

*Romance Divas Book Challenge*

*Isabelle Santiago*

*Possession*



## **Possession**

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# Possession

## Prologue:

*Frioul Archipelago off the coast of France  
Isle d'Éternité, Château de Rêves, 1814*

“We have the prisoner, milord.”

“Bring her to me.”

With a curt nod of the head, the front guard turned to motion behind him. Four large men dragged a petite female body down a dark, stone corridor into the dining hall. The long candles that lit the room flickered from the weight of their heavy footsteps. A sliver of light from the full moon outside created a silver beam through barely parted dusty, velvet curtains. Caught in a power struggle, the four guards hurled the small woman onto the ground as though her skin were hot to the touch.

Damien Durrand stood from his seat at the head of the long, wooden table and stepped toward his prisoner. Bending low, he reached out his hand to brush back thick obsidian waves from her face. She turned away from his touch, struggling to keep herself up, balancing her weight on her hands.

“*Gitane*,” he said, looking up at his men with interest, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“We suspect she was separated from her caravan in the mainland, milord. She and a male companion tried to intercept our cargo on the docks,” his guard looked down at her in disgust. For a moment, Damien expected he might actually spit on her. “He managed to get away, but we captured her.”

“I do not like it when my things are tampered with,” he said, looking back down at the woman who stood statuesque. Her profile was lit by the flaming torches that sat against the stone walls. Shadows danced against her cinnamon complexion. Her cheekbones stood high beneath otherwise perfect skin, with a single, white scar that ran from the end of her dark eyebrow to the bottom lobe of her ear. Her jaw was delicate and rounded, but she held it up with grace and power. He admired her determination to remain unaffected, but she had no idea what he could do to her. “Do you know what the penalty is for theft?” he asked, a cautious whisper directly against her ear.

She flinched. That one sign of weakness, of humanity, was enough to spark his interest, to fire up a wave of treacherous desire. It was impossible not to notice her beauty, despite her lying there in disarray. Beneath the tattered remains of her tiered skirt were long, shapely legs that went into delicate ankles decorated by shining gold bangles

and ending in bare, muddy feet. Her fitted bodice was covered in a sheer blouse that fell off her shoulder, providing a tantalizing peek at forbidden flesh.

He swallowed hard, fisting his hands at his sides. She was not like the French women he frequently bedded, with their milky white skin and wispy hair, who lacked depth or character. This woman was impossibly dark, smoldering and dangerous in ways he didn't dare test. And still, he did.

“Look at me, woman,” he said more forcefully, falling silent when she brought her head up to face him. Her eyes were sharp daggers made of the darkest onyx stone. They hid behind long lashes, deceitfully covered by a curtain of wild midnight waves that framed her face. “Did you hear me?” he choked out, despite the bumps that formed on his skin. She only stared, with all knowing eyes that bore into his soul.

One of his men broke the spell of silence. “Perhaps she does not understand.”

Damien shook his head, standing up straight. “She understands.” He turned, folding his hands behind his back. He needed a moment to think. Pacing the width of the room, he went over his options. The usual protocol with such a prisoner was the dungeon. But the idea of this beautiful creature trapped in the rat infested cell, of her satin skin raised in blood marked strips from the lashings, did something strange to his insides.

“Monsieur?” The patient voice of the front guard dripped into his thoughts. His men all looked to him for direction.

“Clean her up,” he said, unable to shake the strange foreboding sense that crept just under his skin. He stopped his pacing at the window in the farthest end of the room, away from the guards and the intoxicating female prisoner. With a swift sweep of his hand against fabric, he lifted one of the curtains and looked out into the night. “Give her something to eat. When that is done, send her to my chambers with goblets and wine.”

He heard the rushed shuffling of feet. A pained groan. The heavy thud of a chair tumbling to the ground. A shrill, female scream that pierced the still night. He turned sharply, holding out his hand.

“Enough!” he commanded. Four large men froze in place. “Release her.” Their hands opened simultaneously. Her body dropped back to the ground for a moment before she was able to collect herself and stand straight. “Where are the shackles?” The front guard rushed to where he stood, placing the rusted iron circles in his hands. “She will walk alone. If one hair on her head is harmed, I will hold you all personally accountable. Understood?”

They nodded in silent agreement. With slow, purposeful strides he walked back toward her. He placed each iron restraint against her wrists and closed them shut, before

he bent and clipped another set against her ankles. His fingers grazed her bronze skin. He let them linger, let them trace part of her leg as he came back up to stand before her.

“I would not try and run if I were you,” he whispered so that only she could hear. “The penalty for a runaway slave requires a severe lashing. I simply do not think we would find it pleasurable under those particular circumstances.” His pulse quickened when her eyes came up to meet his.

She did understand. Every word.

“Take her away.”

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Hours later, the mystifying gypsy still weighed heavy on Damien’s mind. He stood on the stone terrace outside of his bedroom, eyeing the crashing waves against the stony cliff below, lost in thought. He hungered for her presence, to drink in her poisonous allure. The image of her skin burned in his memory and his fingers longed to travel its territory, claiming it as his own.

Beyond the all consuming wave of passion he found more treacherous desires. He craved to uncover the enigma of her being. Her eyes told secrets of a world both dangerous and seductive. Unlike the rest of the women he knew, she carried an aura of power and intelligence that terrified him, that he knew could undo him completely. In all of history that sort of female had only served to do one thing, bring powerful men to their knees and destroy them. No woman should ever hold that sort of strength. Still, he found that her strange qualities only made him want her more. And tonight he would have her, in whichever way he pleased.

Three concave knocks on the doors signaled the prisoner had arrived. He turned back into his room, stopping at one of the large wooden posts of his bed, uncertain why his heart raced so violently in his chest. He’d had countless women to his bed chamber, had seduced each into oblivion with expert hands. What was it about this woman that made him feel so troubled?

The door swung open with excruciating slowness. She stood at the entrance, looking like a pagan goddess, her skin scrubbed clean and sparkling with its rich darkness in the candlelight. Her chained hands held a tray of drinks. “Come in,” he encouraged. With three swift steps he closed the distance between them, closed the door behind her and took the tray from her shaking hands.

Her head remained bowed in submission, her face masked by a curtain of thick ebony hair. “Did you enjoy your meal?” he asked to fill the uncomfortable silence. She said nothing, made no motion to show whether or not she’d even heard him. Shifting on his feet, he busied himself by placing the tray on the long table by the terrace entrance, stopping to look out into the night.

Something about it felt epic, life changing. The waters below slammed against the rocky cliff with hypnotizing rhythm and grace, part of a perilous dance that could lure any sailor to his imminent death. The full moon cast cold shadows across his bed. The only warmth came from the slate fireplace where raging amber flames crackled. It was just enough light to clearly make out her face, to see the blood that trickled down the edge of her full lips.

“Did one of my men hurt you?” he asked, sped forward by his anger. He cupped her jaw, wiped at the red drop with his thumb. “Tell me,” he begged, hating how desperate he sounded.

*Would she ever speak*, he thought in frustration. He’d wondered for hours what her voice would sound like. Would it be as raspy and sultry as he imagined? Instead of an answer, he was greeted with a smoldering look. Fire burned in the rich coal of her eyes. Defiance hung on her angled chin. Instead of feeling dominant, he felt strangely naked, exposed, without the protection of others to break the trance she held him in.

Movement brought his eyes down to the red, tender flesh of her wrists. She rubbed at them, wincing when iron shackles rubbed against the raw skin.

