

“Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without, and know we cannot live within.”

—James Baldwin

ONE



Mishella

I AM GOING to hell.

A choir sings in Latin. People speak in reverent tones. Sun streams through angels and saints on stained glass windows, dappling rainbows across pious stone effigies—

And all I can think about is undressing the golden perfection of a man next to me.

And that would only be the start.

I want to touch him. Caress every muscled, chiseled inch of him. Wrap my naked body around his. Guide his erect, straining body deep inside mine...

Not. Now.

But why not now?

Cassian. I ache...

Nearly six weeks have passed since the moment that changed life for him and me. Forty-one days, to be exact—since the night he confronted a group of hoodlums attacking me in a dark corner of Bryant Park, not knowing one of them was carrying a gun—that the thug then fired three times.

Even here, in the streaming sun of mid-July, I relive that horrific midnight as if it has just happened. The minutes, seeming like hours, of gripping his pale hand, locking my terrified gaze into his glassy one,

screaming across the park for help until I was hoarse...then screaming some more...

“Please! Come quickly! His name is Cassian Court. Yes, that Cassian Court. You must help him! You must—”

“Ella.”

My head snaps up. He is not pale any longer, thank the Creator—a little patch on his elegant nose actually peels from the sunburn he incurred during our sailing trip on New York Harbor over the weekend—and his eyes are glittering instead of glassy, as deep a forest green of the T-shirt hugging his flawless torso. Regrettably, *that* is mostly hidden now, layered beneath a tan sports coat paired with matching slacks atop his muscled legs...

With a backside to match.

Get your mind off his backside.

Stop thinking of how those perfect mounds would feel, clenched and naked against your palms, as his thighs slide between yours...

Ohhhhh...my.

“Hmmm?” I hope he does not expect more. Likely, he does not. These moments come upon me often. It is a bizarre mix of the awe I felt when we first met, and reverent thanks for his simple aliveness—meaning I am now an idiot barely capable of logic or speech.

The sensation is...

wonderful.

And troubling.

I am rarely described by anyone, myself included, as the fanciful one in the room. And while Cassian Court is often labeled as New York’s crown prince, I spent much of my adult life just steps away from real royalty. True, the halls of Palais Arcadia, on the Mediterranean island I called home until two months ago, would not qualify as a *wing* of some New York buildings—but they were perfect training wheels for the world I am now a part of. Many times, even in the center of, as Cassian’s—

What?

As I gaze at his chiseled face, the query burns deeper than ever. *What am I to him?* Girlfriend? Companion? The ideal decoration for his arm...for now? Or...something else? Something he does not want to see nor even has to, thanks to the giant whale still flopping in the middle of the room between us. A whale possessed by a ghost named Lily Rianna Court.

His wife.

Until four years ago.

It is the sole detail I can get out of anyone about her—including the man's own mother. Yes, I have tried. And *tried*. Struggled to give him time and room to come to me—the considerations I did not give him the night I first learned about Lily. Instead I stormed off, making him chase me across a park—

The park he left on a stretcher. With three bullets in his body.

“Knock knock.” Cassian's playful tone wrestles me from the flashback. He taps a finger to my forehead. “Anyone home?”

I gaze at his retreating hand. Despite my dark reminiscence, fresh need curls low in my belly. Finger porn, Cassian Court style, is not a temptation for which I have girded this afternoon. “*Désolnum*,” I mutter, jerking my stare to meet his instead—

As if that helps.

His eyes have turned smoky—and an alluring kind of reproving. When I use native Arcadian, it hits him like an aphrodisiac. I have not simply “guessed” at this fact. He made sure I knew it shortly after the shooting, when he was still prone in a hospital bed and unable to do anything about it. Since then, we have certainly been able to do a few things about it—just not all the “things” we did before that terrible night.

Things he always had such perfect names for.

I want to fuck the color from your eyes, Mishella.

Take me deeper, favori.

Of course you can come a fourth time for me, little girl.

We have dealt with the dearth. We have had to. Compensated in ways our relationship definitely needed. We have been on real, honest-to-Creator *dates*. Have seen some movies (he likes Tim Burton and Peter Jackson), flown out on some day trips (I have decorated his refrigerator with tacky tourist magnets from Niagara Falls, the Hudson Valley, and the White House), and even gone bowling and sailing (a thousand gutter balls and a sunburn of my own later, I am in love with both). I have learned about his love for omelets and bacon and good Scotch. He has learned I prefer milk chocolate over dark—and now, thanks to him, cannot get enough of New York street tacos and red velvet cupcakes from Billy's Bakery.

By all the rules of a “good” relationship, we have done very well.

Good.

It is a category. A definition.

For a relationship that has none.

Moments like this are simply the silent, screaming proof of it. Where even *désonnum* does not belong. As our stares weave tighter and tighter, a tapestry unfurls, brighter and brighter—and I suddenly see every thread of his thoughts and every color of his soul as if they are my own.

We smile.

He lowers his hand. Scoops mine into it.

“The director was just saying that much of the stained glass in the museum wasn’t acquired until the nineteen seventies,” Cassian explains. “But that now, it’s a crucial part of the Cloisters’ collections.”

“Oh.” I blink, focusing on the large glass pieces. “Hmm. Very interesting.” Lying on top of lusting now—in the glow from large glass panels where every figure has wings, a halo, or both.

