

DAWN

(Book 5 of the Worn Series)

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CONTENTS

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter One
Author's Note

Chapter One

You know those evil cartoon characters with loud booming voices that seem to bounce on every wall when they are really mad? Or the ones who cackle loudly accompanied by thunderclaps for more effect in the background? I should say is the exact personification of a really mad and raged Mr. Abiwu right now. I mean I did wake up in a strange place with the shocking realisation that I had been kidnapped—again—and only to realise that beside Alex sat detective Alice and they were dancing to the tune coming from the car radio.

What are the odds that the policewoman who investigated my father's death and stalked out of my house for weeks and represented the law was friends with Alex one of the great uncles? The answer is none. So yeah I was shocked and eventually got over it.

So I end up in this damn house again and even get some sleep because, well to hell with it I can't keep on wishing I'll roll over and die each time one of these crazy people decide to pull out their antics. But at the moment Mr. Abiwu combination of muttering in rage and boisterous laughter was not helping things.

I mean if the man turns out to be unstable (which I think he is), he may just kill me and never even remember it. Alice and Alex are standing by the door in the office and I am sitting in a comfortable chair trying but failing to keep up with Mr. Abiwu's heavy fast paces.

'That little maggot traitor.' He is referring to Taylor, 'how dare he try to set me up?'

Like I said before, cartoon.

'You obviously didn't put much reins on your son as you thought you did,' Alice says, 'at least you are smarter than him.'

He stops pacing—no he more like halts his pacing and pivots to land his crazed eyes on me. My heart skips when he strides towards me and plants his hands at either side of my chair.

'He will do anything for you wouldn't he?' he says in his crazed voice and his eyes bore into mine, 'well let him prove it.'

'What should I tell him?' Alex asks ready to take every command.

'Leave it I will deal with my son—you may leave now.'

'What about the others?' Alice asks.

'They are in your hands.'

Icy cold feelings rush into my bones as I picture who the others were. All the people I have come to care about. I am positive they are still trying to brainstorm where I vanished off to back at the cabin. That must be five hours ago.

Alice and Alex bow their heads and walk out. Mr. Abiwu doesn't move away from me but keeps his eyes focused on me such that I have to ask.

'So what's the plan now?'

He bares his teeth at me, 'the only reason I am not having someone beat you to death is because of my granddaughter living in you,' he growls, 'you have until she comes out to convince me why I should let you still remain in my life when you don't want anything to do with it.'

Should I be thankful that here is a notorious thief who still cares about innocent lives?

‘Maybe I need you to convince me why I would be crazy enough to let you anywhere near my child.’

His eyes bore into mine for a long tense moment before he steps away from me and walks to his chair, not sitting in it but standing behind it and placing both his hands on it.

‘I have a simple proposition for you Heather—I rarely ever want things from people below my standing. But this child is the only heir I’m going to get from Taylor that he truly cares about,’ he rolls his eyes as he carries on, ‘I mean it’s not like I can just force him to consummate with someone else—I do care about my son you know.’

‘don’t I know that much!’ I mumble

‘So this means a lot to me. She is a special child, protecting you from paying for the error of your ways. But if you can’t let me near her—which of course I may choose to just take her and get rid of you but I don’t want the child to hate me for life before I killed her worthless mother so I was hoping we can play happy family for her sake.’ He lets out a dramatic sigh, ‘it’s simple really Heather—either we all have access to this child’s life or none of us do.’

Seconds tick by as I let his words sink in. why is it even his decision anyway? Just because she shares in his bloodline he has no right to stake his claims on her—the tyrant!

‘So what will it be Heather?’

I have the most venomous words on my tongue but I know this is the moment that I keep my mouth shut lest I get myself killed. By him of all people. I mean there are worse ways to die.

He waits for a long moment and then realise that I am not going to answer. He nods, to whatever runs through that crazy head of his and pulls out his sleek phone from his pocket. His finger slides on the screen before he brings the phone to his ear.

‘Please present yourself to my office ASAP.’

And he lowers his phone tossing it back on the table. I really want to ask him who is coming. The terminator? That would either be Charlie or Alex right? What about Luther—he falls more on the silent assassin sniper type.