“I will remove them,” he said, struck with a thought, “under one condition.” She stared at him, blinked several times and waited. He smirked. She understood him perfectly. “Tell me your name.”

With a hesitant sigh, she opened her mouth to speak. “Mireio,” she said in a husky whisper laced with a rolling ‘r’ that betrayed her Spanish tongue. Her voice tumbled out, rich like honey.

“*Mireille*,” he repeated in French.

“No,” she said forcefully. “Mireio.”

His smile widened. “Mireio,” he tried, despite his accent. “I will let you go,” he said slowly, careful to be sure she understood each word. “But do not do something foolish or I will be forced to throw you into the dungeon. Understood?”

She nodded. Convinced, he reached for the key that hung on his neck, bringing it over his head to remove it. He placed it within the iron fetters. The click echoed in the silence. Slowly, he removed first one, then the other. From above him, she sighed with relief.

“Will you run?” he asked, looking down at her ankles, still bound by chains. She shook her head. For some reason, he believed her. With their eyes still glued to each other, he bent his knees, lifting her skirt. His heart drummed, his hands shook. The woman was devilish. She’d cast some sort of spell on him that made it impossible for

him to resist her, despite how much he knew he should. It was unwise to become bewitched by a woman, especially one as treacherous as a gypsy.

He undid the irons, and tossed them to the side of the door. When he finally stood, her face followed him up. She examined him with open curiosity.

Uncomfortable under her scrutiny, he turned toward the sheer white curtains that swung in the salty breeze. “How about a drink?” he asked. He’d only gone a few steps before her small hand clutched his arm. He stopped short, startled by the heated flush that burned at the contact of her skin.

“Let me,” she said. She strolled toward the table. He watched her every move, the way her thick hips swayed from side to side, shaking the coins along her waist, filling the air with the musical jangle of crashing copper. It was a strange seduction dance that pulled him forward.

“You are not as you are rumored to be,” she said, filling the quiet night with her rich voice. She grabbed the pitcher, filling one goblet with dark, red wine. Drops fell down its side and she reached for them with her finger, bringing it to her lips and licking them away.

“You have heard rumors?” he asked breathless, captivated by her movements. He took another step in her direction, confused by the painful throb against his ribs that matched the quickening blood flow in his pants.

“The women in Marseille speak of a man *sans pitié*, heartless and ruthless, interested in nothing but his own pleasures.” She traced the rim of his cup in slow, leisurely circles that drove him forward like a heated animal. “They call you *égoïste*, but I must disagree. You have shown nothing but kindness for my well being this evening, despite my being your prisoner, despite what I tried to take from you.”

Laughter tumbled from his lips, unreserved. She’d walked into the lion’s den with wide, naïve eyes. She thought he wanted to save her, when in reality, he intended to devour her whole. “Do not fool yourself into thinking my intentions are innocent,” he whispered hotly against her ear. Standing behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against his body. He hardened painfully. She fit perfectly against him. “You tried to steal from me and I intend to punish you severely.” *Just not tonight.*

He nipped at the tender curve of skin between her neck and shoulder. She moaned, a lusty, delicious sound that made his ears ring with the sound of his own blood rushing to his extremities. She spun in his arms, one hand holding his wine goblet, the other pressing against his chest.

“I love another,” she warned by means of a breathy whisper. He laughed again. She fought a losing battle. Didn’t she know she was already his?

“Love is a fool’s notion,” he said, before going in for a full attack of her lips. But she pushed harder, held him at bay with her hand.

“Is it?” Her dark eyes sparkled with interest and amusement.

“*Oui*,” he said, leaning forward to nuzzle her ear. He lost himself in thick waves of raven hair that now smelled like fresh bath oils. “Love blinds men, pushes them into submission to women who in most cases do not deserve their devotion. The greatest warriors, the greatest nations in history were brought down by women. Delilah, Helen of Troy. I will never be controlled by a woman for something as fickle and passing as *l’amour*. I take what I know exists. Desire. Passion.”

He moved toward her lips again, hungry for her. She leaned back, shaking her head, a mischievous smile on her face. She brought the goblet to her mouth, taking a slow sip, watching him over the rim with telling eyes. It was purposeful, seductive. He licked his lips in response. When she brought the cup down, her full mouth was red and wet with wine, sweet and inviting.

“Do not deny me,” he growled, partly in warning. He closed the small space she caused between them by pushing onto her, her body pressed between him and the table.

“You may not believe in love, milord. But I do.” She pressed forward, her breasts firm against his chest, her eyes sparkling with something he didn’t recognize in the candlelight. “It is more powerful than the magic of my people.”

“Old, dark, magic,” he said, a throaty whisper that revealed his need. “It has no power here.”

“Perhaps,” she said, her lips curving into a smile. “Or perhaps you have yet to find the woman with the power to enchant you.” She brought the goblet to his face, held it with both hands as she offered it to his lips. “*Que el amor lo sujete à este terreno para siempre*,” she murmured in a hypnotizing chant, “*hasta que llegue esa, la única, quien le pueda ablandar el corazón*.”

Wind pushed through the terrace entrance into the room, doing a dizzying dance around them, causing a string of goose flesh on his skin. “What was that?” he asked, moved by something he didn’t understand, filled with heat deep in his stomach.

“An old saying of my people,” she answered cryptically, holding up the goblet as an offering. “Drink,” she commanded.

He bent his head and obeyed, unable to stop, pulled by a force he could not see. The wine tasted warm and fruity. When he swallowed, it caused a hot flame to spark in his chest. Her face blurred for a moment before him, his eyelids grew heavy.

The last image he saw were her ebony eyes, before he surrendered to the darkness.

## Chapter One:

### *Marseille International Airport (Aéroport de Marseille Provence) Marseille, France, Present Day*

Not even the Atlantic Ocean was enough of a barrier between Saira Morales and the crappy life she left behind in New England. Who knew the few thousand dollars she'd managed to save for her wedding would become her emergency escape fund? She'd definitely not thought that she'd be using it to run away from her fiancé. *Ex-fiancé*, she reminded herself bitterly. The grimy bastard was probably still trying to pull his pants up after getting caught red handed screwing her dear sister.

The thought only brought another wave of nausea. She could still see the guilty look on his face when she closed her eyes. Like he had any right to feel guilty. It wasn't the first time the two had bumped uglies. From the looks of it, he and her sister had been going at it like bunnies for almost two months. Two months! They'd been engaged for four. Why he even bothered to propose was beyond her. Maybe he'd had one too many to drink when he asked her, because it sure as hell wasn't love that urged him to put a ring on her finger.

God, men sucked. A muffled voice came over the airport loudspeaker saying something fast in French. Saira sighed. She really should have paid more attention when she took French in high school. She felt like a total foreigner.

Looking around the terminal, she spotted a café. To her surprise, it looked rather American, like something she would have seen in New York City, a bar and grill type place. She prayed they spoke English. Her French was just embarrassing and she doubted they'd take well to her Spanish. After a seven hour flight, what she really wanted to do was crawl into a luggage train and disappear into oblivion.

Jetlag had set in something fierce. She'd left JFK at nearly 8pm. Somewhere between the seven hours, it had become morning. 8am, to be precise. Where had the rest of the night gone? She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands. Her head spun. She felt like total crap and she could almost guarantee she looked it. And why in the world did she feel so tipsy? Damn it. If she was going to feel tipsy she sure as hell wanted to have had a drink first.

