of his fingers as he dismisses my babysitter. She vanishes from the room, and in her absence, his scrutiny screams at me. I’m halfway through my steak when he breaks the silence.

“How was your session?” he asks, studying me over the rim of his glass.

“It was fine.”

“And short.” He takes a slow sip as I move the food around my plate. “Sully always did have a way of making people talk.”

“Then I guess he chose the right profession.”

“We all have our talents.”

“And what are your talents, Mr. Whitney?”

“Are we no longer on a first name basis?”

I shrug. “I suppose we are.”

“That’s disappointing.”

His response tips me off balance, and I frown. “Disappointing, how?”

“I was hoping to persuade you into calling me Sir.” He’s bold in the way he’s watching me—a meaningful lock of gazes that almost steals my breath.

Almost.

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Use the title and find out.”

Flustered by his smug innuendo, I cross my legs and force a mask of indifference, refusing to let him see how he’s getting under my skin. There’s something unsettling about his confidence, how he winds it around my neck like a trap.

The dynamic feels too familiar, another match in a smorgasbord of games that needs to end before I make the wrong move.

“Who’s the woman in those paintings?” I ask, reaching for the nearest thought.

The shift in conversation surprises us both.

Oliver leans back and spears a potato with his fork. “She’s in the past.”

“Evasive. I’m sure your hired shrink would have plenty to say about that.”

“Did you open up to Sully about Sebastian?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“No,” he says, drawing out the word, “I was talking about other things when you changed the subject.”

“Was she your girlfriend?”

His fork clanks against the table. “You’re not going to drop this, are you?”

“Not likely.”

He presses his lips together, holding back words that threaten to break free. “Her name was Talitha.”

Was.

A lump of sympathy rises in my chest. At best, his mystery woman broke his heart, though I have a feeling it’s much worse than a story of parted ways.

“What happened?” I ask, bracing myself.

“She died.”

His blunt answer lands between us with an echo of agony.

“So I understand what you’re going through.”

“I’m sorry,” I choke out, swallowing the ache in my throat. “I shouldn’t have pried.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“It’s fine.” He shakes his head, waving off the apology. “It was a long time ago.”

Not long enough.

And it never will be.

He doesn’t voice it, but I hear his unspoken truth. His heart bears a permanent hole, like mine. The realization presses against my ribs, haunting the hollow spaces of my own loss. I should say something, offer a feeble platitude, but nothing feels adequate. Grief isn’t so easily erased.

“It’s been a long day.” I pull my hands back from the table. “May I be excused?”

“I haven’t presented my gift yet.” His tone prickles the back of my neck.

Because a gift from the Brotherhood is never just a gift.

I glance at the massive ring on my left hand and think back to that first dinner, that first offering, when Liam staked his claim. In this tower, gifts always come with strings.

Oliver’s easy confidence tells me this one is no different.

“You seem suspicious,” he says. “Don’t you enjoy gifts?”

“I don’t trust them, coming from the Brotherhood.”

“There’s no need to be wary.” He drags a fingertip along the rim of his glass. “This isn’t something you can unwrap.”

“Okay,” I concede begrudgingly. “I’m intrigued.”

“When you’re ready to know what’s behind the locked door,” he murmurs, savoring the slow tease of my curiosity, “just say the word.”

I know exactly which door he’s talking about, which word he wants me to say.

Sir.

“You’re assuming I want to know what’s inside.”

“Trust me. You will.”

“And how can you be so sure?”

The candlelight flickers, glinting in his eyes. “It’s a talent of mine.”

His words hang between us, with no elaboration offered.

Not that I want one.

I push back from the table, limbs sluggish with exhaustion, and try to ignore the certainty in his smirk. He already knows I won’t be able to stop thinking about what’s behind that door.

Why is it that once an unwanted thought is planted, it spreads like a weed, wild and uncontrollable?

By the time I retreat to my suite, sleep is the furthest thing from my mind. I toss and turn in bed as Oliver's cryptic talents take center stage. Astrid's breathing evened out an hour ago, but my thoughts spin through the day, trapped in the Brotherhood's collective hamster wheel.

Oliver and his mysterious door.

Dr. Sullivan Price and his method.

Liam and the aftermath of last night, when he made me come...twice.

The shrink is right about one thing—it all comes down to control. I lost it with Ford, and then on that cliff, and afterward...

In Liam's bed.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

I gave him something I've only ever given one man. Regret floods my veins, but a small part of me wouldn't take it back, even if I could. That act of intimacy sparked life into me again.

He purged the denial from my bones and dragged me into acceptance. It was cathartic to the core, but it was still the essence of losing control.

Dr. Price's mandate lurks in the quiet shadows of my suite, and I press my thighs together, an unconscious reaction, as a thread of need tugs at me.

An itch I don't know how to scratch. Not on my own.

The men in this tower have always had a hand in my orgasm, whether by permission, participation, or design.

But the doctor's challenge won't leave me alone. Tentatively, I reach underneath my nightgown and slide a hand into my panties. Closing my eyes, I test the waters with slow, featherlight strokes over my clit. Sensation whispers through me before vanishing like smoke. Frustration leaves me restless and squirming.

This is ridiculous.

Last night, Liam had no trouble lighting me up.

Unbidden, the memory unfurls. His breath, hot and damp against my inner thighs. His tongue, lazy and thorough as he licked me to madness. The way he groaned, like he was the one unraveling.

I ease a finger into my pussy, and a sharp inhale shudders through my chest. My exploration is nothing compared to the way he filled me, his expert digits plunging deep, but it's enough to tantalize. Liam's words slip through the haze, coaxing me further.

Give it to me.

I arch into the pleasure, hips rolling, pressure building...

Suddenly, Oliver intrudes into my headspace, his commanding presence drifting through my mind. I'm so startled by the direction of my thoughts that a soft gasp escapes before I can swallow it down. My eyes snap wide, air tangling in my throat.

My bedroom door gapes open, framing a silhouette on the threshold. Broad shoulders, straight spine, hands tucked into his pockets.

Oliver.

Wordless.

Motionless.

Haunting the edge of my desire.

I hold his stare for a beat too long, and my heart hammers in the hush of the room. Then, with a slow exhale, I roll over and give him my back, squeezing my eyes shut as heat pulsates at my core.

Minutes pass.

Astrid's rhythmic snores continue.

The stillness hums in my ears.

But when I dare another glance, the doorway is empty.

11

Silverware scrapes plates. Fabric shifts against rustic chairs. Glances meet, then break, too many times to count. It's another day, another meal, and I'm caught in a maddening loop that never ends.

I'd hoped to sleep off the residue of finding Oliver in my doorway last night, but it still clings to me at the breakfast table.

"That color suits you."

His remark comes out of nowhere, and I nearly choke on my yogurt.

"What?"

"Your dress." He tips his coffee mug toward me before taking a careful sip. "It fits you well."

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“You sound surprised.”

“Not at all. You’re a designer, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but...” I glance down at the long knit piece that matches my brown eyes. “I didn’t design this.”

“Regardless, it hugs you in all the right places.” He nods at my fitted bodice and the hint of cleavage there. “You obviously have an eye for style. You should wear your own work.”

“I’ve worn some of my designs at formal events.”

“What about branching out?” He sets the mug down, his gaze steady as he weighs more than just the question. “Have you considered a lingerie line?”

“I haven’t.”

“You should. Something provocative and bold. I can get you buyers.”

The last of my eggs sit forgotten, cooling on the plate. My mind isn’t on food or clothing or new customers. It’s on what happened in my suite last night. Oliver, meanwhile, carries on like nothing happened, idly chatting as if he has nothing to hide—as if he didn’t stand in the shadows and watch me unravel beneath my own hand.

I chew the inside of my cheek, debating whether to confront him, but he’s already

speaking again.

“Aren’t you interested in expanding your brand?” His smirk holds too much heat to be harmless. “I can help with inspiration, if you need it.”

“I’m more interested in why you were standing in my doorway last night.” If my accusation unsettles him, he doesn’t show it.

“Was I?”

“You know you were.” I give him a pointed look. “Unless there’s a ghost in this tower who looks exactly like you.”

“You should ask yourself why you didn’t look away sooner.”

Glaring at him, I cross my arms. “I did look away.”

“Not soon enough.”

“Excuse me?” His words hit a nerve, sending a jolt down my spine.

“You heard me.”

“All I heard was absolute nonsense.”

He shakes his head. “You’re a natural submissive, Novalee. It’s written in your body language. Even your resistance is a performance, because what you really crave is surrender.”

“You don’t know what I crave.”

“Are you sure about that? You’ve been broadcasting it since you stepped into this house.”

I grip the edge of the table, my nails biting into the wood. He’s channeling Dr. Price with that know-it-all tone.

“You should embrace it,” he adds, his gaze drilling into me.

There’s an unnamed agenda buried in his stare, settling low in my belly, uncomfortable but not entirely...unpleasant.

Suddenly, that locked door flashes through my mind.

“Embrace what, exactly?”

Without answering, he smooths his expression into polished stone, his mouth hardening into a stubborn line.

He’s said too much.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

As the realization sinks in, Oliver lifts his napkin and dabs the corner of my mouth, wiping away a smear of yogurt. His fingers graze my skin a fraction too long, and a jolt sparks through my system.

Our eyes meet and hold.

Something charged passes between us.

Then he drops the napkin onto the table and utters six words that tilt my world off its axis.

“We’ve been summoned to the dungeon.”

“When?” I manage, my voice a thin squeak as my heart bottoms out.

“As soon as we’re finished here.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask who issued the summons, but I already know. Mr. Stone made it clear at dinner the other night.

“Will Liam be there?”

“I don’t know.”

Another lie. He knows.

Of course Liam will be there. All of them will, the men who decide my fate behind

closed doors, dangling their power like a noose around my neck. Some will watch in silence, while others will wait for the right moment to tighten the rope.

And Oliver?

I have no idea where he stands.

Acid rises in my throat, threatening to purge what I ate, and I gulp it down, even as I lift my chin.

“What do they want?” Forced bravado colors my tone. I hope he doesn’t notice how my knees are trembling under the table.

“I think you already know what they want, Novalee.”

“This isn’t fair.”

“Fair or not, we have to go.” He stands, chair legs scraping across the hardwood, dragging dread in his wake.

I fold my arms. “You could have given me more warning.”

“I was just informed this morning.” He hesitates a beat. “I wanted you to finish breakfast first. Liam said you haven’t been eating.”

“Well now it’s about to come back up.”

“If you need to puke, you should do it now.” He pulls me upright. “Making them wait would be a mistake.”

The warning is clear.

Resisting is futile, but I do it anyway, rebellious feet rooted to the spot.

His grip tightens. “Are we heading to the dungeon?” He angles his head, one brow lifting. “Or do you need the toilet?”

I want to say neither, but I shake my head and grit out, “I’m fine,” before letting him lead me out of the House of Capricorn.

The air crackles with mounting fear as we descend into the bowels of this hellish tower. At the bottom of the stairs, the iron gate is unlocked, its metal bars gaping like the jaws of a beast, salivating over its next sacrifice.

Oliver urges me forward, each step ushering in dread. The space is stale from aged leather and rusting iron, the echoes of past suffering gnashing their teeth in the shadows.

Memories soak me, vivid and ice-cold, and I’m back in time, my fingers curling around the bars of a cage while Pax chains Sebastian to the ceiling. His brutal whip cracks through the utter quiet, relentless, too many times to count. Then...

A grunt of pain.

Blood dripping down his welted back.

Horrified stares from half the men surrounding him.

I squeeze my eyes shut until the images fade, but reality doesn't shift. I'm still in the dungeon, trapped in a new month, forced into another terrorizing visit to the place where I had no choice but to watch the love of my life hang in those shackles, his spirit breaking in front of me.

Now, it looks like I'm the one who's going to break.

Too many men crowd the space, but all I see is Pax, arms folded over his broad chest as he lounges beside the St. Andrew's cross. That relaxed stance is a lie, because his soulless eyes promise nothing but pain.

Before I can draw a full breath, he moves.

A nightmare stalking closer.

Heavy boots thudding with purpose.

Then a hand clamps around my wrist.

Pax drags me through the fray, straight for the towering X on the wall, with its medieval shackles poised to claim its next victim. The dungeon churns with movement, voices clashing for dominance, and that's when I notice the fracture.

The men are split into two distinct groups.

Allies to the left.

Villains to the right.

Before Pax reaches the wooden planks, Liam steps in front of him, nostrils flaring, hatred boiling under the surface.

“Let her go.” His voice is low, simmering with the kind of fury that wants to combust. Hands curling into fists, he grinds his teeth so hard I half expect them to crack. Vance, Landon, Ford, and Hugo flank him, sensing the ticking bomb that is the chancellor.

“Everyone, calm down.” Liam's father joins the group as two more legacy members crowd in, blocking the space between Oliver and me.

And that's when it happens.

A pair of emerald eyes lock onto mine, familiar in a way that doesn't make sense. My stomach lurches as if I've stepped off a ledge, caught in a weightless free fall before recognition slams me to the ground.

It's him.

Landon's father.

My father.

I look nothing like him, but I can't help searching for a trace of resemblance. The cheekbones are wrong, and so is his mouth, but still...

Something's there.

A pull deep in my marrow.

Familiarity without logic.

He returns my scrutiny, his dark brows dipping, and I know what he's seeing.

My mother.