I sit still in my chair keeping my face impassive while my heart wants to literally jump out of my chest and run for the hills screaming. He then sinks into his office chair and crosses his leg on top of the other, looking relaxed since I saw him when I got here.

Five minutes later there is a knock on the door. Mr. Abiwu tells whoever it is to enter. I don’t turn around to see who opens the door and steps into the office. Mr. Abiwu acknowledges the person with a slight smile and I can feel the person approaching the table

‘Ah, Doctor Focus—it’s so nice to see you again.’ Mr. Abiwu exclaims

My body goes still. Doctor Focus! I haven’t seen the man since the morning he announced that I was pregnant and I didn’t hear nice things about him after that time either.

‘I really don’t appreciate being dragged here in such short notice but I suppose my job is made up of those and dare I say I wish we always met under better circumstances?’

Mr. Abiwu’s smile widened, ‘you are a man on the rope to save lives—I never imagine a proper time to call you just for a drink.’

‘Doctors have lives as well Rolland.’ Doctor Focus rolls his eyes at Mr. Abiwu—I mean I had no idea they were so informal towards each other. Oh geez I have no idea about most things when it comes to the tyrant in front of me.

‘Mrs. Phatshimo, lovely to see you again.’

I take a deep breath and force myself to look at him without unleashing my full blown screaming tantrum, ‘I can’t say the same.’

Doctor Focus gives Mr. Abiwu a pointed look. I think I am more surprised he isn't affected by the doctor's lack of fear and reverence for his cursed presence.

'Oh don't blame me Focus.' Mr. Abiwu says in a bored casual voice, 'I was just telling Heather that babies are born premature all the time—what with all the foods we eat these days.'

My heart screeches to a halt the same time my eyes go round and my hand fly to land open handed on my stomach.

'You wouldn't.' I growl at him. The mother in me coming to the forefront. Shield, sword, daggers and all. My sense and logic contemplate reasoning with him. I mean he does still have a better nature I could appeal to right? My emotion and heart want to play at his game. Pretend to agree to his terms. Play happy family during the day and slaughter people like chickens in the night.

He barks out a laugh, 'dear me Heather I think I have been holding back with you—you seriously can't mean I wouldn't do anything I say?'

I don't notice Doctor Focus approach me chair until he clamps a hand on my shoulder. I almost snap my neck as I look up at him only to see in his hand an injection with colorless liquid dripping from it.

'So what will it be Heather?' Mr. Abiwu repeats the bored tone, 'am I getting a revenge or I am getting a progress to my plans.'

I would know better than dare the crazy man and I have no idea what the hell that liquid in the doctor's syringe is—

'What is that?'

'Something to help the little one out,' Doctor Focus announces proudly, 'and the chances of both your survival is fifty-fifty. I developed it myself and I am still trying to make it work right—it's a seven up thing.'

Great, I am about to become his guinea pig for a strange pregnancy termination medication that no one would ever know what killed me.'

Then Mr. Abiwu crowns the horror by saying, 'it hasn't been easy for you Heather. Your father died and your family had to hide from an unknown killer. You have been so stressed out. Only to find that your criminal husband was the one behind it all. You run of course just like you ran that time—only this time he doesn't let you live to have to run again the third time.'

Jesus. Mary. And Joseph.

'You are going to kill me and frame Taylor for it?'

Mr. Abiwu gives a shrug while doctor Focus is looking lovingly at his little murder weapon. 'I didn't. you are—your choice will not only cost you your child but mine as well Heather—but I need that boy reformed in the right way and I think a little jail time will roughen him up a little—he is way too soapy for my use.'

Oh.My.God.

I had really underestimated this man's insanity. I mean seriously. How can he be so creative and evil at the same time?

'Time Heather—I value it as much as I do my money and you are here wasting it.'

I eye the syringe. I eye the mad man. I have no chance in hell to make it out of this alive anyway. Well I could knock the old doctor with a little push (the man does look frail) and outrun Mr. Abiwu from his office. But I won't escape the great uncles and whatever minion he has planted out there.

The man has a minion detective for crying out loud.

'Fine.' I hate that I am saying this, 'just step away with that thing from me.'