Mumbling a string of curses she headed into the café and ordered a coffee, hoping that it would do something to wake her up and maybe even lighten her mood. The plane ride had put her into an exhausted sleep. She'd fought the pull of morning as daylight spilled in through her little plane window, grasping at the edges of sleep with all the strength she possessed. Her dreams were pleasant, laced with moonlit walks along a cliff

and steamy nights of passion. Basically, a picture of a life she didn't have but desperately wanted. Thankfully, she hadn't dreamt of her jerk of an ex.

She hadn't dreamt of her old life at all. What was there to dream about? She had nothing back home to look forward to. Not even a job. Her once promising career quickly faded into nothing when she quit earlier in the week. As a paralegal in a prestigious law firm, she found that Mr. Jacobs, of Meyers and Jacobs, expected her to do overtime. And he didn't exactly mean paperwork. In case her fiancé hadn't proved it enough, it was just another reminder that men sucked.

Her coffee arrived and the enticing aroma brought her attention back to the moment. Forget that life, she told herself. It was time to start new. Saira Morales would no longer be subject to her circumstances. She would make her own future, however she saw fit. Despite having said that the entire way to France, she still wondered what she'd been smoking when she decided to come. Was it really a good idea to just leave life for two weeks and runaway to another country? It didn't solve anything. She'd still need a job when she got back. She'd have a pile of bills waiting for her and an empty apartment to go home to. She sighed again, picking up the mug with both hands and letting the warmth seep into her cold body. It didn't matter now. She was in France; she might as well enjoy it while she could.

"You're thinking too hard," a familiar voice teased from a few feet away. Saira looked up, amazed to find that anything could still make her smile. In answer to her most private thoughts, Christine Rubard stood as Saira's saving grace, all blonde hair and sea green eyes wrapped in an angelic little five foot body. She was the only person she could turn to during this horrifying time in her life, whom she could tell her most hideous, embarrassing secrets. "You look absolutely miserable, babe."

"Thanks," Saira laughed, though it sounded miserable even to her own ears.

"Don't worry about it," Christine said with a playful wink. "I expected worse, actually. Where we're going, you're going to forget the rest of the world even exists. By the time the two weeks are up, you're going to be a new woman. I promise." Grabbing a suitcase from the floor with one hand, Christine used the other to steal the cup of coffee and take a sip. "Mmm, that's good stuff," she said with a pucker of her lips. "Now, come on. Let's get out of here. Andre is in the car."

Saira nodded, wrapping her backpack over her shoulders and picking up her second suitcase. They walked in silence through the crowded airport. Saira had never felt more like a fish out of water. This was such a bad idea.

"Stop it," Christine chastised. "I can practically hear your regret wheels turning. You needed to get out of there, Saira. You were drowning."

"Running away isn't going to solve anything."

“It’s going to give you time to get yourself together. To figure out what you want to do with the rest of your life. You’re still young, honey. The world is full of opportunities for gorgeous, intelligent women like you.”

“I really just want to lock myself away in a cabin somewhere. Can I do that?”

Christine’s blue eyes sparkled with laughter. “No. You can’t. But, you can lock yourself away in a beautiful French manor for two weeks on a secluded and some say, enchanted island. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find love along the way....”

The snorted laugh that erupted from Saira’s throat died on her lips. “Love is so out of the question. I don’t want to see another man for as long as I live.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“Dramatic? Joe and I were together since high school, Chris. I don’t know what it’s like to be with another guy.”

“Maybe it’s about time you learn.”

“Forget love.” Saira shook her head. Love was the last thing she needed. “Maybe what I have to do is grow a pair and just hook up with some random guy. Say ‘screw you’ to Cupid and send him crying to his momma.”

The melodious laughter she’d always loved lifted above the air. Christine’s good mood was contagious and Saira couldn’t help the smile that lifted at the edge of her lips. “God help anyone who stands in the way of a woman scorned.”

They walked out into the sunny day. At the end of the drop off point, Andre stood by a cab, waving them over. She smiled at the sight of him. Tall, thin, with piercing blue eyes and fair skin, he and Christine were beautiful enough to grace the cover of a magazine. And so damn happy. She envied them so much.

After almost eight years of marriage, they seemed just as in love as the day they first met. Saira just couldn’t understand. What did they have that was so special, so different from the rest? What did they have that she’d obviously missed with Joe? Shaking away the thoughts, she forced herself to keep a smile on her face and move forward. Andre swept her up into a big hug, his cologne causing a warm blanket of safety and home all around her.

“*Bonjour*, my gorgeous Saira!” he said enthusiastically in his thick French accent. A broad smile stretched across endless white teeth. “Welcome to France!” Brown freckles sat across the bridge of his nose, bringing a sun kissed look to his otherwise pale skin. “Get in, get in!” he urged, grabbing her luggage and stuffing it into the trunk. “We must get to the boat.”

“Boat?” she asked, uncertainty suddenly creeping through her. She’d never been on a boat. She always took the subway or hitched a ride to avoid the ferry in the city. She and water just didn’t get along.

“Don’t worry,” Christine said, grabbing her hand and squeezing tight. “It’s a short ride.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, as Saira took in the streets of Marseille. It was a quiet, sluggish town with a wonderfully cozy feeling to it. Little by little, her shoulders eased, the tension in her neck disappeared. Maybe this was a good idea after all.

“You look wonderful, Saira,” Andre said with a smile, causing her to look across the cab at his icy blue eyes.

“Don’t lie,” she said, before erupting into laughter. “But thank you for saying that anyway.”

“I’m just glad you took my advice and came,” Christine said, still holding on to her hand. “I’ve missed you. The phone just isn’t the same. And really, I’ve been dying for you to see just what I mean. This place is going to knock your socks off.”

“It is quite a thing to see,” Andre said, nodding in agreement. “Magical, in many respects.”

“Thanks for letting me come. You’re both my lifesavers. I hope you know that.”

“Don’t thank us just yet.” Christine looked out the window toward the docks as the taxi came to a stand still. “Let’s see how the two weeks go first.”

They got out, each grabbing a piece of her luggage and walked toward the private boats tied to different parts of the port. Yachts, sailboats, private canoes all lined up, in different colors and sizes, creating an amazing skyline of styles and tastes among the coastal crowd. They walked toward a decent sized sailboat, with beautiful, big white sails that looked like clouds against the bright blue sky.

“This is ours,” Christine said with a proud smile. “It helps us get from home to the mainland. She’s called *Cavalier de Liberté*.”

Saira repeated the name in her mind. *Cavalier de Liberté*. Freedom Rider. How appropriate. Settling in the bow of the boat, Saira yawned. The sun, accompanied by the alluring scent of the ocean breeze formed a languid, lazy feeling that turned her body into a rubbery mess.

“You’re tired,” Andre noted with a sympathetic smile as he revved up the engine. “Close your eyes. Relax. It’ll be a little bit before we get there.”

Saira nodded. Closing her eyes, she focused on the sound of the waves hitting the side of the boat. Lulled by their rhythmic pattern, she found herself falling into the oblivion of sleep with one final thought vanishing into the air. She'd found paradise.

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“Wake up, sleepy head.”

Saira pushed past the fog of sleep and opened her eyes, blinking away the bright sunlight. She was pierced with a rich sea green gaze.

“We're here,” Christine said with a smile.

“Here?”

“Here. *Isle d'Éternité*. Home. The only private island in the Frioul Archipelago.”

Saira sat up, giving herself a moment to look around and take in the sight. A breathtaking stone castle sat atop a jagged cliff, overlooking the water. The beach was covered with endless white sand that stretched up into a field of bright green further into the island. Saira blinked. Was this place even real?