Because I'm a replica of her. Same flaxen hair and brown eyes, though I used to believe that part of my genes came from Edwin Van Buren, whose lineage was chock full of brown-eyed ancestors. But my mother's secret journal made it clear—Franklin Astor is responsible for my existence.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

The connection shatters when Mr. Stone shoves through the crowd. “What’s the holdup?” He pins me with an indigo glare before turning to Pax. “This girl has been a problem since the day she arrived.”

I’m the lone female here, but I’m the problem? Every instinct in my bones tells me to fight, to hurl my own anger back at him, chin held high.

It’s what he deserves.

Before I’m able to launch a verbal attack, my father’s voice cuts through the standoff. “This should be handled in the council chamber.”

It’s not a suggestion.

The words land like a challenge, and Mr. Stone’s nostrils flare, his glare snapping to the other man. “Are you afraid she won’t survive a little discipline?”

“You don’t get to make this decision on your own.”

Silence.

I wait for Mr. Stone to argue, but he smashes his lips together. Five seconds ago, he was ready to rip into me, laying out every grievance in front of the Brotherhood, but now he’s swallowing his anger?

I’m not the only one who notices.

Landon studies our father too long, expression unreadable except for the slant of one brow, betraying a trace of doubt.

Why did Mr. Stone back down? It's not his style.

"Astor's right," Mr. Castle interrupts. "We need to move this summons to the proper place." He levels Pax with a disapproving look. "I'll let you lead the way, since you're so eager."

The dungeon's keeper strides ahead of the group as Oliver moves in beside me, one hand at the small of my back. He guides me down the narrow passageway, and the others fall in line behind us, their footsteps thudding against the rustic plank flooring.

A massive door looms ahead, carved from wood, its sheer size a testament to the power behind it. Pax swings it open on heavy hinges, and a hush descends on the group.

The windowless chamber is exactly as I remember, circular and somber, designed with judgment in mind. Mahogany-paneled walls enclose the space while a colossal zodiac mural sprawls across the ceiling, its celestial symbols casting an eerie stillness over all who enter.

The last time I was here, Liam lost his auction privileges. Now, I wonder what I stand to lose.

Oliver nudges me forward into the circular seating, and I sink into the space reserved for Capricorn, between him and his father. The legacy members settle next to their sons as Mr. Castle steps to the podium. He rests his hands on the polished wood, taking in the room.

"A vote is in order."

No preamble or drawn-out discussion. Just those five words from Liam's father.

And so it begins.

The House of Aries starts, and the verdict is unsurprisingly in my favor. Next, Mr. Castle gestures at the House of Taurus. One by one, each house heightens my anxiety with its ruling.

When it's Mr. Stone's turn, he doesn't hesitate, delivering his decision in the Brotherhood's customary format. "Yay. She absolutely needs behavior modification."

No surprise there. He's been waiting for this.

More votes come, some echoing his verdict, and others standing against it. By the time the tally reaches the House of Capricorn, the numbers are neck and neck.

The elder Whitney votes against me, but Oliver leans back, and his leg presses against mine under the table. His deliberate nudge grounds me—unseen by the others but impossible for me to ignore.

He lets out a quick exhale, and I almost miss the crack in his facade when he says, "Yay."

Still, I'm frozen, rooted in place by disbelief. Did he really vote to have me punished? I'm too stunned to react, part of me refusing to accept it.

Pax Monroe is a monster.

And Oliver just fed me to him.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

Before I can find my voice, the heat of his thigh anchors me, bringing me back from the edge of terror, and I remember.

It's not over yet.

Everyone's attention goes to the next house, and a sliver of hope stirs in my veins.

A hope soon lost.

The Houses of Aquarius and Pisces split their decisions, deadlocking the count.

"We have a tie," Mr. Castle announces. "As such, Liam's vote will count as double to break it."

Chaos erupts.

Mr. Stone is irate. Landon looks relieved. The Monroes are yelling at the Morgans. Ford and his father are on their feet, flinging insults back and forth.

Mr. Castle slams the gavel down. "Enough!"

"It's not enough," Mr. Stone shouts, his rage blasting through the sudden quiet. "Your biased son can't even bid in the auction under his own name—he has to use my son's legacy as a proxy." He points at the House of Capricorn. "Oliver should have the final say, as the one who holds power over the queen this month."

The air leaves my lungs, apprehension clamping around me like a vise.

Too many seconds pass.

Because Oliver is drawing this out. Making them wait.

Making me wait.

Finally, he straightens, eyes locked on Liam, and says, “I change my mind. Novalee won’t be harmed under my care.”

A noxious fog engulfs the room, thickening before the inevitable detonation. Pandemonium spreads, voices clamoring over one another.

I barely register the noise. The verdict is set, yet the reality of what happened glues me to the spot. I’m too stunned to move.

Then Oliver rises, calm and composed, as if he didn’t just flip the summons on its head. He reaches for me, guiding me to my feet, and my legs quake beneath me as the adrenaline drains away now that the danger has passed.

For now.

Gripping me by the elbow, he leads me toward the exit, where Liam waits.

“Why did you change your vote?” Cautious gratitude hijacks the chancellor’s tone, layered with suspicion.

Oliver settles a possessive hand on my lower back, and a confident smirk tugs at his mouth. “Consider it an advance payment.”

“A payment for what?”

“Permission to travel off the island with her.”

“Travel where?” Liam asks through clenched teeth.

“You know where.”

A lethal shadow darkens Liam’s expression. “Absolutely not.”

“I think you’ll change your mind, like I did today.” Oliver steps around him, pulling me along, but his parting shot says it all. “Otherwise, I won’t be so generous with my vote next time.”

13

I should be grateful. Oliver changed his vote, sparing me from Pax Monroe’s sadism, but all I hear is him saying yes. Maybe it was a test. Maybe it was a performance. Either way, when it counted, he reversed course and stood between me and the dungeon.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

But redemption doesn't stand a chance when betrayal is still shouting, which is why I'm still furious.

He lounges across from me in a leather armchair, apparently unbothered after playing executioner and savior in the same breath. A glass of something expensive rests on the table beside him, untouched.

It's all I can do not to glower, my emotional upheaval threatening to turn the sitting room to ash. The fireplace has nothing on me. If anything, those flames only feed my ire, spreading too much heat across my skin.

Oblivious, he flips through a thick binder of year-end financial projections, wire-rimmed reading glasses perched on his nose. Spreadsheets, budgets, numbers, he said. Something about the accounting coming due for Zodiac Corporation.

Not that I care. I'm filled with the kind of acidic emotion that seeps into everything, even the walls.

A harsh exhale escapes me as I drag my attention to Sebastian's paintings. His style is unmistakable, defined by brooding texture and signature shadowplay. The woman from Oliver's past haunts the room from those portraits, her presence chaperoning our every move.

How can Oliver stand it, the constant reminder of what he lost? Is the visual something he needs? Does the ache dull when he curates it, hanging his grief in frames for all to see?

I'm nowhere near that kind of acceptance.

I'm not ready to let go of my anger either.

Because after this morning's trip to the dungeon, sympathy for Oliver Whitney eludes me. Maybe it's buried under the shock somewhere, hiding in a place I can't reach—not while my wrists still remember the threat of shackles.

He shifts in his seat, turns a page, and even the quiet brush of his fingertips on paper makes me cringe.

An hour ago, he dangled me in front of the Brotherhood, using my body to make a point before turning it into leverage, and now he's going about work like it's any other day? He's too calm for someone who lit such a dangerous match.

And I'm too scorched to keep pretending I'm okay. "Where are you planning to take me?"

"You always do ask the right questions." He sets the binder aside. "I like that about you."

"Don't." My hands curl into fists. "Don't act like this is a game. You were going to hand me over to Pax."

"That's one way of looking at it." He tilts his head, chin in hand. "Or did you believe what I wanted you to believe?"

"That vote wasn't some test! It was real."

"And yet, here you are, untouched."

I count to five, trying to weaken the storm inside me. “I want to know where you’re taking me.”

Rather than answering right away, he unfastens his cuffs and rolls the sleeves to his elbows. Then he lifts his glass, takes a leisurely sip, and says, “We’re going to the States.”

My heart jumps into my throat. “Why?”

“For an initiation.”

I don’t realize I’m clutching the edge of the chair until my knuckles turn white.

“Initiation into what?” I demand.

“A private circle.” His eyes stay on mine, unblinking. “Invitation-only.”

“Private as in...a secret society?”

“Yes, but secrecy isn’t the only thing that binds them. These men have particular tastes, and they’re very interested in meeting you.”

My insides contract, something vital recoiling from the threat he hasn’t yet spelled out. “What do they want with me?”

“Your virginity.”

“No! You can’t do that. It’s a breach of contract.” I’m desperate enough to use the rules as a shield. “The Brotherhood will kick you out of the auction.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“What makes you think I want to marry you?”

That stops me cold. Unwittingly, I glance at the woman in the paintings, shrinking under the display of her bondage.

“So you want to ruin me for whoever wins, is that it?”

“I’m not taking your virginity, Novalee. I’m only using it as my way-in. The men in this group appreciate rare commodities.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You and I will give them an exclusive show, leaving your virginity intact.”

“But...what do they get out of that?”

“Poetic irony. The act of defiling something so innocent while preserving your maidenhead.”

“Maidenhead?” I scoff. “What is this, the sixteenth century?”

“I don’t think they had Vance’s elixir back then.” His mouth curves into a sly grin.

“You’ll be under the influence again. The virgin doesn’t get to climax at this event.”

My eyes widen. “I’m not going.”

“It’s not a request. After my favorable vote today, you owe me.”

“I don’t owe you a damn thing! You voted to punish me.”

“And then I saved you.” Rising from his seat, he stalks to where I’m sitting, amber liquid sloshing in his glass. Slowly, he sets the tumbler aside and invades my space, arms braced on the back of the chair.

He lowers his head, attention dipping to my cleavage. It’s a brief moment, but I feel that glance everywhere. Heat creeps up my neck, and the memory of him loitering in my doorway last night floats through my head.

The darkened room.

The soft light in the hall.

The weight of his stare.

The slide of my fingers through velvety flesh, every movement soaked with arousal.

The release that never came.

That same restless energy throbs at my core now, and I smash my thighs together. He’s stirring things I don’t want to feel, each spiral of need dragging me back to Liam.

Back to Sebastian, whose paintings suffocate me, every brushstroke a silent judgment.

Grief and anger collide in my chest, threatening to steal the air from my lungs. I grab hold of my anger with the last of my mental strength, and something long overdue snaps inside me.

With a hoarse cry, I slam my hands against his chest.

But he doesn't budge.

Like stone absorbing a gust of wind, he takes it.

I rear back to strike again, and that's when he grabs my wrists.

"You're about to find yourself in trouble." His grip tightens, eyes burning like he welcomes the fight.

And maybe he does.

Maybe he wants me angry.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“If you take me to the dungeon, you’ll lose leverage for your precious trip.”

“I didn’t say a thing about the dungeon.” His focus drops to my mouth.

The air thickens.

My breath stutters, but it isn’t fear pooling in my stomach.

It’s something far worse.

A ragged cry leaves me as I free myself from his grasp. He releases me without resistance, but he’s already one step ahead, winning the battle with his words.

“The trip is happening, Novalee. That’s not up for debate.”

“Liam won’t allow it.” I instill certainty into my voice, but the words ring hollow.

“He’ll never give you permission.”

“The chancellor will do what’s necessary to keep you safe.”

He’s right, and that’s what guts me the most.

“Go to hell,” I shout, then storm toward the front entrance, my heels clicking against the marble. I don’t know where I’m going—I only know I can’t stand the sight of him a second longer. I wrench the door open and refuse to look back, even as his voice trails after me, smooth as silk.

“You can’t escape this.”

The door bangs shut behind me, and the sound ricochets through the foyer. My blood surges hot as the last ten minutes loop through my head.

Initiation offering.

Rare commodity.

No escape.

Just like the night Ford dangled me in front of Axel Ivermann, who later tried to...

Rape me.

The elevator stands in front of me, but I can’t bear to wait. I rush for the stairs, yanking the door open and charging upward, two steps at a time. Sharp gasps tear at my throat as the stairwell spins around me in a tornado of concrete, metal, and rage.

No footsteps follow. Did I slam the door in Astrid’s face? She must have been nearby, but in my blind fury, I can’t remember seeing her at all.

I don’t know how many flights I climb before my legs give out. Wheezing from the frantic ascent, I let my body move on instinct and push through the nearest exit.

Instantly, I recognize Sebastian’s floor.

I didn’t come here with intention. Somehow, my feet carried me to the one place I still belong. The air has an instant calming effect, infusing my lungs with the lingering scent of Sebastian’s oil paints and something that’s purely him.

I'm not the only one seeking comfort in his memory.

Lilith Astor sits slumped against his door, knees pulled to her chest. Dark hair falls in tangled waves around her shoulders, and her makeup is smudged, mascara tracking down her cheeks in black rivers.

I've never seen her like this, so disheveled, her designer clothes worn and wrinkled. As my pulse slows to normal, I close the distance and sink to the floor beside her.

Minutes pass as Lilith trembles, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs. Seeing her broken and human dissolves the last of my anger from the argument with Oliver.

We've never been close. She's treated me like a rival from the start, but now we're just two women sitting outside a door that won't open, drowning in the same insurmountable grief.