Yes. Hell-bound.

The man to whom Cassian is referring, a handsome fellow with the beginnings of gray around his angular face, warms then preens. The “Cassian Court Effect” has claimed another victim. I have yet to meet anyone in this city, from car valets to waitresses to heads of huge corporations, who is immune to it—the largest casualty, of course, being the girl in the mirror. It is a sentence I fully accept—though at first, it was like turning my skin inside out. After twenty-three years of learning to see only the scheming side of humanity, it has been strange—and amazing—to shift my lens, seeing things through Cassian’s focus. He stuns me, this man with the shadows in his eyes and the ghosts from his past, who can still rouse so much of the light in others. Or perhaps that is the drive behind his laser focus on it—that seeing the Eden in others helps banish the Hell in him.

In that case, maybe I am glad that is my destination too.

“What an honor and privilege it has been to escort you through the museum this afternoon, Mr. Court.” The director still glows as we make our way out of the little stone room, into a pair of galleries lined with elaborate medieval tapestries. “Rarely do we get a chance to see our benefactors outside of the fundraising special events, which are usually such cluster f—”

As the man colors, Cassian smirks. “It’s all right, Blythe. You’re among friends.” He wraps an arm around my waist. “Fly that cluster fuck flag with pride.”

The man chuckles—and clearly enrolls himself as a new member of the Cassian Court Fan Club. As its president, I join him in worshipping the man with my upturned smile—though the next moment, it is impossible to even remember Blythe’s presence. As soon as Cassian dips his head to return my gaze, electricity arcs and zaps and binds us, even stronger than before...heat rocketing into desire, then desire coiling into lust, as the world spins far away and we breathe hard together, barely recalling we are in public and cannot simply shred each other’s clothes away...

“Shall we continue out to the garden?”

Cassian blinks. His jaw compresses before his head jerks up, a forced smile on his strong, sensual lips. Hell overtakes me prematurely, simply having to stare at those lips instead of pulling them to mine...then to other places...

“Of course,” he tells Blythe, shooting me an apologetic glance while slipping his grip from my waist to my hand. It is certain and commanding, his thumb caressing my knuckles as we follow the director out to the little square courtyard, with its lush plants, manicured lawns and stone fountain surrounded on all four sides by arched walkways. The echo of our steps on the stones seems a perfect—and agonizing—echo of the desire pinging through our bodies.

By all the powers.

When we make it through the garden and finally enter another soaring chapel, I press back into Cassian’s side. Perhaps letting his arm rub my chest will relieve at least the ache in my breasts...

And the pillars will magically turn into soaring red velvet cupcakes.

“The Romanesque Hall and the Langon Chapel,” Blythe rambles on. I smile and nod in all the right places, attempting to focus on his litany.

Constructed in stone sourced from Moutiers-Saint-Jean...

Burgundy, France...

in the grand gothic architectural style...

“Gothic.” Cassian is more engaging than I can hope to be, even adding one of the most classic versions of his subtle smile. “Well, obviously.”

“Oh, *oui!*” The director laughs loudly, earning himself high-holy glares from a cluster of women nearby. Cassian fields it like the verbal version of a fist bump, encouragement and camaraderie in a pleasant mix. I am as grateful for it as Blythe, because I now start to wonder if the man is actually making a play for Cassian. That should make me amused,

but...does not. The sensation getting in its way is a complete flummox. What is this twisting in my belly, this irksome stab in my chest?

The feeling intensifies as the director claps a hand to Cassian's shoulder and starts regaling us with details of the chapel's ceiling. I am not as easily "called" as Cassian, barely listening to the narration, even as Blythe guides us to a small side doorway, through a portal accessed by a swipe of his museum key card, then up a flight of private stone steps into private offices and event preparation rooms. The men continue to talk, now I am only interested in the man's rapt stare at Cassian—even as he swings another door wide, and shows us onto a balcony with a jaw-dropping view of the sunset over the Hudson.

That is only where the magic begins.

The alcove is aglow, though not by artificial means. A hundred white candles burn in ornate medieval candelabra, their stone bases carved with a menagerie of animals and—of course—angels. More candles are arranged in the center of a table set for two, with a plate of fresh meats, cheeses, and vegetables accompanied by a tall bottle of Italian red wine. Another plate holds an assortment of fancy desserts. The air is a rich mix of sinful and spiritual, the savory food blending deliciously with the tapers' warm wax.

"Oh." I gasp it before I can help it. While the museum tour has been wonderful despite Blythe's bizarre behavior, this is the last—but absolutely best—thing I have fathomed as a grand finale. A medieval-style dream come to life, with my own gorgeous knight.

I *hope* that is what the *two* chairs mean...

Especially when Blythe lifts both brows expectantly at Cassian, then prompts, "Welllll?"

Cassian squares his shoulders. Sweeps an appraising look across the balcony. As a result, *I* do not stop gazing at *him*. Is he adopting "CEO Face" just for me? He knows what it does to me; I have *told* him in words of his own language—words borrowed from my best friend Vylet, a self-proclaimed "Americano junkie," to make sure he understands the point, loud and clear.

Turn-on. Panty dissolver. Invitation to lick.

Without looking at me—another purposeful move?—he pivots his attention back toward Blythe. Waits through one more pause before speaking.