Mr. Abiwu shoes doctor Focus away with his hand. The crazy doctor actually clicks his tongue in disappointment, ‘man it’s not every day you get a proper candidate for one of these little babies.’

His irony brings a sick feeling inside of me. I keep a wary eye on him until he is away from me and I turn my eyes back on Mr. Abiwu.

‘What are your plans after the baby is born?’ I ask in a business tone.

Mr. Abiwu nods, acknowledging my shrewdness. I wasn’t born yesterday you know.

‘You choose whether you want to be in her life or not. Again it’s your choice Heather.’

Geez this man has no limit to his evil fallacies. I press my lips together before I blurt out anything that could get me killed. The good old doctor is still on standby with the killer syringe by the way.

I bring my hand on my tummy and flash him a wary smile, ‘I guess we are going to try the big happy family crap then.’

‘Thank you... at least you inherited your father’s good genes. Eric’s life would have been a waste.’

I inhale through my nose. He shouldn’t mention my father like he cared about the man he murdered.

‘You killed him.’ I just can’t help myself. All in all I am no longer afraid of this man like I used to, and if I am going to be living with him until I figure out a way out of this I need to set some boundaries. I look at him challengingly, ‘if we are going to be doing this, we have to set down some rules.’

Mr. Abiwu gives me a hard look, ‘now listen you little....’

‘Do you want this or not Mr. Abiwu.’

It is then that I realise the man really wants this. He bristles a little before pressing his lips together to get himself under control. Then in a tone which sounds like he is chewing poop he says, ‘fine, go on.’

‘Number one, you will not insult me with crass words. I already know that you don’t like me or approve of me for your son and incase I didn’t say it out I don’t like you either.’ I take a deep breath, ‘two, you will not speak ill of my deceased father, considering that you killed him, let him rest in peace.’

‘I live to speak freely-.’

I cut him off, ‘I won’t hesitate to remind you of the people you don’t want to remember Mr. Abiwu.’ I pause for effect, ‘your wife.’ He actually winces. Great I touched a nerve—I mean who knew? ‘and Zelda.’

He hisses, ‘I get it, dead bastard won’t be mentioned—anything else while I still care?’

Still arrogant to the very end I see. ‘You won’t hurt anyone I care about just to get your way.’

He scoffs, ‘the little....’ he pauses then takes a deep breath giving me a look that can freeze water, ‘just make sure they don’t piss me off—I am rather gun happy when I get mad.’

I raise my face, ‘well that will be all—anything you want to add to our contract?’

‘Yes—I will have my secretary type in our agreement and we both sign it—does that work for you?’

‘It does.’

I stand from my chair, ‘well then this meeting is over.’ I turn to walk out of the office and catch doctor Focus giving me an appraising look. What the hell?—I turn over my shoulder for one last statement, ‘oh and please stop kidnapping me, it’s a dying old cliché now.’

The man actually laughs, ‘fine Heather.’

I nod at him and walk out of the office. I make it down the hall and when I am positively another floor away from his office I sag against the wall and let out a breath before chuckling to myself. I can’t believe I did that. Well the man had it coming.

I expected the formal signing of the contract. We did it and got it over with. I am still to figure out what has him so intrigued by my baby? Maybe his grandfather biological clock is clanging. My brain companions shrug.

I also expected the arrival of the team from Kasane—but not all of them. I didn’t expect Judith and Hannah to be among them. I am standing on the verandah together with Mr. Abiwu watching as they unload from the car and I actually suck in a breath when I see them. I glance at Mr. Abiwu whose lips barely twitch in an evil smile and I know right away that the man had something to do with it. I feel my anger boiling. I clench my fists.

Taylor rushes to us and wraps his arms around me before lifting my face asking if I am okay. Mr. Abiwu just rolls his eyes and walks back into the house.

‘Jesus, Heather you are going to be the death of Me.’ he mutters, ‘are you okay?’

‘I am fine, they didn’t hurt me... you need to calm down.’

He needs to because Mr. Abiwu is just going to rile him up even more.

‘Now that I’ve seen you.’ He nods.

‘There she is.’ Julian exclaims, ‘the girl who keeps on disappearing.’

I smile at him, you just can’t be mad at the man for long. And he also walks to me, pushes Taylor aside and embrace me in a hug, Taylor gapes at him with his arms akimbo, ‘I thought those police jerks had taken you back to their office.’ He mutters.