Eventually, she lifts her eyes to mine, red-rimmed and swollen at the edges.

"I don't know how to do this." Her voice splinters as she lays a hand across the swell of her belly "Sebastian's supposed to be here. You were supposed to raise her with him."

Page 41

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

I blink back tears. “It’s a girl?”

She nods, wiping at her face with trembling fingers, smearing the black streaks even more.

“I’m a disaster. I’ll make a terrible mother. I can’t do this without him.”

Empathy aches in my throat. “What about Vance?” I tiptoe the question out, testing the fragile ground of her complicated love life.

She gives a bitter laugh. “He won’t even look at me.”

“Because of the pregnancy?”

“Vance is...” The flutter of her wet lashes sends more moisture tracking down her cheeks.

“I hurt him too much. He’s prideful and possessive, not the kind of man you toy with and then ask to raise another man’s child.”

I recall the way they tore at each other on his birthday. He made me watch them that night, and yet I’d felt like an interloper, catching a glimpse of something volatile and private, a combustible coupling of two possessed souls.

“Have you asked him?”

“There’s no point.” She lets a beat pass. “We can’t marry. There’s no future for us.”

There's so much I want to say. I could tell her she's not as alone as she thinks she is.

Landon's trying to redraw the lines, and if he, Liam, and the others succeed, the houses will finally be allowed to intermarry.

And then there's the truth of all truths to break this delicate moment wide open...

She's my half-sister.

But I don't say any of it, leaving Landon to decide when it's time to bring Lilith into the family secrets.

All I can do is reach for her hand, free of pride or judgment, my fingers lacing with hers as we both struggle through the pain.

"Talk to him," I finally say. "Vance is completely in love with you. Don't let another day go by without honoring that. You never know when fate might rip it away."

"Why are you being kind to me?" She turns toward me, raccoon-eyed and vulnerable in a way I've never seen before. "I've been horrendous to you."

"So was Sebastian in the beginning, but I saw him." I pause, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "I see you, Lilith. Vance will, too."

14

Time blurs like watercolors bleeding together, reds and blues crafting a mural of dusty plum. I drift through the days, detached from everything that used to tether me.

The only constant is Oliver's shadow in my doorway each night, his presence both an anchor and a cage as my fingers trace familiar paths. The edge always comes,

threatening to bust through my shield with an explosion I might not survive.

And that's why I pull back, night after night, denying myself the release I crave as his dark gaze burns into my skin.

I don't understand this ritual we've created. Why he needs to witness my restraint. Why I let him. But it's become the only thing that feels real anymore.

During the day, I'm as much of a ghost as Sebastian.

Astrid oversees my meals, dutifully watching me eat food I can't taste. Sleep comes in fits and starts. I've thought about picking up my sketchbook to design my wedding dress, but it's hard to plan a future I'm no longer excited about. The fashion line I once dreamed of feels like someone else's ambition now, a remnant of a girl who no longer exists, so the pages remain blank.

Oliver disappears into his work, supposedly buried in Brotherhood ledgers and spreadsheets. But the few times I've passed his home office, I find him frozen in place, staring at the same document as if his mind isn't in the room at all.

Each night, I rush past the locked door that lingers at the edge of my awareness and slip into the rhythm of our rendezvous. It's the only thing that cracks through my apathy, this ritual straddling the line between intimacy and indecency. Not that I mind the numbness. It's become my refuge, a quiet space between breathing and breaking.

But even apathy has its limits, because on the afternoon of the memorial, my tears come back with a vengeance.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

I cross the threshold of the grand ballroom and take in the sea of solemn faces as a splinter of grief lodges deep. Calla lilies and winter roses hang thick in the air, mingling with the scent of melted wax. Chairs creak as guests shift in their seats, the occasional snuffle or muffled sob rising like static.

At the podium, a man I don't recognize speaks, his white hair glowing silver-blue beneath the lights. He drones on about loss, legacy, and sacrifice, but the words are soulless vibrations buzzing in my ears.

For the entirety of his rehearsed speech, I fix my gaze on the eight-foot photographs at the front of the room. Sebastian's azure eyes stare back, impossibly alive, his crooked grin spearing me in the heart.

A direct hit.

Next to him, Tatum leans casually against a stone pillar. Both are captured mid-laugh, frozen in black frames—snapshots of moments that will never happen again.

Mr. Stone rises from his seat, and my spine stiffens. The room stills as he walks to the podium with practiced poise, but there's something staged in the way he carries himself. He clears his throat, and when he speaks, his voice trembles in a display of grief.

"Sebastian embraced his legacy." He pauses, his Adam's apple bobbing before he swipes a finger across the dry plane of his cheek. "I'll always be proud of the man he was."

He goes on, spinning a story of love and pride between father and son.

Every bit of it fictional.

And then, like a ripple through time, his voice collides with a memory...

Give him the queen's punishment. She'll suffer enough when he breaks.

My mind flashes back to the day Sebastian took fifty lashes for our stolen kiss in the gazebo. The man who dares to call himself his father said those words as if they meant nothing.

A chasm splits open inside me, and my lungs seize. I jump to my feet, everything around me melting to gray, and barely register Liam standing.

Or Oliver telling him to let me go.

I'm already shoving through the heavy French doors, with Astrid not far behind. The winter air bites through my thin black dress, but I welcome the sting.

Snow drifts down in lazy spirals as my feet carry me across the grounds until the white-pillared structure emerges.

Our gazebo.

I climb the stairs, and my knees buckle, hitting the stone floor in the middle of the painted zodiac wheel. A primal sob claws its way out of my throat as I fold inward, unable to hold myself up any longer.

I'm back at the beginning of this pain, as if my grief never left—as if it only played dead before knocking me down again.

“Miss Van Buren.” Astrid’s voice is unusually soft as she kneels beside me. “Please come inside.”

“I can’t.”

She rests a hand on my shoulder, concern flooding her usually stern features. “You’ll freeze out here.”

“I said no!” I jerk away from her touch, and she recoils, feet unsteady. Her mask of rigid composure drops into place again, but not before I catch a glimpse of the woman underneath the guardian.

I should apologize for yelling, but the pain slashing through my chest is too great. So I ignore her and curl into the fetal position, tears burning like acid down my frozen cheeks.

Astrid steps out of view, quietly giving up, and it isn’t long before the crunch of heavy footfalls arrive.

Liam appears first.

Then Oliver.

Vance, Ford, and Hugo follow, and the five of them form a protective barrier around me.

Oliver steps in front of Liam, crouching at my side, and shrugs off his suit jacket.

“I’m sorry,” I say, wiping the hot grief from my face. “I couldn’t stay in there.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Don’t apologize.” He helps me into a sitting position then drapes the coat over my shoulders. The lining is warm from his body, his heat grounding me in a way I didn’t realize I needed.

“I didn’t mean to disrupt the service.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Oliver winds his arms around my shivering form and tucks me against his chest.

As we leave the gazebo, my gaze snags on Liam’s distraught face.

Guilt tugs at me.

I’ve done it again—blindly run into the cold. He saved me once, and I’ve just put him through it a second time.

Only now, he has no choice but to let someone else act as savior.

Oliver leads the way back to the estate, carrying me through the snow in silence. The storm has thickened, flakes whipping sideways in harsh gusts. Disorientation gnaws at me, nausea curling with every shiver.

We enter the tower, and I press closer to his warmth as the seven of us crowd into the elevator.

Overhead lights cast a golden hue across the polished walls, catching fractured reflections of the men in their dark suits, their faces drawn tight with the weight of

the day.

When the car stops at the House of Capricorn, Oliver steps out without a word, cradling me like I'm breakable.

Liam moves to follow, but Oliver shakes his head.

"I've got her."

The chancellor halts, his jaw ticking once in protest, though he isn't about to argue.

Not while I'm under Oliver's control.

And something about that pokes beneath the pain, prodding my anger.

Why do they get to decide?

Why does any man get to say I've got her?

"Put me down," I demand, struggling against Oliver's chest.

He lowers me to my feet as Astrid exits the elevator. The tension between him and Liam holds until the doors slide shut between them. Motors whir in a hush of motion that carries the car to higher floors, leaving the three of us alone.

Oliver unlocks the front door, and I pull his jacket tighter around me as I step into the sitting room. He dismisses Astrid and trails after me, snowmelt dripping from his hair onto his drab black suit.

I'm soaked too, my teeth chattering as I sink into the sofa closest to the fireplace and lean into the cushions, too emotionally drained to do anything else.

Flames crackle, but the warmth doesn't reach me.

"It's time for another therapy session with Sully," he says, pacing in front of me, his gait unhurried. "I'll have something arranged."

"Do what you must. I don't care anymore."

He frowns. "That's a problem, then."

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he lets the silence stretch long enough to aggravate me.

I cross my arms. "What's a problem?"

"You, not caring. That won't make for a happy marriage."

I let out a dry, humorless laugh. "I thought you didn't want to marry me."

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“That’s beside the point. Marriage or not, I don’t like this apathetic state of yours.”

“You speak of happy marriages, but I’m the one who needs help? Is Dr. Price aware you suffer from delusions of grandeur?”

He smirks. “No delusions here. I’d probably make a terrible husband anyway.”

“I don’t need therapy,” I bite out. “Especially not from Dr. Price.” The name lands with scorn.

“We’ll have to agree to disagree.”

“Why do you care?”

He settles next to me, and a sigh of resignation slips out.

“You remind me of Talitha.” He tilts his head, locking his eyes with mine. “She didn’t just pass, Novalee. She killed herself.”

I gape at him, his words illuminating every moment I’ve spent in his presence. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

As I study the paintings, the realization settles in. They’re a merging of the two people we loved and lost.

“Will you tell me about her?” I ask, bringing my attention back to him.

His gaze drops to the floor. “She was submissive...like you.” Dormant grief laces his voice, softening each syllable. “Made for me in every way.”

I recall Mr. Bordeaux and his relationship with Loren, or Pax and the woman he calls slave.

“What do you mean by submissive?” I lean on the arm of the couch. “I’m not like that.”

“It’s an umbrella term for many dynamics. Talitha gave me control of her life and body because she needed the freedom it gave her.”

“How is that freedom?”

“Giving me the reins took the pressure off her. She thrived. Hell, we both did.”

“I understand that’s what worked for you and her, but I want...something different.”

I want Sebastian.

As if we’re tuned to the same wavelength, I swear he hears the unspoken words.

“You might not want or need it in the same way she did, but I see it in you. You have the same type of submissive spirit as my Talitha.”

He pauses, staring into the flames, a faint smile curving his mouth. He seems lost to the memory while the firelight dances across his features.

“She was smart and gifted, with the most breathtaking voice I’ve ever heard. She dreamed of performing at La Scala in Italy someday. She would’ve made it there, too, if not for...”

With a heavy breath, he lowers his face into his hands, fingers raking through his drying hair. He stays like that for a long moment, inhaling and exhaling, words failing him, then his rough voice breaks free again.

“She was bipolar, unresponsive to meds, haunted by things that happened before I met her.” For a beat, his gaze finds mine. “I would’ve done anything for her, but you can’t love someone out of their pain, no matter how hard you try.”

His anguish wraps around me as if it’s my own. Disquiet spreads over us like a blanket, and we’re both transported to the past, our gazes fixed on the flames, ensnared in the same trance.

Until he moves.

It’s a slight shift, his warm and solid thigh brushing mine, but it’s enough to crash land me back on this couch with him, planting me in the present.

Because that bit of contact explodes in the space between us, inching him closer, my name a raspy sigh on his lips. That tone is all gravel and need, a longing for something more weighing down his lids.

It’s powerful.

Primal.

Undeniable.

Just like when he watches me every night as I writhe against my hand.

“They’re gone, Novalee, but we’re here.” He tangles his fingers into my damp strands, and for a second, I think he’s going to kiss me.

In fact, I’m sure of it as his attention dips to my mouth. For some incomprehensible reason, I don’t know if I’d try to stop him.

Isn’t wanting two men enough? Why am I feeling these things for Oliver Whitney?

But there’s something about him that tugs at my heartstrings, even when I wish it didn’t.

Am I that mentally unstable? Or is this a rebound?

I gnaw on my bottom lip, my heartbeat stumbling. “It’s your decision whether to touch me...but I’m asking you not to.”

“I know what you’re thinking.” His hand slides free of my tangled locks. “You’ve convinced yourself that by giving in, you’ll betray Sebastian’s memory.”

“That’s not true, I don’t?—”

He takes me by the chin, locking me into place, making retreat impossible. “You’re allowed to want someone else. Believe it or not, it helps.”

“And you want to be that person.” There’s no question in my tone. Everything about this man screams I want you.

“Yes. If not me, then who?” He leans into me, his spicy scent invading my senses. “I know you miss him, but who else can make you feel like this?”

I lift my chin, forcing him to let go.

“Tell me, Novalee, because I know your blood’s rushing right now, causing an itch you’re dying to scratch.”

“What if it’s an itch I’ve already scratched?”

His brows furrow. “Liam?”

Silence is all he gets.

“I take it something happened before you transferred into my house?”

“Well, it sure hasn’t happened since.” Not even by my own hand. Truth is I’m not sure why I keep holding back, except...

It’s exhilarating, the way Oliver watches me every night. I’m becoming addicted to the attention, to the ache low in my core that lingers long after he’s gone.

And then there’s the anticipation. The possibility that one night he might actually step inside my bedroom.