“It’s perfect.” He grins big, hauling the other man in for a one-shouldered bump. “Thank you, Blythe. Can’t express my gratitude enough.”

“Oh, you already *do*, Mr. Court.” Before I can decipher *that* bit of gushing, the man is back in professional mode, bowing to both of us with formality rivalling any Sancti Palais page from back home. “With that, I bid a fond *bon soir*. Simply pick up the red courtesy phone when you’re ready to depart. Security will phone your car to the front and let you out.”

“Outstanding.”

Blythe bows low over my hand before leaving completely, ensuring I stand in a pool of my own confusion as soon as he shuts the door and is gone. Though I direct my frown out toward the glistening waves and watercolor-bright sky, my unease has not escaped Cassian’s observance. Not that I expected it to. The man has been my personal mind reader since the moment we met.

“All right.” He demands it in a murmur against my hair, tucking me close to his body. “Out with it.”

“With what?”

“You *really* giving me that, *arneau*?”

“And are you really using *that* word...now?”

Arneau. It is not a term he throws around lightly—because he knows that I do not. The Arcadian word for “gift” carries a double meaning, used to denote a person who is special above others in a person’s life. When used, it...*elevates* a conversation.

“Sure as hell am.” Though his reply comes without a skipped beat, he lets one pass while drawing up and re-locking our stares. “You’re troubled. Why?”

I wrestle my gaze away. Turn it back to the horizon, banking that the sunset will hold it still for more than a few seconds. The gamble was worth it. The sky is a palette of pink and orange, the river a collection of purple and gold. I walk to the balcony’s edge. For a moment, I can truly imagine we are a knight errant and his lady, enjoying a respite as day transforms into night. “There is no room for troubled here.” I hope my peaceful breath proves how much I mean it.

“You accuse me of pulling the *arneau* card, then use a line like that?”

Dismissive shrug. “Worth a try.”

Cassian chuckles hard enough to make me join in. Soothes my frayed nerves a little more by stepping behind me, caging me against the stone

ledge, hands flattened just next to my elbows. “You weren’t comfortable during the tour.”

I shift a little. Enough to assure myself his warmth is real...

Including the stiff ridge between his thighs.

“Not true.” I curl one of his arms forward, around my waist. *More...* I want so much more. Though keeping our hands from each other would be a feat close to achieving world peace, his recovery from the shooting has stopped us short from being fully passionate for the last six weeks—meaning everything about his nearness coats my senses like a wizard’s spell. His scent, cedar and soap and musk. His muscles, now leaner but more defined because of the changes in his workouts. His masculine force, potent and stringent, as if trying to gash its way out of his body and into mine. “The tour, I was very comfortable with.”

“But...?”

His voice vibrates along my ear. I swallow, struggling not to let that fire course through the rest of me...but as my toes burn with it, I embrace the defeat. “But Blythe...”

“Blythe?” He jerks back. Just a little. “You’re in a twist about *him*?”

“He...” My lips purse. Borrowing serenity from the sky, despite how the man swirls heat through my belly with tiny circles of his fingers, I push on. “He...wants you, Cassian. In *that* way.”

He resettles behind me. Expands the caresses, playing at the top of my panties through my light cotton dress, while teasing my neck with a soft chuckle. “Is that all?”

I take my turn for a little jerk. “Is that *all*?”

“I’ve known the man for years, Ella. And he isn’t subtle.”

“Isn’t—? Wait. You mean he’s...tried to...”

“*Tried*.” He has the nerve to chuckle about it. “Long ago.”

“*How* long?”

“Long enough.”

“And—and did you—errrm—*return* his—his—”

Another chuckle, huskier and sexier, before he dips in to nip at the space beneath my ear. “What do *you* think?”

I squirm. Battle through the steam he has thickened through my senses with his oh-so-talented fingers and lips. “I think you are a man of many passions—”

“*Specific* passions.” He trails that incredible mouth down, lining my shoulder with tingles of perfect heat. “Most particularly, for strawberry

blondes with the sky in their eyes and heaven in their kiss.” One of his hands sprawls across the front of my throat, compelling me tighter against him. “Oh yeah...and accents. Ones that remind me of Mediterranean islands with trellises full of possibilities...”

Even in my confusion, I smile. His reference to the night of our first kiss, when he scaled a trellis to get onto my balcony then into my bedroom, can bring nothing else. “But only one of us in that room was still a virgin, Cassian. And I can accept that, even if I do not understand all of it—”

“And I don’t want you to.” His voice, deepening with new solemnity, sends vibrations of emotion through me. And confusion.

“But—”

“Ssshhh.”

“*Cassian*. We have been open with each other since the start—” When we had to negotiate the terms of the contract that brought me here. Forty million of his dollars. Six months of my life. And the possibility of having exactly this. A connection my spirit has never felt with anyone...

“And I’m being open with you now.” He turns me back to face him, stroking tendrils of hair from my face as the wind kicks up—and pointedly clearing his throat as our lower bodies fit against each other again. “As a matter of fact,”—his brows jump and his nostrils flare—“if I’m any *more* open about things...”

Against my better instinct, my lips tip up. Against the same intuition, let him see the shudder claiming me as we mesh, soft to hard, woman to man...*perfection*. “I...I do not want you to think I am prying. It is not my place. In just four months—”

He does not allow me to finish. Correction: commands me not to, in the form of a kiss bordering on punishing. His mouth is so incessant, half the air punches from my lungs. The other half funnels strength into my arms, seizing him by both biceps as our lips crush and meld and ravish each other.

