

“The way to love anything is to realize that it might be lost.”

—Gilbert K. Chesterton

ONE



Cassian

A SKY OF STARS. A cushion of clouds.

Heaven is nearly close enough to touch, and it doesn't matter.

The woman I love, attempting to sleep as we fly through the night to the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, is going through hell.

The recall of what sent her there still burns hard in my mind. We'd clutched each other in the middle of a suite at the Marriott Marquis, oblivious to the bustling heart of Manhattan below, as a news report dominated the monitor on the wall in front of us. The images, fed live from the only home she'd ever known before coming to New York with me two months ago, depicted Arcadia Island's main bridge as it exploded apart. The river below it had instantly been turned into a mire of floating wreckage—

And carnage.

The bodies of people she'd known. The friends she'd loved.

Soldiers...protecting the country she was equally devoted to.

Including the man who'd been preparing to marry her best friend.

That had been four hours ago.

Fifteen minutes after I'd proposed to *her*.

Fifteen minutes before I'd picked up my phone and ordered this jet be prepared to take off, so we could immediately fly back to that island.

It wasn't a decision that made my CIA super spy of a brother—or *her* Arcadian super soldier of a brother—anything close to thrilled. Not that

their stress could be blamed. There was a damn good chance the explosion had been orchestrated by a terrorist not even bearing a holy cause for his evil. Rune Kavill's simply a sick fuck who jacks off to the idea of global domination, and is hell-bent on acquiring Arcadia as his forward operating base from the Mediterranean. Add the masochistic ax he has to grind against the Arcadian royal family, and the recipe's been right for the bastard to form a dozen shell companies, all disguised as contractors for the infrastructure projects I've been getting ready to start on the island.

Because God forbid Mishella Santelle and I have a *moment* of smooth waters during this wild ride we're calling a relationship.

Or that the world will ever let us think otherwise.

Ella mumbles and sighs. Turns to her side and burrows against me.

Her tawny lashes flutter open—with new tears sparkling on their russet crescents.

I settle to the pillow next to her, brushing red-gold coils off of her lush face...the features I've fallen hopelessly in love with. Hers is a face so unlike any other, as if clinging to the past just like the ways of her island home. Until recently, Arcadia was a kingdom stoically committed to old-fashioned ways and a more pastoral lifestyle. In the same way, Ella's face belongs more in a Victorian cameo instead of paparazzi glare—to which she's been ruthlessly exposed since I dragged her back to New York with me two months ago.

Dragged.

It's the word that says too much and not enough at the same time—referring to one of the most brilliant business moves I've ever made, yet the one inducing my harshest cringe of shame. There was likely another way to free Ella from her parents' stifling grip but at the time, it sure as hell wasn't making itself known, so I resorted to the drastic. Put a number on it. Purchased six months of her life for forty million dollars.

Worth.

Every.

Penny.

No. Not even that. Not anymore. Beyond that.

Far Beyond.

The thought sears me as her beauty overwhelms me...as her tears gut me. I'd cut off my balls to prevent even one more of them from leaving her in sorrow—but as more trickle down her creamy cheeks, I must accept

that for now, this is all I *can* do. Gather her closer, silently willing the plane to go faster, to get her to the land she loves so deeply...

Ripped apart by a tragedy we still can't fathom.

"Cassian."

Her whisper, a broken breath against my chest, heightens my senses. I smell her, flowers and sleep and the wine I made her sip after we boarded. I feel her, full of nerves and despite the Cabernet. I crave her, just as strongly—*stronger*—as the last time she was on this plane and we were headed for the six months in New York I'd planned on using to flush her from my system. I'd been determined to take her virginity, pay her back for the gift with self-confidence to last a lifetime, then send her into that life without a backward thought for New York or me. My own sanity would be free for the same focus, back to running Court Enterprises with the same single-minded aim on my three-pronged formula for success: taking care of my mother, taking care of my employees, and taking care of my dick.

Three prongs. Simple, right? First rule of engineering: *keep it simple, shithead.*

Well, I got the "shithead" part right.

Forming even three *syllables* seems impossible at the moment, but I manage. "Hey, sweet girl."

Ella rolls a little, peering into the darkness beyond the window. "Where are we?"

"Still over the Atlantic. We will be for a while yet."

Wistful sigh. "All right. I just wish—"

"If I could speed up time I would, *arneau*."