‘They did.’ Lawyer says looking at the house, ‘this one anyway.’

Julian lets go of me and Lawyer also gives me a hug. Okay—I forgive them all now.

‘I am so glad you are okay—at least now Taylor can live.’

Taylor comes to push Lawyer away from me, ‘okay enough being handsy on my woman, while I am still asking nicely.’

Lawyer mutters something about like father like son he same time Hannah Judith and Celine come to suffocate me in a noisy group hug.

Ten minutes later, Taylor shoos everyone inside the house before pulling me into his arms again and kissing me silly.

Chapter Two

The terms of Mr. Abiwu on our little contract was that I don’t mention anything about doctor Focus. The audacity. So now the mad house was full. Alex and Charli and Luther also came to join in the mad house. And it took them exactly five days to settle in because Taylor was

on a mission to either murder them or beat them up. It was going to be three against three. If Mr. Abiwu hadn't butted in. yes, butted in. and so they settled for a stale mate.

Then there was Mr. Abiwu's fight with Taylor over him wanting to frame him. well not exactly a fight because the two actually laughed over it like it was a freaking joke and moved on after deadly threats about any repeated actions in the future. The case wasn't closed, its dangerously pending.

Okay—moving on to the next act of the mad house. There is Julian and Luther and Hannah. A dangerous love triangle I had to talk to myself in the mirror as a self-therapy for me to stop counting the day when one will murder the other. We even tried to convince Mr. Abiwu to let Hannah go (granted he has no idea about her little espionages) and his excuse was that he needed everyone around for Christmas. What?

Luther really cared about Hannah it turns out, in his words Hannah was, I quote, 'she is a little crazy and way out there but I never saw this as pretense.'

To say Hannah was shocked by Luther's declaration would be a major understatement. Hell we were all shocked. Even Mr. Abiwu himself. And Julian being—well Julian, he poured petrol on the fire when he said and I quote, 'I'm sorry that it had to happen this way—but I love Hannah too—she is unlike any woman I have ever met and I am not letting her go,' and for the big blow he added, 'she is mine and we are getting married as soon as Lawyer sorts his things with Judith.'

Yes he totally sold those two out. Shocked again, Lawyer and Judith had to come forth with their explanation and it was simply something like this and I quote, 'Judith and I are getting married next year, I already paid for her dowry—there is no going back.'

And everyone was speechless to comment, but apparently Mr. Abiwu ended the arguments with one knock off statement, 'you should know that the Abiwu men are as obsessive over their women as they are over power, let's just accept things as they are and have a happy Christmas no?'

With growls and grumbles and murmured expletives we all walked out of the meeting.

So that ladies and gentlemen is how I found myself in the crazy situation. Everyone is home (because Mr. Abiwu threatened to get gun happy to anyone who called it otherwise) for Christmas. The house is full and we all share meals in the dining room. For anyone who ever thought they'd ever had a crazy creepy Christmas, please allow me to add this one to the list.

I don't even feel excited when I wake up on Christmas Eve. At least the weather is cool and cloudy, just like how I love Christmas. I wake up with Taylor hand gently caressing my stomach (he finally convinced—no threatened me back to his room). He murmurs something in my ear and plants soft kisses all over my face and I think I mumble something about him letting me sleep in peace. Whatever it is must have been funny because he chuckles softly in my ear before leaving me to sleep in.

What's the point of waking up? The only person excited about the new living arrangements is Gertrude. The woman has been coming up with remarkable menus for every meal for the past month and a half. She is in heaven while all of us are singing kumbaya near the premises of hell.

I only wake up when I can't sleep anymore and that's nine am. Still too early to avoid breakfast. I am two weeks away from labor so I have been using that to avoid, well everything. I was hoping against hope that after the damn Christmas Mr. Abiwu would release people from confinement. How am I supposed to survive living a month in an environment filled with people who are secretly dreaming of murdering each other?

Thirty minutes later I walk into the dining room and it's the same old setting ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Abiwu is at the head of the table looking like he has achieved something great. The four uncles are seated at either side of him. Judith is seated next to Lawyer and Hannah of course is next to Julian but is facing Luther who is not trying to hide his open stare at her.