A cacophony of heat and heartbeats later, he draws back, gaze thick with sage smoke. “I’ve imposed few rules about this whole thing, *favori*,” he utters. “But right now, I’m invoking a new one.” His hand moves in, spreading across the back of my head. “No more countdowns.” His fingertips curl in, pulling at my hair. “I need to have this.” Tightens even harder. “Just this. Just...you. Okay?”

He yanks a third time. I let my head tilt, succumbing to the bite of pain. Slide my eyes closed for an instant. “Okay.”

His grip eases a little. “So we’re good?”

“Good.” I manage to volume into it. “Yes. Of—of course. We are good.”
Just do not stop holding me like this. “We are completely...squalid.”

He chuffs. “You mean *solid*?”

“Oh. Hmm. That makes sense.”

He brushes his lips down over mine again. Raises back up enough to murmur, “You sure about that?”

“About what?”

“Me. Making sense.” He dips both hands back down—pulling me harder against him, making my legs widen for him. “Maybe I need to *show* you solid, instead of just telling you.”

“*Ahhh.*” It spurts out on a gasp as my limbs shudder, my skin tingles, and my sex pulses. My head falls back again, whirling in a new vortex of color and feeling, letting Cassian completely take over again. I am lost in his ruthless strength, as he lifts me to the balcony’s thick brick ledge. Engulfed in blood red, in the sunset that bathes his taut, sharp face. A delighted quarry of joy, without sorrow or penance. If we *are* in hell, I gladly relinquish my rights to heaven.

Obscenities blur, steaming from Cassian as he clamps lips to my neck and suckles his way down, down, down... “*Goddamn,*” he echoes, twisting free the buttons at the front of my dress then nosing aside my bra...to find my erect tip awaiting his attention.

As his mouth closes in, a strangled choke bursts up my throat. We are not officially “in church” but might as well be, with hundreds of spirits, saints, and martyrs immortalized in art below us. My cries of arousal cannot be any more welcome here than in a real house of worship—though that is exactly how I feel right now, as Cassian licks me, laves me, and adores me, his attention not skipping a single inch of my breasts, now juttied up at him in twin spikes of need.

“Cassian.” It is a whisper of desperate, burning need. I shove a hand beneath his shirt, seeking his nipples too...repeating his name as I pinch them both. He hisses then grimaces, letting the pain jolt through him, before crashing his lips atop mine again.

Inside my mouth, his tongue is a vengeful animal. He tackles, twirls, punishes, penetrates. Scrapes my lips...and sucks out my breaths. By the

time he is done, my hands have circled to his back, scratching down his shoulders and spine—

And his hands are under my dress...toying with my panties.

“Tell me they’re white.”

I smile against his mouth. How this man can enchant *and* empower me, in the space of but four words, takes my breath away again. Is it something all men feel about the woman they’ve deflowered—and their panties? And does the answer really matter...as long as I only care about what *this* man feels?

And how I continue to make him feel...

And *oh*, all the things he continues to make *me* feel...

Especially as I whisper in reply, “Yes, Cassian. They are white.” I jot in one of my mental journals, which by now have begun to outnumber my physical ones: *buy more white panties*.

He growls in approval. Drops a stare of the same intent down over me, while working his hands around my hips...then beneath the very garment responsible for pumping both our lusts higher...

and higher...

“*Fuck*.” The stunned flare in his voice is mirrored in his gaze. “Ella...your sweet parts...”

Before I can help it, a giggle overflows. “*My sweet parts?*” It is interesting to be the one *not* fumbling for words. Is Cassian Court, the man with a thousand dirty synonyms, suddenly out of golden prose? And why is stunned and awkward just as stunning on him as commanding and knowing?

“They’re—” His breath hitches again, as he explores my mound more thoroughly. “They’re so—”

“Trimmed?” I barely get it out at full volume. As he slips fingers past the neat patch of hair then further, between my intimate lips, my most sensitive button shivers. Heat races through my sex. My hands tighten, gripping the ropes of his muscles. My body arches, lifting toward him...blooming for him as if it is the first time he has stoked this sparkling fire in me. In many ways, it is. We are not the same two people who burst into our first kiss, in the shadows of my bedroom on Arcadia, two months ago. Now, he is much more than the riveting billionaire come to strike a deal with my father—and I am not the virgin girl melting in his arms. I am a woman. The woman who knows what the zenith of his passion looks

like. Tastes like. Feels like. Who has been without it for so long...*too* long. Who needs it so badly, I am dizzy from the need.

“When did you do it?” His question, just as much a demand for *why* I did it, is rough along my cheek.

“You mean tame the forest?” I quip. “Yesterday. You had the big meeting about the Singapore power grid integration, so Kate and I took a long lunch. She might have mentioned something about how you like...things...this way.”

His brow knits. “How the hell does *Kate* know about—”

“Because she has been your trusted friend since college?” I am glad for the chance to tease a little more—and wrestle my libido to a semblance of control. “And...she might have mentioned that you chattered about it during a night of excessive drinking. And...I might have coerced her into taking me to the spa, once I knew. It was *my* idea, *not* hers, so place the blame properly. I just wanted to please you.”