My favorite endearment from her language causes her to turn back, one hand raising to my chest. "Perhaps I am better off wishing for something else."

I scoot a finger beneath her chin. Tug up. "Like what?"

"Maybe for time to stand still instead."

I rub my thumb over the gentle curve of her chin. "Why?"

She captures the corner of her lip beneath her teeth. Exhales shakily. "What if...things are different when we return?" More tears glisten in her bright blue gaze. "Not just the bridge and Sancti itself, but,"—she drops her stare to the bottom of my throat—"everyone."

"Everyone...like Vylet?"

As I invoke her best friend's name, her features contort. "Oh, dear Creator!" More of those damn tears fall. "She and Alak...they were everyone's hope..."

"Hope of what?" It's a quiet utterance—probably too much so—but what she needs more than anything right now isn't more tears. She needs fortitude. A wide shoulder. And dammit, I plan on being that shoulder...for the rest of her life.

"That—that it all worked," she rasps. "That two people could be 'arranged' but still find it all. Devotion, connection...love."

I hear her final word but don't comprehend it. Not really. I'm still stuck on the other word in the statement that should negate it. "Wait. *Whoa*. Vylet and Alak are—*were*—" Shit. I hate changing the tense but the sooner I get used to it, the sooner I'll start getting *her* used to it. "Your best friend, and the fiancé she was bat-shit in love with, were—"

"Arranged." She supplies it with a stunning jolt of pragmatism. Blinks at me, almost angrily. "Yes. By their parents, at the age of thirteen." A shrug hitches at the shoulder she isn't laying on. "It was a little early, but it was also clear to everyone that Vy and Alak were meant to be—"

"A little *early*?" I cut in.

A scowl, edged in more peevishness. "You do know most highborn unions, with the exception of the Cimarron royals, are contracted between the ages of sixteen and nineteen?"

"No." I don't hesitate to match her expression. "I didn't know." But in a strange way, understand her irritation that I didn't. Arcadia is a land in a bizarre state of flux, caught between the security of their old ways and the light speed of a modern new world. Logically, ways of forging marriages and families will be one of the last social components to stick—exhibited by the very situation she was in when we met, and the reason I had to act fast with my contracting creativity.

My confession buffs the edge on her ire. She cups my face with a gentled expression. "The only reason *I* was not betrothed years ago is because my parents enjoy diving their heads in the sand." She pouts when my lips quirk up. "Oh, my. How badly did I mess *that* one up?"

I laugh and shake my head. My woman and her talent for butchering idioms is close to legend across Manhattan, though this time I get to say, "Close enough for a backboard shot, *arneau*. Why did your parents bury their heads in the sand about your betrothal? Better yet, let me guess. They kept holding back for something better?"

She takes a whirl at the twitching lips. For good measure, adds an adorable little roll of her eyes. “Something like that...yes.”

I work my head a little closer to hers. Get so close, I damn near bump our noses. “Well. They were smart, then.”

“Oh?” Her features flare, a sardonic little move. “Please share, Mr. Court...how is *that* so?”

“They *did* get something better.”

“Really, now?” Her eyes flare in mock astonishment.

“Uh-huh.” I slant a soft but decidedly sultry kiss across her lips. As we move apart, add in a growling husk, “Really.”

“Hmmm.” She issues it with more deliberation, knowing exactly how that specific utterance affects me...and my cock. “And I suppose that ‘something’...is you.”

I let another rough rumble curl up my throat while sliding tighter to her from the waist down. Groan deeper as I slide a thigh between hers, pressing my crotch against her lower belly. Dear Christ, she feels good. The softness to my hardness. The relief for my ache. The kindness and light and passion my life has needed for so damn long...

“Well...I’d never just presume I had the position.” A smirk curls up one side of my mouth, betraying how I don’t mean a word of it. Thank fuck for the answering heat in her eyes, confirming my cockiness is well-justified—though if I had to fight anyone to earn her, including the pair of social schemers who call themselves her parents, I would summon a whole goddamn army to do it.

But I’d much rather focus on what I was destined to do from the first moment our eyes met.

Love her.

I’m a goner to the cause already—especially as she slants a little glance, blue eyes sparkling, and rasps, “Presuming is never the wisest option, you know.”

I tilt my head. “Wise advice from a brilliant woman.”

Her gaze narrows. “Now you are just trying to flatter me.”