It's a secret hope I can barely admit to myself.

"I can't do this with you." I jump up from the couch and fold my arms across my chest.

But he's right behind me.

Out of sight.

Not touching, just hovering.

"I think you can." His exhale hits my nape, sending delicious shivers down my limbs.
"And I think you want to, so I'm going to haunt your doorway every night until you do."

"Why are you doing this?"

Page 46

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“I’ve had many women since Talitha.” Slowly, he pulls his coat off my shoulders. “But none made me ache the way you do.” Leaning down, he kisses the hollow of my neck, a whisper of lips on skin, though that brief touch shoots straight to my pussy.

I suck in a breath, vocal cords stuck in a vise.

“Would you like to know what I do every night after watching you?” He tosses the damp jacket onto the sofa, and I wish I could hide under it.

“No.”

“Definitely the right answer. The details would make you wet.”

He presses into me from behind, and the hard length of his cock fits snug against the swell of my ass.

“This is what you do to me. Having you in this house every waking moment, not being able to touch you...it’s driving me crazy. I can’t focus on work, and that makes me desperate.”

His tone says something else.

He’s not only desperate.

He’s dangerous.

So why am I not frightened? My inability to act, to move, to put an end to this right

now is the most dangerous thing of all.

After a hard gulp, I find my voice. “Then maybe you should send me back to Liam. I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your work.”

“Work can fuck right off. And so can Liam.” His hand curls around my hip, squeezing twice before letting me go. “You’re not ready now, but you will be.”

I turn to face him. “No, I won’t.”

“We’ll see.” His familiar and confident smirk transforms him back into the version of Oliver I know.

Someone aloof and in control.

Not desperate or dangerous.

And I hate that I’m disappointed by how easily he buried that raw, vulnerable part of himself.

15

I’m back in Dr. Price’s office, sitting on the edge of his pretentious settee. The velvet beneath me carries a chill, more from the atmosphere than the fabric itself. It’s the kind of cold that seeps into the bones. Even the fireplace burning in the corner does nothing to warm this place.

The shrink doesn’t speak right away.

Of course he doesn’t.

No, his pen talks for him, poised above the notepad resting on his lap. Like last time, he's sitting across from me, and there's a choreographed quality in the way he presents himself. Relaxed yet military-straight, every move meticulous. It's almost theatrical.

Keeping my hands in my lap, I return his unwavering stare. The quiet between us builds, each moment chipping away at my resolve. The longer I sit here, saying nothing, the more my stubbornness frays. I'm going to lose this battle of wills, because I can't stand to be in this room a minute more.

"Oliver thought I should come."

Dr. Price nods. "I noticed you left the memorial the other day. What made you take off like that?"

My mind drifts to the sound of Sebastian's name in his father's mouth, to the man's venomous lies, dressed in grief's clothing.

"I left because of Mr. Stone."

He writes something on his notepad, no doubt another mark added to whatever narrative he's constructing about me. "You found his speech triggering?"

"Triggering?" My brow lifts. "Try infuriating. The man had the audacity to fake tears, going on about legacy and pride as if he didn't spend every day of Sebastian's life tearing him down. He's a fraud of a father."

Page 47

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Grief can change a person’s perspective. Perhaps the loss forced him to reassess how he treated his son?”

I gape at him, incredulous. “You can’t be serious.”

“Simply playing Devil’s Advocate. Grief can change people, as you’re well aware.”

“That man is incapable of change. The show he put on might’ve been his best performance yet.”

“You believe he was being dishonest?”

“I believe he’s evil.” I ease back against the cushions. “Like a lot of the men pulling the strings here.”

At my backhanded insult, Dr. Price doesn’t even twitch. Ever the man of composure, he jots something down, his pen scribbling hushed judgment across the page.

“How are your days?” he asks, flipping to a new page. “What do they look like?”

I let out a soft, joyless laugh. “A lot of nothing. I stare at the ceiling, watch the ocean, count the snowflakes. Sometimes I eat.”

“Sometimes?” His silver-grey eyes narrow, the point of his pen tapping a restless beat against the notebook.

“Most of the time,” I say, not sure if it’s more truth or lie.

“And your nights?”

“I sleep.”

“And before that?” A faint twitch pulls at his mouth, too restrained to be a smile.
“Have you tried my control method?”

Last night blazes through my mind in vivid color, and warmth blooms on my cheeks.
Oliver stood in my doorway, same as all the other nights.

No sound or shift.

Just him, holding tight to his infuriating status quo.

And me, swallowing down my moans.

Desperate to contain the inferno, I’d shoved the blanket aside before taking my nipples between my fingers, pinching hard to tame the heat. But the second I touched myself there...

Oliver moved.

With a bite of his lower lip, he took a purposeful step into the room, leaned against the wall, and I’d wondered...

Would this be the night he finally did something?

After what felt like a full minute of silent warfare, he adjusted the bulge in his pants, crossed his arms over his sleep shirt, and settled in like a man prepared to wait forever.

Dr. Price clears his throat, dragging me back to the sterile present, but it's too late.

He already has a good idea of what I'm thinking.

"Have you orgasmed yet?" he asks, too casual, as if we're discussing the completion of a project.

"I'd rather not talk about that."

"Why not? Masturbation is a natural and healthy part of life."

"It's also private."

"I'll take a simple yes or no, then."

“Why are you so fixated on this?”

“My approach isn’t conventional, but I’d like to know if it’s working.”

His demeanor is too clinical and composed, and every atom in my body warns me to tread these dangerous waters with caution. Still, the truth breaks loose, unchecked.

“I haven’t been able to.”

“But you’ve tried?”

“I guess I’ve been holding back.” I squirm in my seat, hating the way his questions strip me bare. But once the metaphorical clothes come off, there’s no putting them back on.

“What’s stopping you, Novalee?”

“Oliver.” I swallow my pride and my shame, then forge ahead. “He’s been watching me every night.”

Dr. Price sets his notebook and pen down. “Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“It did...at first.”

“And now?” He folds his hands in his lap, and the energy between us hisses like a viper. “How does it make you feel?”

“Trapped.”

“How so?”

I gaze out the window at the falling snow, dazed by the wintry light of day. “I feel like I’m stuck in purgatory. He hasn’t said a word, and except for last night, he hasn’t moved from my doorway.”

“What was different about last night?”

“I did...something.”

“Please, tell me more.”

“I got his attention,” I admit, flashing back to the large bulge in Oliver’s pajama pants.

“Was that your goal?”

I return to Dr. Price and his dark pewter eyes. A flare of interest transforms his features, vanishing the instant our gazes collide.

Once again, I’ve been playing into his hands this whole time.

“As I told you already, I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Understood, but I would like to know one thing.” He leans in, drawing out the pause until it hums with expectation. “You haven’t been able to let go in front of Oliver, but have you crossed that threshold at all since Sebastian’s death?”

His words punch the air from my lungs, and I sit frozen for a beat, torn between the

urge to withdraw and the pull of exhausted honesty.

He waits, his pointer finger ticking the seconds away as he dares me to hand over another piece of myself.

“Twice,” I say, my voice so small I don’t recognize it.

“Were you alone?”

“I was with Liam.” The admission burns my tongue, hot with shame.

“When?”

“The night I almost jumped.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

“Why do you think you were able to let go with Liam?”

“Because he’s safe?” I shrug. “Because I didn’t have a choice? We both got swept up, after I almost...” My voice trails off, strangled with too many regrets.

The admission hangs in the air, tainting the space with raw vulnerability.

Surprisingly, Dr. Price doesn’t pounce on it. He lets the silence snowball until I break it with another reluctant truth.

“It’s always been easy with Liam.”

“The real question isn’t why you’re able to climax with Liam.”

“It’s not?”

“No. What you should be asking is, why isn’t it happening now?” He gives the thought room to breathe, watching me squirm. “You want to know what I think?”

I hesitate, then nod, betrayed by curiosity.

“I think you’re scared to surrender because it means opening yourself to someone new. After losing Sebastian, you’re terrified of letting anyone else in.”

I narrow my eyes. “But wasn’t the point of this nightly ritual to demonstrate control?”

“Which you’ve done.” His tone softens, part coax and part command. “Now it’s time

to release yourself from the prison you've built."

"In front of Oliver?" I cross my legs. "Is that what you're implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. If having an audience brings you pleasure, then you should explore it. You've earned it." He straightens the gold band of his watch, as if on cue. "I'm afraid our time is up."

I blink, disoriented. "We're done already?"

"For today, yes. You're making more progress than you realize." He rises, prompting me to do the same.

"Continue your nightly routine," he adds, heading to the door. "During the day, I want you to immerse yourself in your work again."

"I don't know if I'm ready for that."

Not with Sebastian's studio right down the hall.

"At least give it a try." He opens the door, and the brass handle catches the firelight. "Find joy in something each day, no matter how small. Start a new project, or visit a friend."

A rare smile touches his lips—a fleeting glimpse of the man beneath the doctor.

"Healing takes time."

16

The thing about time? It's a tricky sorcerer of illusion, first crawling slow enough to

bleed me dry before accelerating without warning. A full week passes before I muster the courage to end my hiatus and face the studio I abandoned.

I push the door open, and the air hints at neglect and musty spaces. Daylight streams through the tall windows, casting streaks across the bolts of fabric.

Highlighting the dust.

Exposing my prolonged failure.

Unfinished sketches fan across tables. Measuring tape lies tangled on the floor. A prototype still wears the skeleton of something I once believed in, the burgundy silk drooping from the shoulders, one side pinned, and the other trailing like blood.

Everything is exactly as I left it, and something about that hurts.

I bend down before the tears win and gather the scraps. My fingers shake at first, but the motion steadies as I sweep fabric shavings into my hand. I sort and stack, lining up scissors, putting away stray bobbins, returning fashion magazines to the shelves.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:28 am

When I reach the far end, my fingers graze a roll of silk, its texture cool to the touch, the hue a vivid sea-blue.

Like Sebastian's eyes.

I close my own and rest my palm on the fabric, fighting the ache. Willing myself not to break into a pile of fresh pieces. With measured breaths, I mentally chant three words until nothing's left but static between my ears...

Healing takes time.

So I take the time, even though deep down, I fear I'll never find that girl again—the one who dreams and creates and designs.

I start by doodling curved lines at my drawing table, pausing now and then to stare out the window. The skies are clear today, the sun's bright rays encouraging a symphony of birds.

As I return to my doodling, I'm taken aback by the direction those lazy lines took. It almost looks like the beginning of a gown with a royal train.

For some reason, that makes me laugh.

Because if this archaic system is going to force me into a marriage, I might as well become the spectacle everyone's expecting.

I'm still giggling like a deranged hyena, the vacant room mocking me, when the door

creaks open again, softer this time.

The laughter dies in my chest.

Elise pauses on the threshold, bundled in a silver cardigan that strains at the buttons. Her figure is fuller now, with the baby's arrival not far off.

"I wasn't sure if I should knock." The uncertainty in her features stings, because she's usually so optimistic.

"You're always welcome."

She steps inside before shutting the door behind her. "I wanted to talk to you at the memorial, but..."

"No, it's okay. I was a mess." Truth is, I barely remember that afternoon, let alone picking out faces in the blur, even familiar ones.

"It's good to see you working again," she says, taking in the room. Grime clings to the corners, gathering near a trail of bobby pins and half-buried thread.

"I'm not sure I'd call what I'm doing working, but I'm trying."

"It's a good start."

"How have you been?" I ask, nudging us in a safer direction. "How's the baby?"

"I'm fine. Baby's good." She looks at me then with an unspoken intensity that says more than her words do. "How are you doing?"

"Better." Though the answer catches in my throat. "As long as I focus on the

present.”

She nods, choosing not to push, then sinks into the chair across from me with a small wince, one hand settling on her midsection. “How are things with Oliver? Is he treating you well?”

My gaze strays, and for a moment, it’s not Oliver’s shadow I recall, but the sound of his footsteps retreating. Just last night, his longing lingered in the air, heavy with need, while I tried to escape through sleep.

“Novalee?”

I return to the conversation, but she’s already leaning forward, spotting something I didn’t mean to stitch into my expression.

“He’s not hurting you, is he?”

“No, nothing like that. He’s...” I trail off, my pencil gliding into the silhouette of a plunging bodice that bares more than it hides. “He’s getting under my skin.”

Her brows lift over wide blue eyes. “How’s he getting under your skin?”

“In a physical way.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

Okay, not exactly physical, since he hasn't even touched me.

But there's a connection, tenuous as it is, born from loss and...something I can't quite name.

He always seems confident and put together, dressed to make a statement, every I dotted and T crossed.

Until I spot him at his desk or on the treadmill, his feet pounding a steady rhythm.

It's in those rare moments, when he doesn't know I'm watching, that I sense the loneliness he doesn't want me to see.

The pain he can never outrun.

Elise studies me with quiet fascination, her chin propped on her hand. "You like him."

"I don't know how I feel about him." I set the pencil down and nudge it with my fingertip until it stops spinning. "But he's treating me better than most."

"After everything you've endured, you deserve someone who sees your worth."

"They all see me as a transaction, Elise."

She dips her head. "I know."

I wave the heaviness away. “Enough of that. I’ve missed you.”

“Same,” she says. “I wasn’t sure when you’d be up for visitors again, but Landon had a meeting with Oliver today, so...”

“A meeting?” I sit up straighter. “What for?”