“This is just...” she tried, unable to find just the right word to describe it. It held an ancient quality to it, a rustic beauty that no longer existed in most places. “Wow.”

“I knew you'd love it.” Christine yelped. She practically jumped up and down with glee. “Come on,” she said, reaching for Saira's hand and rushing her off the boat and onto the shore. “I want to give you the official tour. Andre,” she called out to him, offering a quick wave, “we'll meet you inside for lunch.” She wrapped her arm through Saira's. “He's got to anchor the boat,” she explained, glancing back at the dock.

They pushed through the sand and up the hilly field onto a worn path that led to the cliff. Summer flowers littered the field with random spurts of color. Lilies, hydrangeas, and gladiolas all sat like love letters to the land, kissing it with a soft, adoring touch. “This place is unreal,” Saira whispered, choked by the beauty of it all.

“I know. Sometimes I can't believe it myself.” Winded, they struggled to catch their breath as they pushed up the final steep steps of the path toward the manor gardens. Once in front of the massive structure, Saira leaned back to give it a good look.

“You live here?”

“Yup.” Christine sounded just as awed as she felt. “Andre got a great deal from the previous landowners. It was abandoned. They'd bought the island, hoping to tear

down the castle and rebuild property, but the plan fell through. They wanted to get rid of it right away. He bought it for dirt cheap.”

“I hate you,” Saira said with a dreamy sigh. “I hope you know that.”

Christine laughed, bumping her shoulder with her own. “Don’t. We can share.” With a deep breath, she looked up at the looming structure and smiled. “Ready?”

Saira nodded, struck with a sudden flight of butterflies in her stomach. She was as ready as she could ever be to tour an ancient manor in France. If she thought she hated Christine before, the tour only proved to remind her why. Every corner of the palace merited its name. *Château de Rêves*, Palace of Dreams. Unreachable, impossible dreams, but dreams nonetheless.

Most of it had been remodeled, fit with the newest appliances and technology, perfectly melding the old world of stone and mortar to the new world of plasma televisions and steel refrigerators. Four bathrooms, each a mini spa in their own right, all looked like ancient Greek baths, with luxurious sheer curtains, wide Jacuzzi tubs, standing stone showers and beautiful mosaic tiling decorated by endless candles on iron stands.

There were eleven bedrooms. *Eleven*. Saira wondered how she’d keep all those bedrooms cleaned. It would be impossible. Her little one bedroom apartment was barely ever clean.

The wine cellar stretched to extend about half the length of the building, with dusty bottles piled high on the walls in their respective cubbies. Some were local, some imported. The grand ballroom on the main floor was spacious and luxurious, with light, airy fabrics to accent the steely grey of the stone walls. Its windows reached from the floor to the ceiling.

Saira imagined what a full moon looked like through those windows. Probably magical, she thought. Like everything else about this place. It held a certain old world charm, as though time itself fell prey to the island’s allure, stopping completely.

And just when she thought she’d seen enough to make her envious for a lifetime, Saira walked through the narrow door and down a dark staircase off the kitchen into the underground caverns. Cool, shadowed caves housed natural hot springs carved into the land. Steam rose like haunting smoke. The air smelled of moisture and rain. Saira had somehow stumbled into heaven.

“That’s the tour,” Christine said, as they came up the stairs, pushing back damp strands of hair from their slicked skin. “Andre should be waiting for us in the sunroom with sandwiches.”

“The sunroom?”

“It’s a special room we had built on the third floor, made of all windows. Sometimes we just sit there and watch the sun set over the water.”

“Oh.” Saira nodded dumbly. What could she even say to that? Her childhood best friend had gone from a decent house in White Plains, New York to a bonafide mansion on a private island in France. How had Christine fallen into such luck? And more importantly, Saira wondered, could she rub some off on her?

They walked in silence up the first flight of stairs. Instead of taking the left toward the soft antique furniture and bright pastel hues that filled the hall, they took a right down a dark and empty hallway. Unlike the rest of the home, it felt cold, primeval. The air thickened with tension and anticipation, as though the walls themselves sat waiting. Saira shivered away the cold chill that ran through her skin. “Why didn’t we go through here before?”

“There’s nothing else in this area of the castle. We only have to pass it to get to the sunroom.”

Saira pressed her brows together in confusion. That seemed like a waste of space. “Why?” she asked, with genuine curiosity.

“Why what?”

“Why didn’t you remodel this part of the castle too? Why just stop?”

“This part of the castle is already occupied.” Christine offered no more information. *She doesn’t want to talk about it*, Saira realized with interest, which only made her want to know more.

“Occupied? I didn’t realize you rented.”

“I don’t.”

When the conversation fell back into silence, Saira stopped. A heavy wooden door sat to her left, cracked and rotting with age. She stared at it for a long time. Something inside the room beckoned, drawing her hand toward the handle. What secrets lay inside the untouched part of the castle? What pieces of history did it hide?

“Don’t,” Christine said quickly, grabbing her wrist and pulling it away from the rusted iron handle. “We do not go in there.”

“Why?” Normally sparkling eyes dimmed with uncertainty, worry. Christine looked genuinely troubled. “What is the big deal, Chris? Just tell me why.”

Her best friend let out a long, heavy sigh. “A ghost haunts the castle,” she finally said. She pushed back stray pieces of blonde hair from her face, twirling them nervously between her fingers. “This is his wing.”

“A ghost?” Saira blinked. Was she serious? “You mean like Casper?”

“No, not like Casper,” Christine snapped, her lips pressed into a tight line, her face firm and indignant. “Look, I know you don’t believe in this stuff. I never did either, but it’s real. I’ve seen him, Saira.”

She looked at the door again, amused. There was a ghost in the castle. It figured. She knew the place was too good to be true. It was haunted by some freak who liked it so much, he didn’t want to leave. “Come on Chris,” she said with a smile. “Just get an exorcist or something.”

“It isn’t funny, Saira. He’s lived here for a long time. The previous owners sold because he would not allow them to tear the place down. He’s powerful and you shouldn’t tease about things you don’t understand.”

“Will I get to meet this ghost?”

“He’s not exactly social, if that’s what you mean. We see him on the terrace just outside the room sometimes, looking out over the water, and waiting. We think he lost a love at sea or something.”

“Right.”

Christine let out a frustrated breath. “Look, believe it or not, just respect it. This room is off limits. I don’t want you in this wing. There’s nothing for you to do here anyway.” She stared at Saira, waiting for some sort of promise. Saira only offered a smile. Did she really expect her to stay away from something as fascinating and strangely romantic as a melancholy ghost? “Let’s go,” she said, changing the subject. “Andre is waiting.”

Saira stumbled forward, trying to keep up with Christine’s rushed steps. Her hand was wrapped tightly around her elbow, dragging her down the dark hall. A faint whisper traveled on the wings of the wind, whispering her name like a caress against her skin.

*Saira.*

She looked over her shoulder, back toward the closed door, bitten by curiosity. It was a tempting siren’s call, urging her back, despite the danger she knew might lurk at its edges. Another cold shiver tickled her spine.

Ghosts, she laughed to herself. Christine had obviously been away from home for far too long. It was all silliness. Convinced she’d have a nice long talk with Christine

after lunch, she followed her silently up another flight of stairs, past an antique looking gold framed mirror.