“Now I’m just trying to *compliment* you.” I swallow hard, struggling to maintain the charming banter—*not* easy with her silken body shifting against me, tempting me even through my pants and her skirt. “Flattery is for empty words. No words I speak to you are empty, *favori*.”

Her fingers, still against my face, spread wide. Her expression shifts, firming into solemnity. “Nothing about you is empty, Cassian.”

The grate to her words is my undoing...and my invitation. I heed both, giving in and moving in, taking her mouth with a deeper sweep of passion, a growing swell of desire.

With a gorgeous sigh of surrender, she lets me in.

Her tongue wet and warm, dances with mine. Her body, sweet and soft, trembles for me. Soon, a mewl undulates up the length of her throat. I answer with a long, dark moan, not certain if it's in warning or capitulation. Maybe a little of both. Dear fuck, she makes it so hard to think sometimes. When she gives me her desire like this...exposes her need like this...craves me so earnestly like this...

...all I want to do is give her every damn thing she wants...

...all I want to feel is the completion of her soul...

...all I want to hear is the fulfillment of her need...

“*Cassian.*”

Exactly like that.

“I know, *arneau.*” I rasp it while pressing over, rolling her fully to her back. She sprawls against the cushions, where the moonlight bounces off the clouds and glows across the bed. After a few deft slides of fabric, it also illuminates the perfect curves of her bare hips...and the triangle of white lace at the juncture of her thighs. *White.* Never before have I found the color an appealing one for lingerie—if the occasion ever called for it—but for my little Arcadian, no other color seems worthy. She is the purest part of my spirit. The unfiltered path to my light. The perfect start of a joy I never thought I’d know again.

“Oh *my.*” Her whisper matches the slip of the lace as I peel the panties down. Every muscle in my body craves to twist and tear the things free, but right now she needs release and rapture, not a grunting caveman. So I clench everything back as I bare her then spread her, soothing her back against the pillows the moment she rises up, almost seeming embarrassed.

“*Yaslan riére, arneau. Je yorum conne-toi.*”

She stills. Her eyes widen. I’m usually the one benefiting from the arousal her native language induces. With the tables turned, she’s a quivering deer in the headlights...my sexy-as-fuck little Bambi.

“Wh-what?” she finally blurts.

I kiss her again. Take my time, slow and sensual, to part the seam of her lips. Coax my tongue inside the heated recesses beyond, ravishing and

taunting and seducing. At the same time, I swirl fingers along the inside of her thigh. Higher...higher...

“Hmmm. What part didn’t you understand, beautiful? Isn’t ‘*lie back, little gift...I want to taste you*’ pretty clear?”

She swallows. “Y-yes...but...”

“But what?” I slide her forward, parting her legs wider in the doing. “I’ve got at least another four hours to prove I was well worth your wait, Miss Santelle...and I plan on putting them to damn good use.”



Mishella

WELL WORTH THE WAIT.

Dear, sweet Creator. The man would be worth a thousand waits of a hundred years each, even if he never learned all the filthiest bedroom phrases in my language. But as Vylet would say, it is one hell of a hot-shit start.

Vylet.

Sadness knifes my middle. She is one of the largest reasons I defied both Saynt and Damon, the one-two punch of Santelle and Court family protectiveness, to leave New York at once. Thank the powers, Cassian supported my decision before it was even made. He simply knew, as soon as we learned of the devastation in Sancti and the price Vy personally paid because of it, how I’d need to return home.

And there, like a golden chain connected in my soul, is the deepest reason I love him. Am already bound to him, despite our “engagement” being but a few hours old.

He knows me. All of me.

Accepts it. All of it.

The matched pair of dysfunction known as my parents. The cynicism I bore because of them, perhaps the reason why I was more comfortable treating our connection as a contract at first. On the opposite end of the scale, my hopeless naiveté about so much of life in the modern world—the very world *he* helped create with the genius brain beneath that beautiful head of gilt-colored hair.

The head now sliding its way up my thigh, from my left knee.

The golden waves, sending tingles along my skin with every new inch explored.

The bold forehead, striking a match to my core as it pushes at me...right *there*...

“Cassian!”

I do not expect him to relent. Nor do I expect the imperative push of his hands, one on each inner thigh, compelling me to remain open for him.

Surrendering to him...