I have never been glad to not be someone my whole life.

'Look who has finally decided to join the fiesta in hell!' Alex says as he digs a fork into his eggs. I ignore him as Taylor helps me in my chair. The bigger the pregnancy gets, the harder it is to do simple tasks. Don't let anybody tell you anything else.

'This is just a setting to torture ourselves with empty murder threats.' Charli says looking at Taylor. Taylor ignores him and starts serving my food after shooing Gertrude away. No he actually glared at the poor woman until she scurried away like a startled cat.

'Be nice to Gertrude.' I reprimand him

'I told her not to bother she doesn't listen.' He mumbles irritably.

Celine who is sitting across from me rolls her eyes and picks her mug of coffee to her lips. She is the only one who hasn't promised to murder anyone on the table – yet.

'Gertrude is a wonderful woman to keep up with you monsters.' Celine announces loudly like it's important news.

'Thank you madam Celine.' Julian bows his head mimicking Gertrude's voice.

The other uncles snicker while Hannah nudges Julian with her elbow. He grunts but continues laughing.

'While I was explaining about the great uncles, did I forget to mention they are a bunch of impulsive immature five year olds?' Lawyer deadpans looking directly at me.

I offer a small shrug, 'oh you wouldn't steal the joy of me discovering this by myself.' I say as nonchalantly as I can.

Hannah bites her lips and her eyes somehow land on Luther who retaliates with such a scalding hot look the poor woman had to look down. I suspect Julian kicked him under the table or he wanted to kick Luther but his foot accidentally landed on Charli who didn't waste time by plastering a jam coated slice of bread on his face.

The thing in slow motion slid down his face and landed on the table before Julian landed his older brother with a frosty glare. Alex and Lawyer were laughing loudly. And just like that, the food fight started. I mean we are adults, it's Christmas Eve and well here goes nothing. Not that I join in anyway, I don't want anyone to be almost murdered by Taylor.

As for Mr. Abiwu, he is just sitting there easily at the head of the table like the responsible adult among children paging through the newspaper. You know what? I am done trying to understand what goes on in this house.

Celine is by the couch, an old hymn book on her lap singing 'silent night'. The woman can actually sing. Moments later, Julian and Hannah walk in the living room with a box labelled 'Christmas supplies' and they set it under the large tree that we all ganged up on Mr. Abiwu to let us place in the living room.

Julian gets on his knees and blows dust off the surface of the box. Hannah squeals and swats her hands across her face as Julian continues to blow dust kisses on her. After a few

coughs and shrieks she finally gives up trying to escape the dust tirade and comes onto Julian claws out and all. The picture makes me chuckle as Julian lifts his hands up trying to defend himself but also totally undone with laughter.

Celine closes her book and shakes her head looking at the two as well. Her gaze finds mine and we roll our eyes at the scene. She stands from the couch and comes to stand by the windowsill with me.

It has gotten warmer as the day progressed and now at full midday the sun has taken up complete residence in the sky and the snowy white clouds that had gathered early morning have vanished like a dream.

‘Great singing by the way.’ I tell her.

‘Taylor is not the only angelic voice in the family.’ Celine gloats giving me a sideways glance, ‘I actually used to dream about music school and all that crap when I was younger.’

‘Younger? You’re still very young.’

‘Heather dear, even you must know that life has a way of aging you in a day.’

I know what she means. Images flash in my mind and I banish them because that’s what I do. No matter how many times I think over a horrible image, I always end up with the disappointing conclusion that nothing could be done now. Some dark scars are meant to be packed away in dark corners of our hearts I guess. I used to believe in some form of redemption, now I am not so sure. After everything that’s happened, I feel more inclined to look out for myself. That way, I know what I am doing. But that is also a lie.

‘Celine.’ I breathe out, ‘if I may ask—does Mr. Abiwu have a perfect family complex or something?’

Celine laughs. But it’s a weak laugh, ‘it’s not a complex, it’s twisted.’ She says, ‘he has been doing this every Christmas since--.’ She pauses and I just know. ‘Ruthless as he may have been, he didn’t take the loss of Taylor’s mother very well.’