Something moved and she caught it out of the corner of her eye. Saira stopped short, startled by the eerie feeling that lifted the hair at the nape of her neck. Christine was already further ahead, calling out to Andre, speaking in fast, French sentences. Saira took a slow, deliberate step back and stared into the mirror. As she suspected, all she saw was the reflection of the empty hallway, the dark shadows of stone and torch lights. "You're being an idiot," she mumbled to herself, before running up the stairs to meet with her friends. For a brief moment, she swore she saw the silhouette of a man reflected in the glass, before it disappeared.

## Chapter Two:

She was the one.

He knew it without a doubt. From the moment she pushed her way up the hill and onto his property, Damien had felt the change in the air, the way it crackled and stilled, welcoming her home. He'd watched her from the terrace of his bedroom, taken by the similarities. Her skin was the same ruddy cinnamon. Her hair fell in long, luscious waves that rivaled the darkest night. Her body dipped and curved in all the right places. But it was her eyes that unnerved him. They were frighteningly similar to eyes he'd stared into so long ago, eyes he knew he'd never forget.

She'd sensed him. Even without putting on the cloak of visibility, the only gift imparted by the wicked curse Mireio placed on him, she'd somehow known he was there. When she stepped back and looked into the mirror, he swore for that one moment he was looking right at the gypsy witch who'd forever confined him to the stone walls of the manor.

It was all part of the elaborate joke. He understood that now. Centuries worth of seeking answers, of searching for the right woman had come down to this. The final challenge. He would have to face the embodiment of his past and make the right decision. Unfortunately, he had no idea what that decision was. He had yet to even figure out what the wench had been trying to teach him with that blasted spell.

For years he thought it was just punishment, her way of chastising him for trying to touch what did not belong to him. The irony didn't escape him. She'd been his prisoner for the exact same reason. Why she felt claiming her was a worse sin than stealing his goods, he didn't know. In his mind, they ranked about the same.

She had been another woman, a different breed, but a woman nonetheless. He'd had his share. It was her power that made the subjugation more appealing, which made the need so much stronger. She became more than a possession. She was an equal, one

which he had to duel and conquer. In their first round, he lost. But that would all change soon enough.

Two hundred years was more than enough time. He was through being subject to her control. Now, he had a plan. He wasn't sure it would work, but it was worth a shot. He was out of options anyway. He'd tried nearly everything else.

With a heavy sigh, Damien made his way onto his terrace, staring out over the water, lost in thought. Countless women, nameless faces, all blurred to form a distant memory. How foolish he'd been to think the spell required some sort of physical connection to be broken. Hadn't it been his attempt at physical intimacy that had gotten him in trouble in the first place? Years of purposeful celibacy had proved just as fruitless. They'd served only to frustrate him. At times, the loneliness became unbearable. He wished for death more than he wished for a solution.

But time served to teach him a valuable lesson. He went over Mireio's words in his mind hundreds, thousands of times looking for some clue. Most of it was a blur, but he remembered one thing, her foolish obsession with love. It was the one thing that had slightly dimmed her hold on him. *Too bad*, he'd thought. *That a woman as obviously intelligent as this one is wrapped up in something as foolish as love.*

Which could only mean one thing, somehow, his spell was meant to teach him the power of love. What she hadn't counted on was that there was a force even stronger. His will. His desperation. His anger. She wanted to force him to love? She would see just how strong her emotion was when faced with a man on a mission.

Saira Morales would be the one, he thought to himself, watching her from the terrace as she walked the sandy white beaches alone and melancholy. He would woo her until she not only craved his touch with every breath, but also loved him with every fiber of her being. And her love for him would be just the thing to set him free.

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Saira stood in front of a full length mirror, horrified by her reflection. She wore a heavy beige gown with intricate gold embroidery. The neckline wrapped around her shoulders and dipped low on her chest, exposing breasts pushed up by a corset that made it nearly impossible to breathe. She couldn't for the life of her understand just how it'd come to this.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered, clutching the edge of her antique dresser to balance herself. "A masquerade? You couldn't just hold a dinner party?"

Christine pulled the ribbons tighter. She gasped for air. "Why not? No one dresses up for soirees anymore. I figured something a little bit more formal would be fun."

“Leave it up to you to turn something simple into something outlandish.”

“It’s not like you couldn’t use the distraction.”

“Flying to France was supposed to be the distraction. A masquerade is just preposterous!” She clutched her stomach. Women must have been suicidal to wear these things all day.

“Why? I live in a manor. The place practically demands a little bit of dramatic attention. Think of it as your welcome party. A way to meet some of our local friends.”

“I swear, Chris, if you’re trying to play matchmaker…”

“No, no, no,” she soothed, finally releasing her hold on the dress. Saira stood up straight, her posture made perfect by the boning in the corset. Christine smoothed out the skirt and smiled. “I just want you to have a good time. You wanted to get away from real life, right? I’m helping you do it. Where else will you be able to go to a masquerade?”

Saira looked at her friend through the mirror, angling her eyebrows in suspicion. She knew Christine. Despite her denial, she knew that somewhere deep inside she was hoping she would find for her what she’d found in Andre. It just wasn’t going to happen. Love like that struck one in 100,000. Saira just wasn’t one of the lucky ones. “You swear?” she asked, although she knew better.

“On *Isle d’Éternité* you’re unknown. You have no past, no history. You’re a blank canvas where no one can judge you. Enjoy the freedom of anonymity, if only for tonight. I’m giving you the chance to start over. If you happen to make a love connection…” her voice faded and she shrugged. “That would just be a bonus.”

Saira rolled her eyes. She meant well, she reminded herself. And she did have a point. This was her chance to start fresh. She’d be absolutely foolish not to take it. “I can’t believe you’re actually throwing a masquerade,” she said, accepting her fate. “Seriously, you’re like the only person on the planet who can pull this off.”

“What can I say?” Christine laughed, adjusting her turquoise and white gown, wriggling inside to make herself more comfortable. Her blond hair lay pinned above her head in a mess of curls that fell around her heart shaped face. She had to admit, the woman knew a thing or two about leaving reality behind.

With a final glance in the mirror, Saira was stunned by the transformation. Her dark hair was half up, held in place by a comb with a beaded dragonfly. The rest fell in dark waves on her back. Chandelier earrings draped her neck and brushed her shoulders. Her skin sparkled from the glittered powder Christine brushed on her collarbone. For a second, she actually felt as though she’d slipped back in time.

A faint knock brought their attention to the door. “Are you descent?” Andre asked, cracking open the door and peeking through.

“You’re supposed to wait until I say yes,” Christine called out with an easy laugh. It was all the invitation he needed. He swung open the door and waltzed in, a wicked smile on his face.

“And miss the show? What would be the fun in that?” He stopped beside where Christine sat at the foot of the bed and leaned over to kiss her. Saira watched them from the mirror. She could barely contain the disillusioned sigh. She knew she shouldn’t be jealous, but she couldn’t help it. They wore their love on the very surface and it glowed bright, an aura of color and warmth that surrounded them. Damn her if she hated them for it.

She turned away from the reflection and focused on putting on her heels. She was the worst friend ever. Here they were, going out of their way to comfort her and she was having evil, malicious thoughts about them. No, not about them, she corrected. About love. That stupid emotion that did nothing but make her miserable.

“You ready, Saira?” Andre asked behind her.

“Yes,” she answered, “I’m ready.”

She pushed aside all of her troubling thoughts. Tonight was about discovery. Adventure. She wouldn’t let herself get bogged down by petty emotions. Nothing was going to stand in the way of her freedom. She’d lived for other people for far too long. It was time she took her life and made it her own. Love be damned. She didn’t need a man to make her happy.