“It’s nothing bad,” she assures me, rubbing a protective hand over her belly. “Landon’s been following the paper trail of Jerome’s off-the-book dealings. Turns out, Oliver is his accountant.”

The illegal gambling party Jerome hosted during Ford’s month filters through my mind, and understanding clicks into place.

“So Landon’s still planning to take him down.” I arch a brow. “And Oliver’s helping him?”

“I think so.” Her tone drops a notch, more cautious now. “He hasn’t shared details, but if Oliver’s involved, there’s more to this than speculation. Landon wouldn’t bring him in unless he saw value.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Speaking of Oliver,” she says, shifting in her seat, “he’s planning a spa day for the two of us tomorrow. Facials, waxing, the whole deal.” Elise laughs softly. “Though I’m not sure how the tech will find my lady bits under this belly.”

That makes me smile.

And then I want to cry.

Of course Oliver wants me plucked and feathered for the perverts in his secret society.

The trip to the States is only days away, and the thought of getting on a plane again blasts me in the chest. Suddenly I'm choking on air.

I don't know whether I'm panicking, crying, or both.

"Novalee?" Elise's voice cuts through the noise as she rises with effort.

"Don't get up," I say, raising a hand. "I'm okay."

But she ignores me, crosses the space with determination, and pulls me from my chair. Then she folds me into her arms, and as comfort tugs at my broken pieces, I fall apart again.

No warning or control.

Just the wreckage of grief breaking loose.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

I cling to her, my shoulders shaking with each ragged sob.

“Oh, Novalee,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

We stand there for what feels like forever, her embrace rooting me to the present.

With a loud snuffle, I step back. “I didn’t mean to cry all over you.”

“I’m here for you, whether you need to laugh, cry, or scream.”

“I suppose a trip to the village is a good place to start, then we’ll go from there.”

Tomorrow won’t magically fix me, but maybe a spa day with Elise will be a step in the right direction...

A small reminder that life still exists beyond these circular walls.

17

The spa day leaves me glowing, my complexion as silken as moonlight on water. Despite Oliver’s hand in the arrangement, it was good to reconnect with Elise. Between pampering treatments, we talked about everything and nothing. I even surprised myself by laughing out loud when she said the baby moves like a trapped creature. Watching the kicks ripple across her belly, I couldn’t help but giggle.

For a little while, I almost felt like myself again.

But as I cross the threshold into the House of Capricorn, the glow from Elise's presence fades, and whatever peace I gained vanishes under the weight of Landon's dealings with Oliver.

The revelation that he's Jerome's accountant adds another twist to my already tangled feelings for Oliver Whitney.

Is he helping my brother take Jerome down? Or is he playing both sides? I pause in the sitting room and consider what I know about the man who taunts me every night with his voyeuristic tendencies.

His composure rarely slips, but it did when he told me about Talitha. In that moment, pain bled through the cool detachment he wears like armor.

Is it possible he's an ally?

A shadow shifts in the kitchen doorway, drawing me from my thoughts, and I find him standing in the lit entrance. His gaze trails over my blond locks before landing on the shaped lines of my brows. I tuck a curled strand behind one ear, and his attention catches on the gleam of my polished nails.

"Exquisite color."

I glance at the glossy paint, my ring glinting from the recessed lighting that keeps those paintings on display.

"The tech recommended it. She called it Scarlet Midnight."

"I know." He shoots me a secretive smile, and a flush spreads across my collarbone.

"Dinner's waiting," he adds, his tone carrying that edge of command I can never

seem to resist.

As I step past him, he presses a hand to my lower back. That simple contact shouldn't affect me like it does, but my body betrays me, and I lean into his touch without thinking.

We sit side by side this time. He's taken the head of the table, and I'm to his right, no longer at the opposite end. Tonight's dinner is pasta, tossed in a creamy sauce with grilled vegetables. I twirl a bite on my fork and bring it to my lips.

Loaded silence hangs between us. I'm acutely aware of all the things we don't talk about—things that have been building in the dark for the past three weeks, even with a chaperone snoring nearby.

Astrid didn't accompany me to the village today, which only highlights her absence now.

“Where's the babysitter?”

“Dismissed,” he says, pouring two glasses of white wine.

“Dismissed as in...?”

“Gone for good.” He hands me a glass. “You've been behaving.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

I arch a disbelieving brow. “Have I, now?”

“Yes.” He unknots his tie and pulls it free, right at the dinner table. “You returned to your studio yesterday, and today, you went to the spa with Elise. I’m proud of you.”

There’s an unmistakable note of innuendo in his voice, despite his words masquerading as concern for my mental health.

He holds my stare, drops his tie to the floor, and I know I’m right. Awareness needles under my skin, while butterflies dance a wild rhythm in my stomach.

I tip my head back and gulp down the wine, because without Astrid shadowing my every move...it’s just him and me now.

“How was the spa?” he asks, spearing a broccoli floret.

“Good.” I lift a shoulder, feigning casual before aiming for his jugular. “The tech waxed my pussy bare.”

He pauses with the fork in his mouth, then slowly slides it out and chews.

But his non-reaction is not enough, so I push harder.

“My skin is so velvety now. Makes me want to touch myself.” I drag a fingertip up my arm, attracting his roving eye.

He refills my glass before taking a leisurely sip of his own.

God, this man makes me want to scream.

Fighting the urge to throw my drink in his face—because that would be unhinged, even for me—I go for direct instead. “Did you have ulterior motives for sending me to the spa?”

“I might have.”

“Such as?” I already know, but I want to hear him admit it.

“You’re an intelligent woman, so why don’t you give me your theory?”

“I think you wanted me polished and groomed for your perverted friends abroad.”

He sets his fork down, a deliberate preamble. “So tell me, Novalee. Are you ready now?”

Silence lands between us, stretching taut. This is about more than his travel plans.

He’s going to make his move tonight.

The certainty settles deep in my bones, ratcheting my heartbeat as he devours me with his eyes, saying nothing and everything, all at once.

I take another long swig from my glass and let the buzz carry me through the rest of dinner, arousal pulsing a relentless drumbeat at my core.

Every second heightens it, reminding me of all the nights I’ve forced myself to fall asleep with wet, aching need pooling between my thighs.

When he finally pushes back from the table, showing off the hard cut of his torso

beneath his dress shirt, I expect...

More.

“I have some work to finish,” he says, his gaze burning with an intensity that contradicts his nonchalant tone. “Won’t take more than an hour. I’ll see you soon.”

He walks away with a confidence that borders on smug. Why do I get the feeling he’s already orchestrated the next move?

Five minutes later, in the privacy of my quarters, I understand why.

Lingerie drapes the foot of my bed, bold in maroon and tasteful in design, despite its wicked intent. Lace lines the cups, each one teasing with a peekaboo slit that leaves nothing to the imagination. A sheer skirt parts down the front, inviting quick access.

And the panties?

Page 54

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

There are none.

Does he want me bare for my hands...or his?

I slip on the babydoll number, and anticipation thrums where I'm still tender from the wax. The bedtime ritual waits like a path I've walked too many times.

After three weeks of edging under his illicit stare, I ache to take the next step.

Crossing into my bathroom on unsteady feet, I go through the motions of my nightly skin routine before returning to the bedroom.

But I don't pull back the covers—not with the fireplace painting the room in pale amber rose, its heat licking at my exposed skin. Instead, I climb onto the mattress and sink into the pillows, my desire simmering in my belly, banked like embers.

My nipples tighten through the lace-cut slits, and I roll them between my fingers, nails freshly polished to match the sultry hue of my lingerie. Stretching out my limbs, I let the sheer skirt fall open.

And that's how I wait for the sound of his approach, fingertips veiling the peaks of my breasts, legs pressed together to obscure the view of my pussy.

He doesn't keep me waiting long.

Oliver's silhouette fills the doorway, and my breath catches as his molten gaze drags over every inch of me. Something flares in his expression.

Appreciation?

Or a craving that torments?

I meet him head-on, part my thighs, and offer what he hasn't seen since I entered this house.

It's a provocation.

An undeniable dare.

A demand for action.

And yet, a twitch of his jaw is all I get. Gritting my teeth, I slide my fingers through the slick folds of my pussy and let a moan break free.

Loud.

Needy.

Frustrated.

I'm wearing the lingerie he chose, putting everything on display, no sheets, no shame. And yet...

He still doesn't move.

Will he ever?

"Oliver." His name escapes in a plea, cloaked in seduction, floating on the air like a siren's lure.

As if absorbing the impact of my voice, he sucks in a ragged breath and starts toward me, each step a release of restraint. By the time he reaches the bed and crawls over me, hovering but not touching, his loose shirt grazing my nipples, I'm ready to fly apart.

A hoarse whimper rasps out of me.

"Don't come yet." He takes me by the chin.

The air between us crackles, and another groan spills free.

He pushes a finger past my lips. "Suck."

"Mmm." I envelop him in the eager seal of my mouth.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

“Match this pace,” he commands, withdrawing, then pressing back in. “Not faster. Not slower. I want you right on the edge.”

I hum around his salty skin, following his rhythm with trembling focus as I rub myself in tandem.

Oliver shifts, bracing an elbow on the mattress.

“Wider,” he says, deepening the motion, adding another digit.

I stretch my jaw for him, and he smirks.

“Both your mouth and your legs.”

So I spread even more.

“Yes, that’s it. Let the air ground you. Let it be the one thing that holds you in check.”

But I’m not sure I can control myself with him so close. His commands direct every aspect of this show, and I’m an actress under his tutelage.

“You’re doing so well. Now push your finger into that pretty cunt. I want to hear how wet you are.”

I work a single digit into my tight, slick walls. Need builds as my thumb drifts back to my nub.

“No more clit.” His fingers thrust into my throat, triggering a gag that rips my focus away. “You’re too close.”

Unbidden, my groan turns guttural, but the edge stays out of reach, held at bay by Oliver’s maddening pace.

He’s the master of patience, demanding I surrender with every slow stroke against my tongue. So when he suddenly yanks my wrist away and sucks my soaked fingers into his mouth, I’m caught off guard.

“Mmm, you taste incredible.” He guides my hand between my thighs again. “What do you want, Novalee?”

“I want to come.”

“I can leave and let you finish alone.” He nips my ear with his teeth. “Is that what you want?”

“After all these weeks, that’s your move?”

“If you want me to make you come, you have to say the word.”

“What word?” I gasp, dazed with lust. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” His pointed statement sends my mind straight to that locked door.

I do know, and it’s the knowing that winds around my windpipe.

“Please, Oliver,” I whisper, pride nowhere to be found.

“Please, what?”

“Please...” Primed and shameless, I close my eyes and succumb to the inevitable.

“Sir.”

That’s all he needs. In a fluid motion, he sweeps me into his arms and carries me to the forbidden door I’ve spent the month avoiding.

“Once we step inside,” he says, lowering me to my feet, “your virginity is the only thing off-limits.” He grasps my nape. “You’ll be mine until morning.”

“The whole night?”

“At my mercy until sunrise.”

“Will you hurt me?” My voice cracks, tendrils of fear snaking free.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

“I don’t give pain without pleasure.”

“That doesn’t reassure me.”

“I’m not here to reassure you. I’m offering to take you to a place where the two are intertwined. If you want to know all the ways I can make you feel, then say the word one more time, so I know you’re certain.”

My attention veers from his face to the door. Sir is already clamoring to spill off my tongue again, but my vocal cords won’t cooperate. Seconds sneak by as I swallow down my instincts, both fight and flight, before giving myself over to the unknown.

With a choked plea, I seal my fate and utter what he wants to hear.

Oliver’s smile turns dark and sensual as he keys in the code. “By morning, you’ll say it without resistance.”

18

I don’t know what I expected. A dungeon like the one buried beneath this tower, all darkness and chains, designed to strike fear into the bones of any man? Or maybe something similar to Vance’s decadent suite, where every piece of furniture teetered between practical and perverse?

Oliver’s sanctum radiates control, terrifying in purpose and opulent in design. A lavish playground for his varied...tastes.

“Surprised?” he asks, the heat of his presence pulling at me like gravity. His hands settle on my shoulders, and I catch myself leaning into him, spine brushing solid muscle.

“Not exactly surprised, but it’s not what I pictured either.”

Golden light spills across the room, each piece of equipment casting a shadowy signature on the floor. Swings, benches, and metal frames sit with purpose. At the center stands a massive four-poster bed draped in black silk, its thick posts notched and reinforced for bondage.

One wall showcases rope in bundles of every hue—deep crimson, obsidian black, earthy brown, ivory white, and all the colors between.

It’s a visual symphony of control.

“No dungeons here,” he says, fingers gliding down my arm. “But plenty of ways to bend you to my will.”

An inner alarm stirs as I take in the suspended cage in the corner. “What’s that for?”

“Bratty behavior.” One hand closes loosely around my throat, guiding my gaze to a wall of whips and canes as his other reaches for something out of sight. “Though I prefer to start with a bare ass.”

Before I can register what’s happening, cool metal grazes my shoulder, and I flinch as scissors shear through one of my lingerie straps.

“Wait!” I try jerking away, but his grip steadies me as the blades skim across my chest. The second strap gives way with a soft snap, and the fabric pools at my feet. Instinctively, I cover my breasts and press my thighs together.

He saunters into my line of sight, expression stern. “You gave up the right to modesty when you said sir. Now show me the fruits of your spa day. Or would you rather find out what I can do with a whip?”