“Mishella.” A subtle growl advances up his throat. He resettles me with harsher jerks, fitting our crotches back together again. “You please me just by being here with me. You please me with the brilliance of your mind, the challenge of your spirit, and the music of your laugh.” His stare slides to my mouth. “And you *definitely* please me with your passion...”

“And now, my waxed sweet parts.”

After joining his chuckle to my giggle, he dances his reply across my lips. “Ah. Yes. Certainly those.” Another nip in, but not the full kiss I expected. “But the forest was amazing too.”

“Bullshit,” I return—before the breath leaves me as if he did deliver the kiss. By the powers. I am still a mess of shivering need, craving that kiss. Craving *him*...

Even more now...

He trails his mouth along the line of my jaw, into the dip behind my ear, down the tight strain of my neck. Knowing every spot that makes me tremble harder, gasp louder, wrap myself to him tighter...*Ohhhh, don't stop...*

“Amazing.” He issues it in a snarl, making it all too clear he is not to be debated this time. “All of you, Ella Santelle.” With one hand still spreading my most sensitive tissues, he raises the other to my nape, securing my head so I am angled back, compelled to gaze at the brutal determination on his face. “*You* are amazing. The most incredible person

I've ever known." The force of his hold intensifies, responding to what must be the doubt on my face, before he grates, "Including her."

He does not elaborate. He does not have to. The words vibrate on the air between us as if he already has.

Including Lily.

His face gains a dozen new lines of harshness. Clearly, his belief in the words is absolute—and it frightens me.

I bring a hand in, spread fingers along his jaw. "Cassian—"

"Hush."

"But I do not expect—"

Hush."

This time, he backs it with a smash of his mouth—an assault injecting him into my blood, fusing him into my skin, and branding him into my senses until I possess no breath, sensation, or *thought* without him there. He is against me. Around me. Inside me.

And still I need more.

A message my body does not have to repeat. As always, the man simply knows—and delivers.

Sweeps his tongue deeper in—as his fingers spread wider into me below.

As his hips roll, and his erection throbs harder between our bodies.

He groans.

I gasp.

He growls.

I mewl.

And the last six weeks fall away...replacing the agony of our abstinence with a flare as bright, perfect, and electric as the first time we ever drove our gazes into each other like this—

And knew our bodies were soon to follow.

I no longer yearn to soothe away the tension from his face. I scoop my fingers in, savoring all its magnificence. The forceful lines at the corners of his glittering eyes. The tension framing his nose, flared with the breaths of his arousal. Even the defined hills of his lips, parted to show me his locked, white teeth.

The look intensifies as he pulls his hand from my sex—and redirects it between his own legs. In one twist, he unbuttons himself. In another, takes care of his zipper.

Only then does my voice find its way past the brushfire of my arousal. “We—we cannot. Doctor Rudd said you needed six weeks after the shooting to—”

“Fuck Doctor Rudd.”

A heated breath staggers out as I watch him shove down his black briefs—and take his beautiful shaft in hand. “I would rather fuck you, Mr. Court.”

“That can be arranged, Miss Santelle.” One side of his mouth kicks up in a grim smirk. Disappears beneath a sensual grimace, as he works the milky drops at his tip along his heavily veined length. “With one important change.”

“Ch-change?” I struggle to remain focused. By the Creator...so much of this man is flawless, but his penis has to be the most perfect part of him. I have certainly not seen thousands in my lifetime—but growing up with a boy-crazy kinkster for a best friend has certainly yielded some special fringe benefits. After helping Vy ogle *many* on-line crotches, I can attest with certainty: Cassian Court’s cock is flawless in every single way.

“Yes.” He wraps his fist around that long, stiff length and strokes, making himself harder, redder. “Don’t you remember?”

I blink and attempt to shake my head—though at the moment, I barely remember I *have* a head, let alone coherent thoughts inside it. The cause turns hopeless as he slides back in, slotting his hard, commanding body into the welcoming V of mine.

“*You* don’t fuck *me*, Miss Santelle.” He pushes back the cotton between my legs, exposing me—before widening me. “*I* fuck *you*.”

And then...he is the force that fills me. A rod of heat. A ram of pressure. An invasion of lust. Impossible to hide from. Impenetrable...incredible.

He is mine.

And I am completely, hopelessly, his.

My body, not used to him after so many weeks, fights the penetration—but my soul welcomes the sting...craves the new wounds he opens from the inside out. The emotional blood I spill...

The tears it is now all right to shed.

They cleanse me. Heal me. Open the faucet for all the other tears, too. All the things I have kept so carefully stoppered since the night I knelt beside his bleeding body in a dark corner of Bryant Park...

The terror.

The guilt.

The nightmare of thinking he might die...without ever knowing how deeply I had fallen in love with him.

“Armeau. What is it?” The flinty edges of his voice slice into the side of my neck in all the best ways, making long-forgotten parts of my body tremble...reminding me why our surface satisfactions of the last six weeks have not come close to this. “Getting to know him” like a girlfriend has been enjoyable, even fun, but it is not the completion of having him like this...possessing him in the deepest regions of my body...letting him into the sweet, wordless places of my soul...where even I cannot venture without the strength and boldness of him...

“Mishella?” he persists. In answer, I can only shake my head once more, before tucking my face against his neck. I breathe in, cherishing the scents of our soaps and the musk of our arousals. I lick his skin, savoring the salty, masculine taste of him.