Putting on her brightest smile she turned, determined to make tonight the most memorable of her life.

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It had been a good thought. Motivating, even. But Saira hadn’t factored in the presence of one stubborn, pushy, and rather smelly masked stranger. From the moment they’d stumbled into each other by the hors d’ouvres table, he’d followed her around and nearly talked her to death. It didn’t help that he thought he was funny. Every few sentences he would break out into uproarious laughter. She only stared at him blankly. Didn’t he realize she barely understood what he was saying? His accent was too thick to make out anything more than a few words at a time.

Now, hours into the party, she just about regretted talking herself into coming. She knew it was a bad idea. She’d been forced to mingle and talk to strangers all night. Sure, most of them had been friendly and welcoming. Then, there was this guy. With the smell of fish still lingering in his clothes and the annoying laugh that reminded her of

a donkey. He was a fisherman, no doubt about that. There would be nothing wrong with that if he just bathed. And stopped talking. He would be nearly tolerable then.

With a heavy sigh, Saira tried to walk away from him, for like the umpteenth time. As with the many times before he followed close behind, mumbling some unintelligible thing about sailing. She rolled her eyes and proceeded to ignore him. Her eyes roamed the room, watching the flow of movement. People came and went. Couples danced. Dresses of different colors brightened the overall dark room. Sheer white curtains swirled lazily against wall length windows. Saira wondered what the water looked like hit by moonlight.

“I need some air,” she mumbled, rushing away without waiting for an answer. He better not even think to follow her outside. She might be forced to hurt him.

The music dimmed the further she got from the ballroom. Stepping into the gardens she took a deep, cleansing breath. Finally, solitude. Hoping to catch a few stolen moments she removed her heels and left them on the patio, lifting her dress to avoid getting it dirty as she strolled through the grass. It was cold and moist against her stocking clad feet, but she smiled anyway, feeling suddenly invigorated. *This* was her idea of a good night, not some crazy masquerade.

She followed a worn dirt path, startled to find it led toward the back of the manor. The walk was narrow, hugging the sides of the building and lifting from underneath it to form a short wall, the only barrier between her and the serrated rocks below. Stars shined brighter than she'd ever seen. The moon hung half full, its reflection flickering in the moving waves. Without the buzz of the crowd or the bright lights of the ballroom, time stood still. Is this how the previous owners of the manor felt, all those years ago?

Taking slow, leisurely steps she strolled further down the path and stopped short at the sight of a man. He stood, his weight held on his hands, his palms flat against the slate slabs that made up the cliff wall. He stared out into the night, lost in thought. She was captivated by his expression, so full of emotion and yet unreadable. His profile displayed a rugged beauty that perfectly fit the hard and rustic edges of his surroundings.

She knew she should leave. The moment felt too intimate, too private. But try as she might, she couldn't turn away. She was enchanted by his presence, curious about what put that plethora of emotions on his face. Instead of a step back, her feet moved her forward.

Sensing her presence, he turned his head toward her with unbearable slowness. She froze. Her heart slammed in her chest at seeing him full on. His beauty was devastating. Stubble covered his chin and jaw, darkening his pale ivory skin. He wore his raven hair slicked back, away from his dark brows and expressive eyes, eyes that despite his obvious youth seemed ancient.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered when she came crashing back to reality. The sounds that had all faded into the vacuum erupted into a natural crescendo, overwhelming her. Her face burned. She’d just been ogling him shamelessly. “I didn’t realize there would be anyone out here.” She spun back toward the gardens.

“Wait,” he called out, his voice causing a shiver to crawl up her spine. “Please don’t go.”

She stopped in her tracks, taken aback by his earnest plea. Slowly, she turned in his direction. Goosebumps covered her flesh. She shuffled from foot to foot, waiting anxiously for him to say something. He didn’t. Instead, he walked toward her, bridging the distance between them. Her pulse raced. Up close, his eyes were a rich, earthy green, nearly the same shade as the grass that covered most of the island. They bore into her soul, pulling, searching for something deep inside. Butterflies took flight in her stomach.

She looked away, unable to keep his steady gaze. He stared at her as though he knew her. Irrationally, she feared he saw more than she wanted him to.

“The silence,” he finally said, breaking the wordless trance, “is deafening.” She listened to the deep tenor of his voice, captivated by the tremor it caused all over her body. Despite his accent each word was crisp, highlighted by the different notes of his voice.

“I crave the silence,” she whispered suddenly, surprised by her own revelation. “Sometimes the world seems so loud; I can’t hear my own thoughts.”

“It feels like you’re screaming at the top of your lungs but no one can hear you.”

“It’s being swallowed up by life,” she said, mesmerized by the way he looked at her. His emerald gaze felt like a warm caress. “By the ticking of time passing.”

“Time,” he said, a rich chuckle filling the air between them as he indulged in a private thought. “No one really understands the value of time. Those who waste it want more of it. Those who have it, waste it.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“Maybe having more time isn’t all people think it’s cracked up to be.”

Saira frowned, pressing her eyebrows together. “I can’t imagine that given extra time people wouldn’t take advantage of life. Do things right. Few get second chances.”

“Life shouldn’t be about second chances,” he said, tilting his head toward the crashing waves below their feet. “It should be about the moment.”

“When you live for the moment, you live without concern for others. That’s a pretty selfish way to go through life.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience,” he repeated, turning to look at her with interest.

“Experience or not,” she said, shaking her head, “there’s more to life than pleasures of the moment. There’s the future. Doesn’t the future matter at all?”

“So we go through life tentative and afraid of experiencing anything real for the sake of safety?”

A sudden wave of anger sparked deep within her stomach. “That’s not what I’m saying…”

“Then what are you saying?” he pushed, stepping closer, until only a breath of air stood between them. “You can’t have it both ways. You either grab life or you let it float away.”

“That’s such a typical male perspective,” she said, before she caught what she was actually saying. Her mind was already conjuring images of heartbreak, of a man and woman tangled up in sheets, of dreams broken. “There’s a happy medium. It takes a little bit of effort to find it, but of course, exerting effort for anything that doesn’t bring immediate satisfaction isn’t worthwhile.”

“I’ve offended you,” he said, strangely fascinated.

“I should go,” she said, flabbergasted. She didn’t know why but she suddenly felt furious. Her hands shook from the violence of her anger and it was so completely unexpected that she actually found herself stunned.

“I didn’t mean to offend you.” His warm hand cupped her chin as he brought her eyes back toward his. It was an unexpected gesture, one that caught her off guard.

“Don’t do that,” she said, through clenched teeth. A fist tightened around her heart. She didn’t want tenderness. She didn’t want emotions. She just wanted air. She couldn’t breathe. “They’re probably looking for me inside,” she pushed out, turning from his grasp and rushing back toward the gardens. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Being near that man unnerved her. There was too much about him that was dangerous, reckless. In her weak emotional state, the last thing she needed was to be around a man set on pushing through her defenses. He was selfish and impulsive, like every other man she’d ever met. It was just like her to fall for a pretty face. And it was always the pretty faces that held the emptiest souls.

With a disgruntled growl she pushed forward, determined to make it back to the ballroom in one emotional piece. She was almost looking forward to seeing smelly fish guy again. Almost. At least he posed no threat to her heart.