“You said no pain without pleasure.”

A diabolical grin plays at his mouth. “A whip in the hand of a skilled master can be extremely pleasurable.”

My chest rises in protest. “For who? You?”

“Do you need a demonstration?” He lifts his chin, staring me down as if he’s counting the strikes it’ll take to prove him right.

“No.” I lower my arms, vulnerability prickling at my nape. I asked for this, but now that he’s stripped me naked, with no way to undo the choice I made in a weak moment of desire, I’m not sure I’m ready for the consequences.

His gaze travels from my breasts to the bare triangle between my legs. The reaction is immediate—a glint of reverence, a tick in his jaw, a subtle flexing of his fingers as if he’s imagining them buried deep.

For a second, I think he’s going to devour me right here.

Instead, he takes my hand and leads me to the wall of rope. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue.”

He selects a teal shade and lets it cascade through his hands.

Page 57

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

This space is his.

And he offers no reassurance, only an unspoken demand for blind trust as he ties my wrists together in front of me.

Somehow, the silence unsettles me more than a command ever could.

My breathing turns shallow, though I don't know what affects me more—the glide of the rope or his intense expression. Midnight hair flops across a furrowed brow, and every few moments, his warm eyes lift to mine, scanning for distress.

But it's not fear or hesitation making me tremble.

It's him.

The devastating beauty in each trace, touch, and tie.

Adrenaline surges as he lifts my bound wrists, elbows angled skyward. The stretch locks my shoulders and arches my spine, thrusting my chest forward, nipples exposed with no way to shield them.

He begins to wind rope around my torso, looping under my breasts and across my ribs in firm, possessive passes.

When he finishes, he guides me to a padded wall, fastens my wrists to a bracket behind my head, and cuffs my ankles, anchoring them wide apart.

It's art and ownership.

A version of foreplay I've never experienced until now.

In this moment, I belong to him, and it sets my blood to boiling.

"All those nights, you clung to control," he says, peeling off his shirt. "Now you have none."

He steps in close and drags a single finger up my slit.

It's the first time he's touched me there, and my pussy clenches, wrecked from too many nights of denial. I ache for pressure, friction, depth, but he keeps me perched at the edge with a featherlight graze of my clit.

"Please, Oliver," I whimper, teeth sinking into my bottom lip.

"Please what?"

"Huh?" The sound escapes before I can catch it, my thoughts still tangled in his sensual web.

Cocking a brow, he withdraws only to pinch my nipple hard.

"Ow!"

"Still not what I want to hear." He twists, slow and cruel, until I grit my teeth against the pain. "You've forgotten the one word that matters in this room."

"I'm sorry!"

“I don’t want apologies.” He claims my other peak and gives it the same punishment.
“Say it.”

“Sir!”

My chest heaves beneath his hands, our eyes locking as he holds the pressure.
Finally, he releases me.

“When and how you climax is no longer up to you. I might let you come once...or
force you ten times. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

He bends and draws one sore peak into his mouth, then the other, pulling at the tips of
my breasts until they tingle.

“Please, sir.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

“You’re beautiful when you beg,” he says, grazing my nipple with his teeth as a finger sinks into my soaked heat. I nearly come undone.

“More, please...”

He pauses, and for a moment, I think he’s going to give me what I crave. Instead, he pulls away and strides across the room.

At the glass-topped dresser, he opens a drawer lined with neat rows of gags and anal plugs that gleam like curated jewelry.

But it’s the glint of metal in his hand when he turns that knocks the breath from my lungs.

Two brutal-looking clamps, joined by a chain of polished steel.

“What are those?” My voice comes out thinner than I intend.

“Punishment.”

“No!” I tug against my restraints as he closes the distance.

“Afraid so. You’ve spent the last week driving me mad with these pretty little nipples.” He tweaks one in warning. “Now it’s my turn to play with them.”

The clamps snap shut on tender flesh, and agony rips through me. I cry out, caught between a scream and a sob.

“They’re too tight!”

“No, they’re perfect. And they’ll only get tighter every time you forget to call me sir.”

He proves it with a slow tug on the chain.

“Oh God, stop!” The words rush out in a desperate plea I’m not sure he’ll honor.

Because there’s no safety in protest, only the faint hope of mercy, and I’m clinging to it with everything I have.

“I’m not God, Novalee.” He cranks the vises on my nipples, and I can’t help but scream what he wants to hear.

“Sir!”

Without warning, he lets go of the chain and sinks to his knees.

Instantly, I’m on fire in a different way.

“You have a gorgeous cunt,” he says, leaning in, his breath stoking the coals of arousal as he teases my mound.

I’m so desperate for his mouth that my hips jerk forward. My nipples blaze with constant torment, and an impatient whine breaks loose.

“Every sound you make gives you away.” A kiss brushes my inner thigh. “Every breath and whimper.”

Another moment passes before he drifts closer to where I ache for him. I’m hot and

wet, legs forced apart and shuddering, blood thundering through me. My muscles burn from the strain of bondage, yet it pales next to the sight of his lips hovering inches from my pussy.

“I know how you squirm when you’re close, and I know the rhythm of your need.”

“I need you to touch me!”

“Oh, I know you do, sweetheart.” He gives the chain another yank, and my whimpers shatter into sharp cries. “But we’re not on your timeline, are we?”

“No,” I gasp.

He increases the pinch. “How can I make you come if I’m too busy punishing your disobedience?”

“Please, sir. I’ve denied myself for weeks.”

Page 59

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

Weeks of unimaginable grief battling primal need, all undone in a single night by the man on his knees.

Yet I'm the one begging, even as he makes me groan in pain.

"All this time, I've been watching you." His gaze drowns me in the ocean of his control. "Or did you forget?"

"How could I forget, sir?"

"Then you already know I can keep you like this for as long as I want."

"You can, but I'm begging you not to...sir."

The devious curve of his smile speaks of triumph, promising my downfall.

And that's when he parts my slick folds.

His tongue finds me, all sinuous heat sliding into intimate flesh, and those licks ricochet clear to my toes. My body bows into the pleasure, straining against the rope as he edges me like he's been watching for weeks.

Because he has.

Each suck and lick ignites new sparks, as if he's memorized every dip, fold, and hidden place on the map of my desire. He's mastered the art of the tongue, knowing exactly how to use it to make me sing in his language.

“Sir.” The title escapes on a breathless sob, my voice the only part of me that can break free. So I open the floodgates and let the sounds spill.

Moans and whimpers.

Groans and cries.

Desperate pleas.

And the chant of his favorite word...

Over and over again.

Oliver has dissolved me into a state of incoherence, where thought slips through sensation and all I can do is feel.

His fingers press into the curve of my ass, holding me firm under his relentless mouth. The clamps bite sharper each time I move, layering pain atop pleasure until I'm strung tight, seconds away from shattering.

As if on cue, he backs off, leaving me keening at the edge of climax.

“Don't stop!” I blink as the ground of denial rushes up to meet me. “Please, sir.”

“You're getting too close.” With infuriating composure, he stands and drags the back of a hand across his lips.

“What are you do?—?”

“Shh.” He frees me from the wall. “I want you silent for this next phase.”

“What? Why?”

He gives the clamps a final tug before removing them. Intense pain storms through me, and I lose my breath and my ability to make a sound.

“Trust me, Novalee. I promise it’ll be worth it.”

But when he leads me to a leather bench and bends me over the end, it isn’t trust that keeps me there.

It’s surrender.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

I should have never surrendered. Silence is agony, forced on me by a large ball gag stretching my lips. Like the wall, the bench welcomes my body in luxurious leather, robbing me of all mobility. Though my wrists are no longer bound behind my head, they're tied together in front of me. The cuffs on my ankles remain.

Oliver has me bent over, feet planted wide and fixed to the floor. The position tilts my hips above my shoulders, sending too much pressure to my battered breasts.

Now it's my ass that burns while the rest of me strains from the vibrator secured between my thighs.

Anytime I get too close, his thick paddle finds its mark.

It's a dance between purgatory and nirvana, of which Oliver Whitney is a ruthless virtuoso.

The tension builds faster than I can bear, and my lungs seize around a scream I can't release.

Crack!

Pain flares across my backside as another blow lands.

Then another.

Five in total, each more savage than the last.

The sting spreads in a blaze of red that drags me from the edge. Before the ache fades, he dials the instrument of my destruction higher, and I grind against it, chasing a climax he won't grant.

Sweat beads along my spine.

My heart kicks at my ribs.

Heat swells, ready to boil over.

No, no, no.

I lunge for it anyway, bracing for the inevitable fallout.

Crack!

A fresh set of strikes cut me off from the tipping point. My legs tremble as the impact throttles my muffled groans, even as pleasure carves itself from pain.

He alternates between the two until I can't tell which is which.

And that's how this next phase goes.

Torment versus rapture.

Frustration versus arousal.

A crescendo I never reach.

And a fiery descent that won't extinguish the flames of my desire.

Oliver pushes me to the brink again and again, only to yank me back with another rapid succession of blows. I want to plead for mercy, but my silence holds, locked behind the gag and the last fragments of pride I haven't let him take.

I've lost all sense of time.

Only sensation remains.

I'm beyond exhausted, every nerve lit, tears and saliva slipping from my face. Fear begins to creep into my thoughts, and I'm wondering how much more I can take—how much more he'll make me take—when he suddenly removes the gag.

“You're doing so well, sweetheart. Your body knows how to obey.”

“Please, sir.” The entreaty scrapes out through clenched teeth. “No more.”

“Who owns you right now?”

“You do, sir.” As much as I despise that fact, it’s undeniable. There’s a hierarchy in this room, and he’s on top.

“And what about your orgasms? Are they mine or yours?”

“Yours, sir.”

“And your pain. Is that mine as well?”

“Y-yes...sir.”

Though my mouth stutters the answer he wants, I hand him over to the murderess in my mind. I’m so caught up in imagining his slow, tortured death that I don’t realize he’s releasing me from the bench.

He cradles me in his arms, every part of me bent to his will, and carries me into the en suite bathroom. After turning on the water, he guides me to the marble counter and positions me in front of the mirror.

“Look,” he says, angling a handheld mirror at my backside. “This is the color of your need. Isn’t it beautiful?”

I gulp at the sight. Beautiful isn’t the word I’d use, but it’s a testament to his mastery that he can etch such a brutal signature on my body and still leave me drenched. My skin glows crimson, mottled with the imprints of his discipline. Each mark tells the

story of my submission.

The massive jacuzzi tub fills beside us, steam curling through lavender-scented air. Oliver strips before lifting me into the water and sliding in behind me.

“Lean back,” he says, arranging me between his thighs.

I sink against him and let the warm water ease my screaming muscles. Bubbles cocoon us in silken clouds as his hands glide over my shoulders and breasts, soothing the ache while heightening a different kind. When his fingers dip into the suds and find the apex of my sex, I whimper, throat raw from screaming and crying.

“Please, sir.”

“Shhh.” His lips brush my temple. “Relax, close your eyes. I’m going to take care of you now.”

His fingers burrow into my folds, holding me at the pinnacle, coaxing pleasure from a place of transcendence. I arch into his touch, toes trapped in a continuous curl.

I want to let go, but after weeks of denial, followed by the excruciating hours of his dominance, I cling to the edge by a frayed thread that refuses to snap.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” He hooks a finger into me, stroking a spot I can’t resist, while his thumb circles my clit. “You’ve earned this.”

When I finally shatter, it’s with a sob that comes from somewhere deep inside. The release crashes into me like a soul-shaking exorcism. Oliver embraces me through it, murmuring praises.

The relief is overwhelming, devastating, and...

Beautiful.

Just like the scarlet hue of my ass.

I'm still trembling when he lifts me from the water and wraps me in a plush towel. He carries me to the massive bed at the center of his sanctum, each step lulling what's left of my nerves.

The sheets welcome my fevered skin, cool as silk on a winter day. Sleep tugs at me, promising the kind of deep rest that's eluded me since my world slid off its axis. Even as he splays my thighs, I'm ready to let it pull me under.

But Oliver has other plans.

The vibrator hums to life against my sensitive flesh, and I gasp, trying to squirm away.

"Please, I can't?—"

"Who's in control?" he asks, one hand pinning my hipbone to the bed. His lids hang low, dark eyes smoldering with command.

"You are, sir."

"And if I want to give you ten more orgasms, what will you do about it?"

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

“I-I don’t...what do you mean?—“

“You’ll do nothing but lie there and take each one.”

The wand pulses harder, forcing me back to a state of arousal with cruel intentions. My back bows off the bed as reckless need shudders through me. Before I can reclaim my breath, he slides down and replaces the vibrator with his tongue.

Each wet stroke unleashes fresh tremors. I clutch the sheets, voice splintering into hoarse cries as another climax surges.

“Sir,” I sob, trembling. “No more.”

“Every time you beg me to stop, I’ll add another.”

I bite my lip, holding back the plea. Unbidden, my knees inch closer together.

“Wide open, Novalee.” He slaps my inner thigh. “Do I need to get the rope?”

“No, sir.” Shaking my head, I groan.

He returns to my pussy, lips nipping, fingers lodging inside me. The vibrator aids him in breaking me apart.

I’ve lost all control, my muscles cramping with each forced climax.

He doesn’t stop at two or even three.