“Just...go deeper,” I finally beg. “Fill me up, Cassian.”

He groans, cupping my backside with his masterful hands, opening my body wider for his. “I won’t stop until I have.”

We rock in a steady, primal rhythm, my hips rolling to meet his plunges, his cock impaling me a little deeper with each new thrust. As the sun dips lower and twilight merges into night, shadows play over the focus of his face, the power of his body. I am entranced, scarcely believing a creature so perfect derives such pleasure from joining with me...but I accept the gratitude of knowing it as truth. Of feeling it with every perfect sink of his rigid, taut flesh.

“Almost there, *favori*.” As he mutters it, his hands spread me wider. “Open up, Ella. Just a little more.” His head falls back. His grimace is a flash of white. “Yes. Fuck...*yes*.”

I cannot echo the words. Nothing but a cry spews, as he penetrates me with his full length. I shiver as his sac slams my ass but then he withdraws, preparing to stab in again. When he does, it hurts worse—and tingles better—than ever before.

“By the powers!” I tremble again, from head to toe. He is so big—and growing by the moment.

Before he lunges again, just for a moment, he pauses. I look up, confronting his gaze. Its deep green patina reminds me of the art deco demons adorning the ledges of his Upper West Side mansion, shining down on me with equally carnal intent—

Which explains why he has stopped.

Because he is readying the words.

The words he knows I will hate him for. Worship him for.

“There’s only one power you need to concern yourself with right now.”

An arch of one whisky-colored brow. An enticing roll of his hips...teasing my most sensitive tissues. “You know what that is, don’t you?”

Yes. I hate him.

Have never wanted him more.

“Yes, Cassian.” I hope he does not make me say it. Pray he makes me say it.

“Then say it.”

“The...the only power here is...is yours.”

“Good girl.” He reverses the roll. Adds a smooth slide, so his erection brushes my clit as he pushes back in. “And what am I going to do with that power?”

My breath shakes. My tunnel convulses. Oh, the terrible, incredible things he does to me. My body...but more vividly, my mind...and my spirit.

Taking me. Breaking me. *Wide open...*

“You will pleasure me.”

“What else?”

“You will fuck me.”

“And...?”

“You will—” The words turn into a tight swallow.

He dips his head. Sinks teeth into my neck. “I will do *what?*”

“You will make me come.”

He licks the abrasions along my carotid. “How many times?”

I swallow hard. By the Creator, he does not hold back a single, dirty syllable of what turns me on the most...soaks my channel, dominates my mind...consumes me with longing for nothing else, *nobody* else, but him.

“How many times, Mishella?”

“As—as many times as you say.”

A sound of rough satisfaction rumbles through him. “As I *shall* say.” Candlelight plays across his face, flickers in his eyes, turns his mouth into sensual cruelty. As the night deepens, my golden demon thrives. “As I shall dictate before watching you crumble for me, piece by perfect...fuck-ing...piece.” He emphasizes with defined lunges, ensuring the head of his cock delivers the meaning deep inside my sex.

“Yes...Cassian.” I do not wait for his prompt now. I simply know it is what he wishes...just as he sees completely inside me, and knows every detail of every passion I have—perhaps I ever *will* have. A distinct possibility, since I cannot think of wanting anything else but this—or anyone but him.

He pulls back. Swirls his wet crown along my most tender folds. Pushes his thumbs in, so my erection is stimulated by every inch of his.

Plunges once more inside. Then back out, repeating his torturous teases...

“Powers that *be...*”

“*Not them.*” His snarl burns the front of my neck, the curve of my chin, my slightly parted lips. “*Who* do you beg for this, Mishella?”

“You.” I make the amendment on a gasp. “I beg you, Cassian.”

“Then do it.” He is back inside, taking me with swift passion, hurling us both into our special, spectral space—where the universe peels back and we are exposed, as naked as if we are doing this skin-to-skin...soul-to-soul.

“Please.” The command in his stare turns it into a shaking rasp. “*Please, Cassian.*”

“Please...what?” He growls it out but punctuates with a hitched breath. Half-second gloat. He might be covering it in black dagger attitude, but this is just as mind-blowing for him as it is me. Six weeks and two days after receiving my birth control injection, we are now able to fully enjoy its benefits—which should be *Benefits*, capital *B*.

“Please, Cassian. Let me come!”

He shifts his hands to my hips—controlling their motions as well as his. Setting our pace. “You need it bad, *armeau?*”

“Dammit! Yes; you know I do.” I cannot quell my frustration. How is he able to hold back from this? From giving us both what we want...and need? The answer is non-essential—as soon as he releases my right hip long enough to reach beneath and swat that butt cheek. “Ahhh! What—”

“That wasn’t begging.”

“Dammit.” I am not so nice about the repeat. He answers with a new pound of his lips over mine. Our tongues battle. Our mouths wrestle. By the time we break apart, we are breathing hard—and fucking harder. His desire ropes around me. His heat soaks into me. His cock controls me—completely.

My world narrows, becoming only the light of our union...the lightning of his body, striking over and over again, promising a cataclysmic cloud break...

“Oh...” I choke it out, fingernails making tracks down his spine, emulating the electricity building along mine. “All right; all *right!* I am begging. I am *begging.*”

“For what?” He kisses me again. His lips are gentler but his breaths are sharper. “You know what I want, Mishella.”