### Chapter Three:

Struck motionless, Damien stared out at the spot where Saira had just stood. He blinked, trying to make sense of what happened. One minute they'd been there, in the middle of what he thought was a fruitful conversation, the next, she'd completely closed off. He'd offended her, but he had no idea why.

He took a step forward and stopped, unsure what to do next. He hadn't expected it to end quite that way. The look in her eyes just before she'd run away pierced him, stirred feelings that made him uncomfortable. What had been the source of such pain?

He took a deep breath, startled to find her scent still lingered in the air. His hands fisted at his sides. That wasn't how it was going to end. Not if he had anything to say about it. Desperate times didn't allow room for sympathy. Two hundred years! Was he expected to wait until she was ready?

He stomped his way toward the gardens and into the manor, drawn toward the lights and music of the ballroom. He hadn't waited this long to fail. It was for the best, he thought, urging himself to believe it. She'd be glad when she could replace the anger and bitterness with more pleasant feelings.

Glancing around the room, he spotted her nearly instantly. She stood out, a glowing diamond among average stones. Without a second thought, he rushed toward her.

"There are many ways to catch prime fish," an older man babbled beside her. Damien couldn't help his smile. She stood there, obviously bored out of her mind, her thoughts somewhere else entirely. Not bothering to excuse himself, he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him, wrapping his arm around her waist for a dance.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her sable eyes wide, her cheeks flushed pink.

"Saving you."

"I don't need saving," she said, trying to pull away from his grasp.

"From the looks of it, you most certainly do. Is he the reason you came searching for silence?" He smiled his most charming smile, spinning her on the floor before bringing her back into his arms. "Because if he is, I wouldn't blame you."

She breathed out, a flustered expression gracing her beautiful features. "What kind of games are you playing?"

"Games?" he asked, feigning innocence.

“Don’t think I don’t know exactly what kind of man you are.”

“What kind of man am I?” he asked, leaning into her ear, whispering against her skin. He felt her shiver beneath him before going completely rigid.

She pulled back, glanced up into his face and grimaced. “A conniving, selfish, arrogant...”

“Those are some very strong adjectives to attribute to someone you spent all of five minutes with.”

“It isn’t hard to recognize your type.”

“My type?” he said, with a faint laugh. “I guarantee you, you have never met anyone quite like me.”

“Add cocky to the list,” she bit out, wriggling out of his grasp.

“What terrifies you more?” he called out to her when she turned to walk away. “That I’m exactly who you think I am or that I’m exactly the type of man you could care for?”

She froze. He smiled. Finally, he hit a nerve. “Even if I was interested in having a relationship,” she started slowly, turning back toward him. “Which I’m not, you are the last person in the world I would consider.”

“And why is that?”

“Because a part of me would always wonder whether or not you were done living in the moment. Or where the wind was going to blow you next. Men like you,” she said, with an insurmountable amount of disdain, “are too selfish to give a damn about whether or not I care. You’re incapable of actual emotional attachment.”

He swallowed hard. Despite knowing the words weren’t directed at him, he was amazed to find they stung. Biting down hard he took a step toward her. “I’m sorry he hurt you,” he whispered into her hair. “But I’m not him.” He packed away the inkling of guilt that threatened to surface. He wouldn’t hurt her. He would make her feel things that other man couldn’t, would make her drown in emotions she didn’t know existed. Damien was the master of all things physical, but hundreds of years taught him a thing or two about emotions. Regardless of how it ended, she’d find peace with knowing that she was the savior.

“It doesn’t matter,” she finally said, shaking her head, coming back from the painful memories that shadowed her eyes. “I’m just not interested.”

“Then forget attachment,” he said suddenly. Her entire expression changed. Anger warred with curiosity. “Forget the feelings you’re afraid to feel. At the very least, I could show you a France no other man could.”

“What exactly are you asking?”

“One chance. An innocent friendship.” He lifted both hands, to motion he meant no harm. “Can I help it if I want to get to know you?”

She stared at him, her face an unreadable mask. He waited, his throat constricted. She didn’t seem convinced. Lifting a delicate brow, she shook her head, a dry, humorless laugh falling from her lips.

“Just when I thought I heard every line in the book,” she started, her rage dripping off of each word. “That one tops them all.” With that, she spun on her heels and walked away from him.

*Merde*, he thought to himself, cursing the heavens. The woman was insufferable. It figured he would get someone as thick headed and impossible as she was. It just wasn’t enough that he’d been trapped in a manor in ghostlike form for two hundred years. Now, he had to trust his fate to the hands of someone who didn’t want anything to do with him.

Frustrated, he threw out all the rules he’d put in place to spare her. She wanted to play rough; he would give her a real reason to run.

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Saira walked out of the ballroom and didn’t look back. She was done pretending. Christine could come find her if she needed her. But the night, as far as she was concerned, was officially over. She’d been put through a gamut of emotions she swore she’d left across the ocean, by a man whose name she didn’t even know! Pompous jackass. God, she hated men so much!

She slammed the door to her guest room shut, falling back onto it and letting her head fall back against it with a thud. He didn’t know anything about her. How dare he make assumptions as though he knew her? As though he knew what she was feeling? He didn’t know. No one knew. Because to the rest of the world, she was in control, but inside, inside she was broken into thousands of pieces and she had no idea how to put them back together.

Angry, she reached behind her and tugged at the laces to her dress, eager to get it off, to drag herself back to reality. One night of pretending. That’s all she’d asked for, and she was met with the harsh truth slapped right in her face. Men, all men, were exactly the same. Even the gorgeous, mysterious ones that stared out into the night as

though pondering life's mysteries. She let out a heavy breath when the corset finally came undone. Finally, she could breathe again.

The pounding at her temples lessened. Blood flow returned to normal. She should feel better, shouldn't she? So why did she still feel like crap? She dragged off the rest of her clothes, tossing on a nightgown and crawling into bed. She didn't feel like brushing her teeth. She didn't feel like washing her face. She just wanted to disappear into oblivion.

She hadn't realized the breakup would be so hard. That every moment would be a reminder of her failure. She'd been too angry to see past his betrayal to the real problem. Her. She was too afraid to truly open up, to give all of herself. Her hesitancy drove Joe right into the hands of another woman. Her sister. Her beautiful, adulterous sister.

Forget it. It was their fault. All of it. No matter how far in she dug, she was not going to find any reason to forgive them for that. Exhausted, she turned off the lamp at her bedside table and slid beneath the sheets.

The mysterious stranger's face appeared immediately when she closed her eyes. She let herself fantasize about him in the safety of her dreams, without the ties and messy promises of reality. She let him caress her skin with endless, open mouthed kisses, marking her, branding her as his own. She opened each emotional barrier she kept closed for her protection; let him touch her in all the intimate places she'd never been touched before.

And when she cried her release out into the darkness, sleep finally claimed her, leaving only the image of his beautiful face behind.

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Damien fought to control his panted breaths, easing his hands off his deflating erection. His body still shook from the virtual reality of their lovemaking. He wiped away the beads of sweat that gathered on his forehead.

It was another little gift he'd inherited from his *Gitane*. The ability to dream walk. He didn't pretend to understand why, though he had suspicions. If Mireio had known the woman would be impossible, she would have gifted him with a way to handle the situation.

He had to admit, he would miss the little otherworldly gifts he enjoyed now when he returned to real life. For now, the seed was set. It was only a matter of time before Saira cracked under his pressure.

## Chapter Four:

Two days slipped by, two miserable, thought provoking days, and Saira still couldn't get him out of her head. His face was embedded in her memory, the husky timber of his voice reverberated in her ears. She hated him, for getting under her skin, for making her wonder about the possibilities. Despite her better judgment, she was taken with him.