Oliver holds me captive through five more since the one I gave him in the tub, each orgasm harsher than the last.

By the end, I'm wrecked.

Tears streak down my cheeks as I tremble in the wreckage of overstimulation. I sag against the bed, every layer unraveled, and only then does he show mercy.

He gathers me into his arms, tucks a blanket around us, and draws me to his chest. My head rests beneath his chin, cheek pressed to the warm rise and fall of his breath. One of his legs hooks over mine, cocooning me in a tender hold.

We sink in the aftermath, skin to skin. Sometime later, as my thoughts begin to surface, I realize...

I'm confused.

Not only by my response to him, but by the gentleness of his touch, the steady beat of his heart against my ear, the soft brush of his foot nudging mine under the covers.

Mostly, I'm confused because he made me come in endless agony, yet he's lying here, awake and...

Hard.

I shift slightly, pressing into the thick ridge straining between us. His cock twitches, but he doesn't move or ask for anything.

"Sir?"

His lips tilt, a smile I sense more than see. "You can relax that bratty tongue. No

more punishment for tonight.”

I lift my gaze, and he angles back to meet it. My pulse stumbles, because he’s sexier than I’ve ever seen him.

His black hair, tousled from the humidity of our bath, falls in thick waves that tempt my fingers. He smells fresh, with something deeper underneath—a hint of earth wrapped in mahogany.

“Novalee?” His gravelly voice reels me in, and I blink, caught staring with an ember of attraction too raw to hide. “What’s on your mind?”

“What about...?” I trail off, nodding toward the unmistakable bulge between us.

“Ask what you want to ask.”

“Don’t you want to...finish?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

“I finished you six times. Was that not enough?” The question’s blunt, but his tone teases.

“I meant you.”

“Tonight’s not about me.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out, so I snap it shut.

He watches me a moment longer, dark lashes heavy over eyes that haven’t lost their heat. “This confuses you.”

“Yes! None of you have ever put me first.”

Except Sebastian.

I lock the thought away before it guts me.

“Don’t mistake my restraint for an act of gentlemanly behavior. I’ve had plans for you since you walked into my house.”

The warmth seeps out of me, chased off by suspicion. “You used Dr. Price to groom me, didn’t you?” I glance around the room, taking in the apparatuses Oliver introduced me to.

“I did. But only because you needed preparation.”

“Preparation for what? This?” As soon as the words settle between us, I know better.

He means the trip to the States in two days.

“The initiation,” I say, anxiety fluttering in my stomach. “What’s going to happen there?”

“Tonight was about you. What happens in the circle is about what I get to take from you.”

“And what is that?”

“Your sassy mouth.” He slips a finger between my lips. “My cock will initiate all the places I’m allowed to explore.”

“You plan to take me anally.”

“Yes.”

“And orally.”

“Most definitely.”

“And I’m not allowed to come.”

All statements. All true.

“Not in the circle, but if you behave, I might give you relief later that night.”

“I’m more worried about my safety than an orgasm, Oliver. The last time I went abroad...” My voice thickens, and I have to swallow past the remembered anguish.

“Well, you know how that turned out.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” His palm curves over my cheek. “I’ve already hired private security.”

“Why do we need security?”

“Just a precaution.” His calm voice steadies the fragile trust growing between us. “It’s a team I’ve worked with before. A guard will be stationed outside your suite the entire time we’re at the Davenport Estate. I want you to feel safe.”

“We’re going to have our own rooms?”

“Of course.” His brows furrow. “Outside of this room, I don’t share my personal space with anyone.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

Something about that stings. “I wasn’t assuming anything.”

“That came out wrong.” He tucks a tangled lock behind my ear. “What I should have said is that I haven’t since Talitha. It’s not something I do, Novalee.”

“No need to explain. I understand.”

“Do you?” He lifts my chin, forcing my gaze back to his. “I know you have complicated feelings for the chancellor, and your love for Sebastian goes without saying. But tonight, you and me...what should have been merely physical was a bit more, don’t you think?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Fair enough. You’re not ready to define this, just like I’m not ready to open up certain parts of myself.”

“Like your personal space.” My tone is wry, all hurt gone at reading between the lines of his explanation.

He doesn’t deny it, and yet his expression is unguarded in a way I didn’t think was possible for the always-in-control Oliver Whitney.

What passed between us tonight was brutal and beautiful, raw enough to reach something untouched inside me.

For the first time since losing Sebastian, I wasn’t spiraling in grief. I was alive, every

inch of my skin tingling, every breath steeped in sensation.

Oliver gave that to me.

And I suspect I gave him something, too.

Not solace or healing, but an intense union between two souls still carrying the ones they lost.

His grief wears the name Talitha.

Mine will always whisper Sebastian.

We may never be whole again.

But in this moment, tangled in each other's arms, we don't have to be.

20

The flight is a blur of tinted windows and restless sleep. We arrived late last night at the sprawling Davenport Estate, the chauffeur guiding us through an iron gate that separates the brick mansion from Portland's glittering skyline.

After a fitful night, I spent the day drifting between jet lag and anxiety in my private suite, with the promised guard stationed outside my door.

Oliver kept his word.

"You look stunning," he says, offering his arm. As I slide mine into the crook of his elbow, his fingers glide along my skin, leaving a possessive trail. "And I'm pleased you're wearing your own design."

“Thank you. I worked around the clock to finish it in time.”

The sweetheart gown drapes like liquid sin, sculpted from the same burgundy silk that once hung unfinished on a mannequin. What began as a skeletal vision now clings to me, every seam a quiet resurrection.

Oliver looks equally devastating in a dark gray tux, tailored to the sculpted build of his frame. A hint of cedar and smoke envelops me as he steps close, sending an arrow of need straight to my core. He escorts me downstairs with two security guards in tow, who fade into the background as we enter the ballroom. I adjust the black mask covering the upper half of my face and can't help but think...

Another damn masquerade.

Where Ford's bash flaunted its debauchery behind gauzy curtains, this gathering hides its true nature beneath crystal chandeliers and champagne flutes. Society's elite mingle over hors d'oeuvres and polite conversation, none the wiser to what will unfold later tonight for a select few.

But maybe that's part of the allure—masks, food, and wine before disappearing into parts unknown while the silent auction winds down.

The contrast is striking.

Here, women glitter in proper designer gowns, with no lingerie-inspired numbers in sight, while men stand tall in tailored tuxedos. A string quartet plays in the corner. Along one wall, the auction table gleams with curated charity items that disguise the evening's true agenda.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

Whatever awaits, I can't help but imagine it unfolding in some hidden space below, like the dungeon back home.

An elegant couple approaches, dressed in gold and extravagance. It takes me a moment to recognize them as the Davenports, our hosts, whom I met briefly last night. Now they greet us with that same manicured grace, as if warmth were something they rehearsed for years.

"We're so glad you made it," Mr. Davenport says, his blond hair smoothed back for the evening. He extends a hand to Oliver before turning to me with a smile full of perfect white teeth. "Miss Van Buren, lovely to see you again."

"You as well, sir."

The title slips out without thought or intention, and a hush lingers between us. Mr. Davenport raises my hand to his lips as Oliver shifts, sliding his palm over the small of my back.

Virginia, his wife, breaks the tension. "I can hardly believe we have a real-life queen as a guest. We Americans tend to get a little excited over royalty." She takes the hand her husband just kissed between her own. "I trust you slept well after your trip?"

"Yes," I manage, despite the lump of nerves in my throat.

"Well, you look amazing." Her dark hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail, braided around the crown. "Your gown is flawless. Is it one of yours?"

I nod, surprised she knows.

“Mr. Whitney mentioned you’re a designer. I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.”

Mr. Davenport rests a hand on his wife’s shoulder in an ushering gesture and nods toward the dinner guests on the other side of the room. He guides us through the crowd, weaving between diamonds and tuxedos, until we reach a table where a couple is already seated.

“I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Channing and his wife, Kayla,” he announces.

The dark-haired man stands in greeting, his eyes a startling shade of blue that catches me off guard. For the briefest moment, I think of Sebastian.

Then the thought is gone, swallowed by another round of handshakes and pleasantries.

I take my seat beside Kayla, Oliver settling next to me, and ignore the chilled glass of white wine at my place. I’m not about to touch it—not after what happened in Los Angeles.

The men begin discussing overseas investments, accounting issues, and a kind of restructuring talk that sounds too coded to be about business. I’m only half-listening when Kayla leans in, the chandelier threading glints of red through her auburn hair.

“How are you enjoying your visit to the States?”

“I’m still recovering from jet lag,” I admit, nudging the wine aside with a quiet scrape of glass on linen. “We arrived late last night, but I spent most of the day in my suite.”

“Time zones can be brutal. Do you have plans to see the city while you’re here?”

“Oliver promised to take me sightseeing before we return home.”

“Portland has beautiful gardens,” Virginia cuts in.

Kayla nods. “The coast is breathtaking too, even during the winter.”

A female server approaches, wine bottle in hand. She looks close to my age, younger than the wives at the table, with her blond hair swept up in a classy twist.

“More wine, sir?” Her voice drops to a honeyed whisper, fingers lingering on Mr. Davenport’s shoulder.

“Please,” he answers with a wide smile as she bends to refill his glass, offering a view down the front of her dress shirt. She rounds the table, paying special attention to the men, radiating flirtation and sugary perfume.

The blonde reaches Kayla’s husband last. “You’re looking empty, sir.” Brushing against him, she tips the bottle with a teasing glance.

Kayla’s shoulders tense. “Careful, sweetie. You’re pouring my husband’s wine, not auditioning your cleavage.”

The server straightens, but it’s Mr. Channing’s expression that pulls my attention. His blue gaze narrows at his wife, subtle disapproval making her face flame. She snaps her mouth shut and stares at her lap.

Virginia lets out a practiced laugh. “Our staff is always so attentive, isn’t that right, darling?” She places her hand over her husband’s, and he nods, clearly entertained.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

When the server reaches Oliver, he traces the condensation on his full glass. “I’m good, thank you.”

I take in the dynamics, the subtle tension undercutting smiles and sips of wine—power and performance, masked by charm.

By the time the first course arrives, conversation is in swing again, but the energy has shifted. Partway through the meal, Gage leans close to Kayla and whispers something in her ear that makes her cheeks flush as scarlet as my nails. Whatever he said, it wasn’t praise for her territorial display.

Kayla swallows hard, but her composure recovers as she turns back to me. “I hear you’re a designer.”

She catches me mid-bite, so all I can do is nod.

“Talented and royal,” Mr. Davenport says, his interested gaze following the movement of my fork. “What a fascinating combination.”

Oliver finds my knee under the table, and his possessive gesture sends a delicious shiver up my spine. His thumb traces a slow circle, dragging silk and lustful memories along with it. Desperate for a distraction, I change my mind about the wine and reach for my glass, hoping to douse the fire he so easily stirs.

Halfway through, I regret taking the first sip.

A flush spreads over my cheeks, the air suddenly too warm. When I glance his way, I

find his knowing eyes already on me.

Oliver stands, and the scrape of his chair draws more than a few glances. Napkins fall. Conversations pause.

“If you’ll excuse us,” he says to our dinner companions. “I believe my date would like a dance.”

I set my glass down and rise, legs tingling from wine, want, and anticipation. He offers me a hand, his expression magnetic, desire the gravity that pulls me to his side.

Soft classical music lures us to the center of the floor, where couples glide in a sensual cadence. Drawing me flush against him, he slides a palm up my back and guides us into an easy, swaying flow.

At first, neither of us speak.

Our bodies do.

His heat tantalizes me, urging me closer, barely a breath between us. “Oliver?”

“Hm?” His chin rests on my head.

“Will Kayla and her husband be present tonight?”

“Yes.” A beat passes, followed by another whirl, and then he says, “Are you nervous?”

“Should I be?”

His rhythm falters, as if he’s considering the answer. “As long as you trust me, no.”

“Do I need to call you sir?”

“Only if you want to.” There’s a smile in his tone. “But you don’t have to say anything at all. The men don’t want to hear you speak, Novalee. Your job is to obey and look pretty, both of which you’re an expert.”

I veer back and scowl at him.

He laughs. “You’re excellent at scathing looks, too.” He dips until his mouth hovers near my ear, his breath igniting gooseflesh along my nape.

“I can’t wait to hear you beg again.”

He inches back, lips tilting into a smirk.

My mouth parts.

We’re much too close right now...which is ridiculous, considering the experience we shared a few nights ago.

But this is different.

Page 67

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

This is intimate and...

Too familiar.

My heart aches as I push against his chest, gaining a few precious inches. “I won’t beg.”

“Is that the same lie you told yourself the other night, before I made you scream?”

“I’ve been thoroughly satisfied,” I counter, my tone egging him on. “You probably shouldn’t have given me so many orgasms.”

“Oh, Novalee.” With a shake of his head, he chuckles. “Did you forget about Vance’s elixir?”

Oh God.

He did warn me.

I search for the right response—something to give me a sliver of advantage—but as he turns us toward the French doors across the room, my thoughts slam into a wall.

Near the champagne fountain, a woman leans in, her expression serious.

But it’s the man beside her who freezes me.

His masked face is angled enough to catch the line of his jaw, the sweep of hair

curling over his collar, the distinctive way he stands.

Cocksure and ready to take on the world.

My breath stutters, then stops altogether.

Because for one impossible second...

I'm looking at Sebastian.