“I said I wanted to taste you, Ella.” His voice is a twist of snarl and seduction, vibrating the trimmed strip of curls that are now the only barrier between his mouth and my pussy. “And you’re going to open up...and let me.”

As if I need any reinforcement after that dictate, I look down—into the unblinking authority of his green wizard eyes. The man may be crouched between my knees, but there is no doubt to him—or now, to me—who is controlling the lust here. *My* lust.

With that recognition, I know my response has been narrowed to two words.

“Yes, Cassian.”

A sound erupts from his chest, dark and low, before vibrating from his lips...which dip between my intimate petals. I shudder, that first incredible contact sizzling through me like lightning, shaking me like thunder. Cassian braces his hold tighter, keeping me spread, forcing me to take the slow, relentless laps of his delving, magical tongue.

It is so much.

Too much.

As my body succumbs to him, my mind threatens to follow. It terrifies me...just the threat of that unhinging, during this hour when so much of my sanity relies on me keeping all the hinges intact. But he continues, exploring my flesh with excruciating leisure, making me feel every exquisite, electric arc of his purposeful, patient licks...

Lightning.

Thunder.

Too much.

I need the damn storm. *Now*.

Attempt to tell him so, digging both hands into the thick decadence of his hair, I yank hard.

Utterly. Useless.

He shirks his hold from my legs in order to grab my wrists. Lifts them with calm but commanding power, riveting me with a newly forceful stare.

“Put them over your head, *armeau*. Wrap them around the pillow. And *keep them there.*”

For a moment—a long one—I do not move, except to peel back my lips and let him see my locked teeth.

For the same moment, Cassian also does not flinch. By a muscle. Wizard’s stare. Warlock’s smirk. Emperor’s absolution. Royal domination.

He is going to unravel me. And dammit, I already hate it him for it.

And have never loved him more.

With a soft snarl, I roll back. The pillow is a taunting cloud, now puffed a little higher by both of my backward fists, twisting as Cassian laves my slit all over again.

His tongue is fire.

His tongue is poetry.

His tongue is torment, the moment he finds the perfect spark of my storm, and fans it again and again with fresh force.

“Oh! Ahhhh!”

He hums with carnal satisfaction, suckling the cyclone even higher, turning me into a shuddering, quaking twig in the gale, clinging to sanity despite knowing that the end is near...

Sweet *Creator*.

The

end

is—

“*Cassian!*”

And I am finished, thrumming and overflowing, trembling and screaming, rocking and bucking, unable to take anymore—until he gives it anyway, hooking his hands around my thighs, spreading my core like a succulent fruit he cannot get enough of. I moan, wordlessly begging him to stop, but he spikes me into yet another climax, ripping me from the moors of sanity until my body utterly dissolves for him—

Just before my self-control meets the same fate.

It all floods out—the heartache, the horror, the sorrow, the fear—everything I have kept stuffed down since those images from Sancti blared into my brain and tore into my heart. The schism has left cracks. Tiny prison breaks of tears have seeped their way past those barricades, though

I have allowed nothing out yet. Nothing responsible for hauling me out like now, into the glare of truth, exposed and raw, naked and vulnerable, open and on fire.

The sobs are wrenching. Exhausting. Freeing. They turn me into a blubbery mess, even as Cassian slides up, unzips himself with alarming alacrity, and aligns his hips between mine. The broad crown of his erection, pushing at my swollen entrance, is already slick with his need.

“Oh...*Creator*.”

“That’s it,” he replies to my gasp. His voice soothes over me while his sex slides into me...fully dominating me. “Give it all to me, *favori*. Open it for me.”

“Cassian.” I look away. I am ashamed of the achy shiver beneath my plea, though at the same time, embrace it. In letting go of my walls, I can let in his strength. My ultimate weakness has become his perfect power—a force he returns in every long, hard, determined thrust of his body.

But soon, even he trembles. His jaw hardens, his arms clench, and his buttocks tighten. Every hard, perfect muscle in his body betrays how he holds himself back.

For me.

Yes, he is ready to pour free. But he will not, until I do. I recognize that truth in his eyes—yet so much more too. This all only begins with my physical release. He does not simply want my orgasm. He wants the surrender of my soul, the ache in my heart.

Because he wants to heal the cracks in both.

Like the miracle he is in my life.

“I love you so much.”