For two nights he'd come to her in dreams, touching another part of her, making emotions blossom within her that were as exhilarating as they were terrifying. If circumstances had been different, if she was brave enough to try again, if she trusted her heart....

Ultimately, none of those things mattered. The only thing that mattered was that he was gone, she would probably never see him again, and she had no way of knowing if she even wanted to. If she had only gotten his name, it might be a different story, but it was probably best that she didn't. She had nothing to tempt her to look him up.

She tossed another pebble from the beach into the still waters. The sea was unusually calm today. Everything waited.

"Thinking about the mystery man again?" Christine came up behind her, walking barefoot in the warm sand.

"Unfortunately."

"Is it really that bad, Saira? To want to feel something again?"

"Yes," she said, despite knowing how ridiculously childish she sounded.

"I know it's difficult..."

"Don't," Saira said quickly, before Christine could go any further. She didn't know. She couldn't. She had her perfect life in her fairy tale manor with her great and handsome husband. Christine just had no idea. "I appreciate what you're going to say but just don't, ok?"

"Ok," she whispered, settling with just walking beside her. "Think you'll be up for going out tonight? Andre and I planned on heading into Marseille for dinner and dancing."

For some strange reason, the thought of leaving the island was unbearably sad. She felt needed here, felt held down by a force she couldn't necessarily see, but felt. She shook her head. "No, I think I'll just stay behind if that's ok with you."

"Of course, it's ok. Whatever you want. Mi casa es su casa, you know?"

Saira laughed. "Thanks, Chris. For everything."

"That's what I'm here for, babe." She pulled her in for a tight hug and Saira let herself find comfort in familiar arms. Everything would be ok. Eventually. She just had to ride out the worst of it before she'd hit calm seas again. "I'm gonna go get ready. You know where to find me if you need me."

The moment Christine walked back toward the manor Saira felt the change in the air, the sudden spark of electricity that hung from the clouds. She looked around in nervous anticipation. Of what, she wondered. What big event lingered just beyond her reach?

"Saira."

She froze, startled by the male voice behind her. She closed her eyes, shook her head, forcing herself to forget it. She had to be imagining things. There was just no way....

She turned slowly, expecting to find nothing but sand, expecting to have to chastise her imagination. Instead, she looked into dark green eyes, into the hauntingly beautiful face of a stranger she felt she knew so well.

"You," she whispered, her eyes wide. How in the world had he gotten to the beach? She looked past him into the dock. There were no extra ships. Despite all that, the only question she could ask him was, "What are you doing here?"

He smiled, a slow, comfortable smile that spoke of secrets. "I came to see you."

"Me?"

"You're all I've been able to think about." A wave of desire started deep in her stomach and blossomed into delicious warmth all throughout her body. Memories of similar sweet whispers delivered late at night passed through her mind. She didn't even want to imagine what shade of red she was. "I just wanted to apologize," he continued, closing the distance, stopping directly above her. "For my behavior at the party the other night. I don't know what came over me." He reached a hesitant hand toward her, brushed away a strand of her hair with his fingertips. She quivered at his touch, fighting to keep her knees from buckling. "Being near you just... does something to me."

His words were perfect little declarations meant to make any woman fall into a puddle at his feet. She nearly did, God, she wanted to, except for the strange emotional wall he slapped down smack dab between them. His features were soft and inviting, but his eyes betrayed no emotion. Without it, the words were empty. All she heard were lies, manipulations of the truth packaged with a pretty bow.

“Why are you really here?” she asked, unable to shake the feeling there was much more he wasn’t saying. All she kept picturing was the way he looked that first night, staring out into the night sky. There had been genuine vulnerability there. Loneliness. “Why won’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because I can’t,” he said, his voice sounding almost apologetic before taking on that steely resolve. “I don’t take no for an answer.”

She rolled her eyes. It still stunned her how he could make her tremble from his tenderness one moment, and want to smack him across the head the next. “Well, you’ll have to take no this time. I don’t know what you even think you’re going to gain from this pursuit. Isn’t there someone out there who will just bend at your every command? Why waste your time with me?”

“If I wanted a woman who would bend at my command I’d have her. I like the challenge,” he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper.

“Then do a frickin’ math problem,” she snapped, throwing her final stones into the water to prevent throwing them at him. He was such a jerk. Did she really ever find him appealing? What was wrong with her? “I’m not up for playing this game, ok? Find someone else.”

She stomped off, pushing into the sand with heavy footsteps. His hand wrapped around her wrist, pulling her back, slamming her body into his. “Don’t leave me,” he whispered. It was a broken plea that betrayed something private, something that lingered deep inside. The need in those words, the desperate loneliness, shook her to the core. Who was this man? “There is no one else,” he said into her hair, holding her close. She tried to pull back, to look into his eyes and read him, but he held her tight, unwilling to let her go. For a moment, she thought she felt him quiver in her arms and she held him tighter, afraid of the emotions that bubbled to the surface. “You’re it for me, Saira.”

She listened between the lines, unsure why his words sounded more like a plea than a declaration of affection. “Why should I believe you?” she asked tentatively into his chest, without the prior accusation that hung in her voice. “I don’t know anything about you. I don’t even know your name.”

After a long drawn out moment, he released a long, tired breath, as if responding took everything he had. “Damien,” he finally responded. “Damien Durrand.”

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Night crept onto the island with deliberate slowness, extending the day, the sun warring with the rising moon. Damien still walked the beach, pondering his next move. The Rubard family was out for the night, which meant he had the evening to do something significant, something that could seal his fate with Saira for good. But it had

to be just right. Nothing too desperate or he might scare her off. It had to be subtle, but meaningful. He had no clue where to even start.

He thought about things women generally liked, but none seemed appropriate for this one. Flowers were too cliché. Chocolates promised something more sexual than he thought she was ready to acknowledge, *yet*. It had to be something less superficial. Something that would push her just past the line of uncertainty and trust she walked so carefully.

He walked the grounds of his manor, hidden in his ghostly form. He wanted the freedom to roam his land, to think without interruption. It was critical that he did everything just right. This moment meant his entire future.

He stopped his mindless walking and stared out at the distant skyline that was Marseille. Somewhere between the last few days, the idea that his fate lay in the hands of a woman stopped being so terrifying. In fact, that afternoon, with her full body crushed against him and the waves rolling onto the shore and drenching their feet, he'd felt a strange surge of hope he hadn't had in over a century. If anyone could save him, she could.

Which was why it was essential that his plan tonight work. He thought of his most prized possessions. There was the manor, though most would argue he didn't really own it anymore. Still, he knew all of its secrets, every crack and bend and hole in its walls. The land was just as much a part of his life as family. He'd seen it grow and change over years of wear and abuse. But even those things seemed empty in comparison to the gift she would give him, if she chose to accept his plea. Life. How could he even repay her for that?

A sudden thought struck him motionless. There was one thing, he thought despairingly. One thing that he could offer her which he'd never offered anyone else. Would she accept it? He shook away the troubling thoughts.

He didn't want to think about those things. His rational thought process was clouded by her lingering presence in his mind. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't forget the feeling of her in his arms, the warmth of her eyes when her anger faded away and she looked at him as though... as though she could love him.

Just as the moon came up and took its final place in the sky, Damien turned back toward the manor, certain of his next move. He would give them both tonight. One single night to live the fantasy, a taste of what life could be like, if they were given the chance for eternity.