21

My mind is shattered. Even after dancing, dessert, and polite conversation that blurred into background noise, I can't steady my thoughts. Now, as Mr. Davenport escorts Oliver and me down a quiet corridor, the music from the ballroom fades.

But I'm still haunted.

It happened so fast. A flicker of movement across the room, a man half-turned in profile, listening to something the woman beside him said. But for a single, unthinkable moment, I was certain.

So certain that my heart kicked out of sync and my breath stalled as I gaped at a ghost in a tailored tux.

It wasn't him.

The hair was too dark, the jawline buried beneath scruff Sebastian would never grow that long. The stranger and his companion disappeared through the French doors, probably in search of a quiet place to rendezvous in the garden.

Not the love of my life.

Just a random man at a masquerade.

So why am I still shaking?

As Mr. Davenport leads us into a private lounge, I push the storm of thoughts aside. Whatever I saw or imagined won't help me now. Not with what waits in this room.

"I'll be right outside," our host says, closing the door with a soft click.

I let the silence settle as I take in the space. Luxury meets privacy, with soft light spilling from crystal sconces. A floor-length mirror reflects the chaise and vanity, both framed in gold. Jasmine and secrets float on the air.

Oliver finds my zipper without a word. He draws it down with agonizing tenderness, and the silk falls away in a whisper of burgundy as his knuckles graze the curve of my spine.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

“Arms up,” he commands.

I comply, watching his reflection as he retrieves a garment bag from a wheeled rack. What he pulls free is little more than white wisps and strategically placed panels.

“That isn’t a dress,” I say, challenging him with my tone. “It’s lingerie.”

“It’s both.” He traces the curve of my shoulder. “And something else entirely.”

The material seduces my skin as he slips it over my head. Each strap settles into place, forming a deceptive lattice. Hidden within the design are subtle metal rings and reinforced seams—attachment points disguised as ornament.

This gown was engineered for more than display.

After he’s done, he removes both of our masks. Then he bends to coax my feet out of the black heels I wore to the ball. Barefoot now, adorned in nothing but flowing ribbons of decadence, I glance once more at the mirror as he guides me toward the door.

What stares back isn’t the same girl who walked in.

The dress, if it can be called that, clings in open defiance of modesty. Pearl-white gossamer shimmers with every motion, sheer panels crossing under my breasts in a deliberate frame. My nipples peek through vertical slits, stiffened by the chill in the air. Cords and fabric flutter at my hips before trailing past my knees.

I don't look like a queen.

I'm an ethereal offering.

And Mr. Davenport's gaze lands on me with unsettling approval.

"Right this way," he says, leading us into a library with walls of shelved books. The air reeks of lemon-polished wood and old money. Not a single window breaks the room's dim hush.

A table holds two documents, a silver pen between them, and a leather folder waiting to seal the agreement.

"Standard nondisclosure," Mr. Davenport says.

Oliver signs without hesitation, and I follow, my hand steady until the folder snaps shut with an echo of finality.

Mr. Davenport moves to a shelf behind him and presses on a book's spine. A hidden panel clicks before swinging inward to reveal a staircase spiraling into the shadows.

"Shall we?"

My throat tightens, fear closing in fast. A dizzy second sends me reeling, and I shift my weight to counter the tilt under my feet. Both men catch the stumble.

Oliver grasps my arm, looking at our host. "Will you give us a minute?"

Mr. Davenport studies my flushed cheeks and shallow breaths, a flicker of compassion in his gaze. "Take your time. We'll be down below with the slaves."

His word choice scrapes through me like broken glass.

Slaves.

Not women or even wives.

He disappears down the staircase, and Oliver cups my face, thumbs a gentle caress at my temples. “You’re doing great. At dinner, you won over Davenport and Channing. Kayla and Virginia welcomed you with envy and admiration.”

His touch steadies my trembling, but fear still sours my gut.

“I know you’re scared.” His voice lowers to a velvety coax. “But you’re wired for this, Novalee.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

He extends his hand, palm up.

“I know you can, sweetheart.”

Page 69

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

It's a command disguised as an offering, but I take it. Adrenaline pulses through my veins as he steers me down the steps. Each one carries us deeper until we emerge into a circular chamber.

The couples stand in perfect formation, the men still in their tuxes from the ball, while the wives kneel at their feet—dressed like me but in different jeweled tones.

Ruby, sapphire, emerald, amethyst, topaz, and beyond.

A rainbow of submission draped in shimmer and silence surrounds me, and I'm the pearl they mean to pry open.

As Oliver urges me forward, I catch sight of Kayla in a scarlet ensemble that glows in the soft lighting. She offers a slight nod, but her posture says more than words.

We're all bound by the same rules tonight.

I scan the dim room, gaze darting from couple to couple until it clicks. Twelve in total, situated around an altar-like table where a frosted bottle and silver spoon await.

Vance's elixir.

My stomach clenches as I recall the unbearable consequences of three measured doses.

The incessant throbbing.

Blood surging in an endless loop.

No relief.

Oliver guides me to the center and picks up the bottle. “Dr. Morgan’s invention is quite genius,” he announces to our audience. “One teaspoon arouses, two creates desperate need, and three does both while making climax physically impossible.”

He pours the first spoon and lifts it to my lips. “It’s an effective way to punish disobedience, or as in the queen’s case, ensure purity. As a virgin, her hymen must remain intact, orgasm denied.”

If the liquid had a taste, I imagine it would burn bitter. But it slides down smooth, one spoonful after another, until the last drop is gone and every eye in the room watches in curious wonder.

Without another word, Oliver works the features of my garment, finding the anchors and winding the cords around my limbs, crafting bonds from the same material that whispered across my skin moments ago.

Through heavy-lidded eyes, I spy the wives undergoing the same transformation, each woman rising to her feet to become a slave.

Oliver nods toward Mr. Davenport, and something clicks overhead. A quiet whirl follows as the cords of my gown begin to tighten.

At first, I stay grounded, my heart racing as fabric draws taut. Then the system claims me, hidden pulleys lifting, inch by inch, until I’m suspended in the air like a splayed starfish caught in a current.

It’s a pose I can’t control and wouldn’t know how to name, my arms and legs bent

and spread apart.

The others ascend around me, twelve women hanging in a carousel of living marionettes, circling the virgin at the center.

Some are gagged. Others grit their teeth as jeweled anal plugs breach their rears in silent ceremony. Virginia Davenport, draped in plum, already has her mouth wrapped around her husband's cock.

Oliver ambles closer, attracting my focus as he pulls a pair of clamps from his pocket. He holds up the delicate adornments, pearls swaying from the ends. "You have such responsive nipples. I can't resist."

My first instinct is to protest. Didn't he inflict enough pain the other night? But as a loud moan breaks the quiet, colliding with someone else's guttural wail, I bite back an objection.

He asked me to trust him. That's all I can do.

His finger grazes an exposed peak, and the first flutter of need stirs at my core. He fastens the clamps with measured pressure, making my breath hitch at the bite. It's a pain I know well now, fueling arousal while never dulling the sting of those pinchers.

"These are gorgeous on you."

His dark, sensual praise shoots straight to my sex, a live wire I can't fight. Like a carnival ride poised to drop, I'm a powerless passenger.

Oliver moves behind me and steps between my legs. The cords pull taut as he brings me closer, breath ghosting across the flesh of my thigh. Then his tongue finds me in slow, familiar strokes.

Even without the effects of the elixir rushing through my bloodstream, I have zero defense against this man. A violent jolt takes me, hips straining against the bindings.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

Holy hell, denial scorches every nerve. Minutes in, I'm dripping for him, crazed for a release that won't come.

"Please, sir." The title escapes before I can swallow it.

He groans, thick with satisfaction. "That word was made for your lips."

Then he doubles his efforts, clamping his teeth around my clit and shaking his head, wild and relentless. My stomach heaves, as if trying to purge the orgasm from my system, but the pressure only builds—an endless rush of blood that won't stop.

I choke on a cry.

The room hums around us in cries, gasps, and the slap of flesh, but all I feel is him.

"I need to...please, Oliver!"

"That's it, sweetheart." His amusement vibrates against my flesh. "Beg like I said you would."

"It's too much," I whimper.

"It's not enough." His tongue plunges into my opening, and I pant through raw, uncontrollable pleas.

In my delirium, I sense the tremor in his breath, the rough imprint of his fingers on my thighs. He moans against my mound, betraying the fracture in his control before

abruptly veering back to yank on my restraints.

He spins me around and adjusts the cords until I drop a couple of feet, all gentleness gone. His zipper comes down in a rough tug, and then he's guiding his cock to my lips, eyes hooded and crazed.

Something primal rises in me. I open without thought, starved for the taste of him, and he slides right in. His essence hits me first, a mere second to register the feral notes of his desire before he drags me down his length, holding me there for the longest seconds of my life.

"Relax your throat."

I try. I do. But he's thick and relentless, pushing deeper until I'm gagging around him.

"Fuck, yes, Novalee," he grits out, teeth clenched as his pelvis grinds in sharp, rhythmic bursts. "Such a good fucking girl."

Those obscene words do something to me.

I swallow him down, despite the gagging and drool escaping my bruised lips.

He locks my head in place, controlling the angle, setting an unapologetic pace as he claims my mouth and throat with complete abandon.

It's not until he's close, breaths ragged and muscles tight, that he pulls out. His swollen tip gleams wet, and I only get a glimpse of his impressive shaft before he whirls me around again.

Lube drips between my ass cheeks.

My breath snags on a shudder.

Oliver isn't afraid to inflict pain, so I know it's going to hurt. As the straps of my dress tilt my ass in his favor, I brace myself.

Just breathe.

His hands are warm and steady on my hipbones as he eases in the tip, allowing me precious seconds to adjust. But it's not enough, and I'm unprepared when he impales me on his cock in one savage thrust.

We let out identical groans that live on opposite ends of the spectrum.

One born of pain.

The other of pleasure.

He takes me like a force of nature, as if he's been running this scenario through his head every night for the last three weeks. He's a master at leveraging my vulnerability, employing gravity to open me to every thick inch of him.

Each thrust drags a sobbing moan from my being, and I don't know which is stronger—the burn or the need to fly.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:29 am

The elixir keeps me skyward as he drives toward the finish line. He lets go of my hips and hauls me back with an arm across my stomach, his chest flush to my spine. His mouth finds my neck, breath scorching against my skin. Then he sinks his teeth into my shoulder, and that's when I feel it.

The instant he lets go.

Still buried deep, he groans through the release, his growl vibrating on my collarbone as he brands me there with a kiss.

It's a mark of ownership that stings more than it soothes.

Because virgin or not, in the middle of a deviant circle in a foreign land, I belong to Oliver Whitney.

For several moments, his breaths outpace the beats of my heart. Tension bleeds from his frame, his release still echoing through our joined bodies. His fingertip trails down my thigh, the touch tender before slipping away.

He steps back, and I'm left hanging in the aftermath as the rasp of his zipper breaks the silence.

Around us, the chamber stirs. Tuxedo jackets rustle, and voices murmur as the men tend to their wives. One by one, the women descend with unsteady grace, limbs loosening as they return to the ground. But I remain suspended, a trussed offering, the storm quieting around me while it still screams through my blood.

Oliver begins to take down his masterpiece. As he lowers me to my feet, sweat and pheromones coat my skin. My thighs tremble, nipples numb beneath jeweled vises. He removes the clamps, unwinds cords and ribbons, his touch no longer possessive.

Now it's worshipful.

Free of restraints, I sink against him, intoxicated by endorphins and boneless with need. He embraces me in the quiet, and then, with a reverent whisper meant only for me...

"Thank you." He brushes the hair back from my flushed cheeks. "I have the antidote. If you wait for me in your suite, I'll reward your patience."

I blink at him, still floating between reality and the dark euphoria of the evening. "I didn't know there was an antidote."

"Vance doesn't advertise it." He nods toward the men and their wives. "We have business to discuss, but afterward, I'll come take care of you."

My sex throbs in anticipation.

As Kayla and Virginia gather me between them, each taking an arm, my sluggish thoughts unravel. We make our way up the staircase, through the library, and back into the powder room, where my evening gown and shoes wait.

I halt in front of the mirror and trace the forming bruise on my collarbone. Something about the mark excites and unsettles me. I can't explain why, but it's visual proof that tonight happened.

Kayla helps me back into my dress and heels.

Virginia shoves an unwanted glass of water into my hands.

I set it aside, unwilling to let go of this haze.

Outside the lounge, Oliver's security duo hovers. One steps forward and explains that the guard outside my door hasn't returned from his break. He'll stay behind to assist Oliver while the other escorts me back.

I can only nod, the weight of tonight's experience silencing my tongue.

We ascend the grand staircase in silence, each footfall echoing through the late hour. At my suite, I fumble with the keycard, my nerves still misfiring. Twice, I miss the slot before the lock finally flashes green.

The room swallows me in darkness as I step inside, the heavy door slamming shut behind me. I reach blindly for the light switch I haven't yet memorized, and that's when I see it.

A shadow where none should be.

With a hoarse gasp, I freeze against the wall. Every nerve flares. Fear cinches my vocal cords, trapping a scream that won't break free to alert the guard outside.

I stumble, disoriented and spiraling in terror, searching for the door handle.

Then I register it.

A voice I know better than my own.

One I thought I'd never hear again, drifting to my ears on a ghostly prayer.

"Novalee."