I gulp again. Dammit, I *do* know. He wants the words. Not just any syllables. He wants all the filthy, naughty phrases from my dark, dirty fantasies...the fantasies only he knows how to fulfill...

“I am begging...”

He growls when I hesitate. Does not surrender a beat of his body’s rhythm. “And I am waiting.”

“I—I am begging to come. For you to fuck me until I do. Until my pussy soaks every inch of your cock, then vibrates around it until—until—*oh!*”

He grunts hard. I shudder harder. Something in the way he angles down and in, merging us in a tighter grind, converges every nerve in my clit and inch of my sex. I fall deeper into the cave, bouncing against the walls, stumbling toward the abyss at its core, where nothing but sensation and consummation await. I pant hard as I hurtle toward it, letting the bittersweet pressure mount inside. My buttocks quiver. My thighs clench. My vision turns into stars, forming a dizzying frame around his beautiful, unmerciful face.

“Now.” The brace of his hand, thumb against my chin and fingers along my jaw, hauls me deeper into the darkness. “Your cunt will come for me *now*, Mishella.”

And I am falling. Throbbing. Vibrating.

Bursting.

Screaming...

Though muffled at once by his mouth, sucking in my ecstasy like a parched man at an oasis—while his body continues to pump, brutalizing me like a sheikh with his concubine. Creator help me, just the thought enflames me again, especially as he peels back more of my dress, baring my breasts for his new licks and suckles. The moment he draws my nipple between his teeth, my second climax hits, twice as violent as the first—then a third, as he boldly presses my clit with the pad of his thumb. By the

time he is finished, I am a shuddering, sobbing mess, coming apart beneath him like melted sugar.

Only he is not finished.

I *am* melted sugar but he is still a stalk of hard cane—and ruthlessly uses that fact to his advantage. He looms over, capturing my gaze with his brilliant emerald focus, working my body with his knowing strokes. At the end of each plunge, he hitches his hips up and in, knowing exactly what place, so deep inside, he is determined to stimulate. My body reacts beyond the realm of my mind, coming for him yet again, answering instincts older than the cathedrals these stones used to be a part of. My head falls back, my gaze flying into the indigo sky, shooting my senses to the realm of the stars. While I have never felt more connected physically—maybe because of that—I have never flown farther spiritually. Every inch of me vibrates at a new frequency, echoing harmonies as perfect and beautiful as my love for the creature who has brought me here...

The man now surging deeper into me.

Stretching me.

Throbbing deeper than he ever has before.

Then groaning, harsh and low, his breath filling my ear...his essence erupting in my sex.

“Fuck,” he grates. “*Fuck.*”

One of his hands wraps around my head. The other is still flat between our bodies, finding the tender pearl at my center...coaxing it with harsher tugs, unrelenting and unforgiving, bringing fresh flutters to the channel in which he is still embedded so tightly.

“Cassian!” I grab him, though am unsure whether to welcome him or punch him. It is so much. *Too* much. “I—I *cannot*—”

“You can.” His snarl shakes the chest upon which I am now pressed. “You will.”

Tears stab my eyes. The sensations he elicits...they begin to demand more than orgasms. A *more* I am not sure how to give—or if I *can* give. Not holding the knowledge that I do now.

Not while I still look the whale in the eye.

Not while I think of a faceless ghost named Lily—and the fact that she once wore Cassian’s wedding ring.

And the fact that I did not know about it until the night he was shot.

How can I give him everything I am...when he has not done the same? Or even considered doing the same—until he was forced to? Outed by a

sloshed ex-girlfriend who finagled her way into the gala we were attending and blurted the truth about Lily in front of a crowd of New York's social elite...

The *ugly* truth.

“No, Cassian. I *cannot*.”

The violence in my voice punches the air—

And him.

He pushes back. Erupts with a fierce sound from deep in his chest. Slides out of me as if yanking a knife from his ribs instead.

Our breaths are still fast and fevered—as synched in our frustration as they were in our passion. Wordlessly, with my juices still coating him, he stuffs his cock away. Just as silently, sweeps a napkin from the table and dabs at me, attempting to help my own clean-up. After a few seconds, I take over the task—but do not stop watching him from beneath my lashes.

Reading him like a neon sign.

On the surface, his face is stoic and gritted—but in the shimmer of his eyes and the grit of his jaw, I see the true torment biting at him.

The anguish of recognizing the whale too.

And the acceptance that we can no longer let the damn animal suffer like this.



Cassian

REMORSE IS THE old sweater in the closet of my life.

It fits entirely too well to throw away—no matter how many times I've attempted to throw it out, give it away, or burn it.

Now, the thing falls over my shoulders again. All too familiar. All too disgusting. No ignoring it anymore. No giving it a glossy shine or turning the dirty threads into silk with another glamorous date—because Mishella Santelle doesn't care about the silk. She sees right through the shit, because her life has already been draped in too damn much of it.

She actually wants the filthy sweater.

She wants my honesty.

Even after everything.

After knowing I wrote a check to be with her—and that her parents didn't blink about telling her to jump at the chance. Knowing that

initially, my dick drove the decision as much as my brain did—then after arriving here, knowing that the “sweet deal” of her billionaire benefactor came with a past full of fucked-up and a lover full of lies.

All right...not lies, exactly.