“Then give yourself to me.” He adds a perfect hitch of his hips at the end of each lunge, causing the tip of his cock to stroke the rare ridge of flesh deep inside, making every inch of my core shimmer in new sensation. “Show it all to me, Ella. You’re safe, my love. Let it all go, *raisquette*.”

And once more, I am completely stilled—paralyzed by a dart of utter magic from his lips. The word, Arcadian for *reason*, is so much more to Arcadians. When a man uses it with a woman, especially with his body buried inside her, it is usually because he is married to her—and pledging his body to hers for all time. Right now, thousands of feet above the earth and hundreds of miles from dry land, it literally has to mean nothing.

But it means everything.

Emotions burst from me...everywhere. Trembling, sobbing, shuddering even harder and higher...

As Cassian empties himself inside me.

He hisses through the climax, baring his teeth in the moonlight. Strains his head back on a groan of primal release. Finally lunges back down, shoulders hunching, as he plunges his mouth to mine, soaking up my sobs with his passion, pulling in my sorrow to every inch of his own soul. No doubt in my mind lingers about it, as he drags up with eyes glittering like an animal with a bullet in its side. There is pain there—the kind only possible from a creature familiar with the stuff—but there is also resilience and resistance, born of a resolve to go on. *His* amazing tenacity.

The next instant, his features turn tender. He rubs a thumb across my cheek, his stare trailing after the moisture he wicks away. Presses his lips together, to send a hard gulp down his throat. “Thank you, beautiful woman.”

I cannot contain a watery laugh. “Thank *me*? For which part? The first, second, or third time you shot me to the stars.”—I nod out the window—“beyond those?”

“For taking me with you to them.” He presses his lips to my forehead. “For letting me in. For letting me see all of it. To share it with you.”

I unravel my hands from the pillow. Reach them both up to his face, exploring the regal angles of his cheekbones, the bold lines of his jaw. Finally, while brushing the sweat-damp hair from his forehead, the chance comes for my own deep gulp. My throat struggles with it, thickened by emotion. “Thank you for not giving up.” Narrowed gaze. Teasing rebuke. “Despite the unorthodox methods.”

He flashes a smirk rivalling every sultry male cologne ad in Times Square. “It worked, didn’t it?”

I drub his shoulder. “Revelation by fornication cannot always be our go-to plan.” I emphasize the point by pushing my face against his right hand—and the newly healed gashes there. “Not always the wisest choice, hmm?”

He sobers then nods. The memories are still fresh for us both, of the night his own emotional exposure became too much, right after nearly screwing my eyeballs out of their sockets. The crashing emotional walls had been his instead of mine, already tenuous because of the past—and its pain—he had revealed to me that night. Releasing himself physically had torn him apart inside, the price eventually paid by the glass door of his

master bathroom shower—and the fist he drove through it because of those violent feelings.

Was that only two weeks ago? It feels like two decades now. We have been through so much. Has it been too much?

And now, we are flying straight into the heart of more conflict.

But we are doing it together. Stronger than we ever were. And bound to each other in a newer, more profound way.

The same conviction glows like fire on emeralds from the depths of Cassian's eyes. He brushes his thumb upward, tracing the arch of my eyebrow. "I know this trip won't be easy for you, Ella." His voice is full of those same quiet flames. "But I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right beside you...through all of it."

Just like that, the tears are hotter behind my eyes. I manage to smile through them, nestling my face into his palm. "I know."

I am capable of saying little else, unable to find any words capable of communicating so much. My gratitude for him. My love for him. My need for him now more than ever, as the miles close between us and a homeland that has, for the last two months, been an unchanging part of my core being...a constant in my soul, despite so many other things that have changed around me, within me.

Now I wonder if anything about Arcadia will be the same.

Petrified about what I shall do if that answer is *no*.

A soft but protesting sob escapes. Despite Cassian's rock-solid solace, I give in to a moment of uncertainty...and fear. Nothing is the same—a truth I always felt myself ready for, until it applied to the constant in my world. Arcadia. *Home*.

A home I will no longer recognize, based on the images from the newsfeed back in New York.

"Pahaleur armeau."

My precious gift.

Cassian's whisper, given from the depths of his massive heart and boundless spirit, is everything I need—and everything that rips me open like wire strippers, exposing the filament of my soul.

I'll be right beside you...through all of it.

The promise settles my mind...but is a restless thing in my soul, rattling the confines of my composure all over again, as a sole question snarls back in return.

What the hell will "all of it" even mean?