Then what is it called when you take a woman thousands of miles from her home, claim her virginity a day later, then profess you're falling in love with her a few days after that—without bothering to tell her about the woman you were once married to?

So maybe I withheld a few things for too long.

So maybe I lied.

But now it's time to suck it up, swallow my pride—and my fear—and put on the goddamn sweater.

Starting this very second.

Only that's impossible.

Not without dragging her on one final journey.

I should feel better about the decision. Aren't difficult choices supposed to be easier once made?

Fucking fairy tale.

As I angle back toward her, my bones are like lead, my tendons turned to steel cables. I move with matching heaviness, lifting an awkward hand. At least I'm grateful she accepts it. Gently, I help her down from the balcony's ledge. Greedily steal a moment to hold her tight to me again, pushing the gold curls back from her face, marveling at how the candlelight dances across her features...though she'd light up the night without the extra illumination.

So. Fucking. Beautiful.

Her lips, pursed in curiosity, are still stung by my kisses. Her gaze, wide and searching, is as pure as the heart of a flame. Even the tiny stains of mascara on her upper cheeks are breathtaking—because I know exactly how they got there. Can still practically feel each of her orgasms, fluttering around my cock...

Thoughts for another time.

A much *different* time.

It's time to take care of things even more important than that.

“Cassian—”

“Sssh.” I take her lips in a small but insistent kiss. Tug her toward the door leading back into the museum offices.

“But the food and wine—”

“Will be appreciated by someone around here, I’m sure.”

She stops. Pulls me back. A glorious flush suffuses her cheeks. “I—I did not mean to ruin the whole night.”

“*Ella.*” My second kiss isn’t so benign. *Ruin.* I’m not sure the woman even grasps the meaning of the word as a verb. “The night has hardly started—so that’s null and void as well.”

She doesn’t move. Tightens her lips. “Null and void’, Mr. Court?”

“Rolling our eyes, Miss Santelle?”

“And now with the royal ‘we’?”

“And now with the sass that’s begging for another spanking?”

No eye roll—but a deliberate pout full of just as much cheek. Little minx. She can rout my bullshit as easily as I catch the drift on hers.

I’m so fucking tempted to cap it with another swat to her delectable ass, but remembering what happened after the last spank makes me overcome the lure. The next time I’m inside her, we’ll be more than simply skin-to-skin. We’ll be twined again, spirit inside spirit. Thoughts so meshed, they’ll feel like one. Hearts so bonded, they’ll hammer in the same perfect time. No more secrets—and dammit, *no* more ghosts.

Tonight, it all ends.

The only ending I *ever* want with her.

And I am a man used to getting what he wants.

Because I am a man willing to pay for it. No matter what the price.

No truth has been less of a shock, while clanging through me exactly like one. It makes everything more real. More...permanent. A future I now envision having with her, despite the “strictly business” deal I struck to get her here. The contract that officially frees her to return home in just four months.

Home. To an island nearly five thousand miles away.

Unacceptable.

But *that’s* an action item for another day.

Another price I’ll have to pay.

Worth it.

No matter what...she’s fucking worth it.

Is there some mental baggage in that one? *Bet your ass.* If I learned anything from the years with Lily—the knowledge I bring to every step I make now—it is that love doesn’t pay lip service to every goddamn cliché ever conceived for it, but a lot more that haven’t been.

Flowers and honey. Victor Hugo. Got it. Check.

Smoke and sighs. Shakespeare's always good for this kind of shit.
Wonder of the wise. Amazement of the gods. Plato lends credibility.
But now for the Cassian Court entries in that journal.

Love...
is a gift.

This woman's love...the most priceless of them all.

Which throws the onus on the asshole peering back at me from reflections in the museum's glass cases, as I guide her through the now-empty museum.

Great gifts require great gratitude. And the great commitment toward caring for them. And the actions proving exactly that.

And the recognition that many times, fate doesn't offer tomorrow for that proof.

There is only today.

And by this point, only the four hours we have left of it.

As if I need any further justification for rushing our steps out the front of the museum.

We emerge into the sticky summer night and make our way toward the Jag XJL limo, my driver Scott waiting with an open door and a lopsided smile. I climb inside after Ella—to find her already pivoted in the seat, waiting for me with an expectant frown. I settle in, letting her curve a hand into mine, but answer the questions in her eyes with steady silence.

For a few minutes, as we speed along the Henry Hudson, she seems content with that. But I know better.

The river begins to glow blue and silver instead of gold and red. The GW Bridge rises into view, its sweeping suspension cables lined in aqua lights.

Sure enough, as the bridge and the park disappear behind the bend in the road, Ella blurts, "Where are we going?"

I'm ready for it. I'm actually ready for a lot worse—not that she'll receive a different answer from me either way. From now on, I hide nothing from this woman.

Famous last words?

I pray they won't be.

With every goddamn bone in my body, I *swear* they won't be.

I made it through private school and college by shining shoes and slinging newspapers. Began a global empire with my own sweat and

smarts. I can sure as fuck figure out how to do an open, honest, healthy relationship with a woman willing to bring the same thing to the table.

Starting with this.

“We’re going where we can punch the restart button, *arneau*.” I squeeze her hand. Kiss her forehead. “With the truth.”

“All right.” Her answer is like music, filled with her sweet trust and soft affection. “Where is that?”

“Home.”