What? She must have seen the scowl on my face because she goes on to explain;

‘These stories are not always as you heard them Heather. There are just some details no one ever talks about.’ She shakes her head, ‘things that explain why Taylor can never totally turn his back on his father no matter how cruel the man is.’

‘He cares about his father,’ that alone is a mountain of mystery on me. He seemed to not understand my feelings towards my father when he is the same towards his. For all that its worth, somehow I know that Taylor and I’s relationship has been shaken to the core. To the point whereby I allow myself just to feel. My love for the man is unreasonable. Even when I still hurt because of him I still can’t seem to turn my back either. But I know we are no longer the same as when we first met. When we married.

Celine scoffs bringing me out of my reverie, ‘once upon a time this was a perfect close knit family. They were just so damn perfect they made the rest of us look like we didn’t know how to exist in harmony.’ She rolls her eyes, ‘personally I think Mr. Abiwu was willing to keep things that way, as long as his family didn’t know what he did in the dark. But of course there came a time when he couldn’t hide it from them anymore—and everything fell apart.’

I glance back at the tree where Julian and Hannah are proceeding to hand crystal balls and decorations on the tree branches. It adds a whole new feeling—or, my wild mind projects a realistic picture from Despicable Me where the minions are basking in a false temporary tropical island. How can I not worry about what will happen when this phase is over?

And I am having way too many serious thoughts today. I shouldn’t. They won’t get me anywhere. Celine breaks into my thoughts again and this time she is singing ‘oh holy night’.

I smile at her when our eyes meet. Feeling almost close. But we can't be—we are broken souls. I have come to learn that the broken have nothing to give if it means mending their deepest wounds to accommodate such blossoming existences of life.

And then Alex strides into the room, instantly breaking the dreamy atmosphere. He even has to clap to announce his arrival like he even needs to. The bastard.

'Getting straight to the point.' He throws himself on the couch and takes Celine's hymn book paging through it because I think his hands just need something to do, 'who wants to ditch tomorrow's Christmas party with me?'

We all look at him. 'What?' I am the one who asks. I just can't help it.

'Well they are all going to be here to celebrate the seasons with the leader of their clan—duh... and the little precious one is a bonus as well.'

Celine sucks in a breath while my heart skips a beat and my hand comes to rest on my stomach, 'what?' I ask again. I mean its Christmas Eve, the atmosphere around this damned house is even close to settled. What is this now?

Alex looks at me then shakes his head, 'I don't like you but I just feel sorry for you—not that you are the pitiful type or anything and I don't do sorry feelings for people.'

'Point taken Alex.' Julian growls at him through his teeth, 'we promised to get through this holiday in a peaceful stalemate so can you please not push buttons?'

Alex actually acquiesces and raises a palm at me, 'sorry Heather—I just hate cases that prolong unnecessarily.'

I don't have to say anything to him so I just turn away from him and look out the window a sick feeling rising in the pit of my stomach.

'Ignore him Heather.' Celine tries to reassure me, 'let's go out for a walk.'

I know better, 'no.' I whisper and turn to Alex, 'tell me what the hell you are talking about now.' I demand, glaring at him. I still can't believe that I am letting Mr. Abiwu into my child's life—what is this now?

Alex rolls his eyes, 'seriously Heather, how can you not know these things? Your father led a great clan—he left it all of course but there are still some lunatics out there who are loyal to him.'

'Alex!' Julian and Celine exasperate all at once but it is too late

'No she should know—Christmas will be over soon and its easier if she knows what the hell is going on.'

By now I am close to hyperventilating but I manage to snap, 'just say it!'

'They are rebuilding your father's clan.' Alex says, 'and your brother is the leader.'

Brother!

'you are the heir as well—its clan business now--, and that baby could be the only thing Mr. Abiwu and the rest of us can use to not cause a warfare between our clans—she connects the families together.'

My brow creases, 'what do you mean?'

I mean really—I thought the marriage was what brought the family together as Mr. Abiwu has been flaunting how unsuitable my family was. Not that I cared about families I just wanted to be with Taylor—well look where that got me.

'The marriage contract wasn't that solid – you could have just divorced Taylor and all this is over—but the child is a permanent connection, we definitely cannot fight each other now.'

My jaw drops open and everything falls into place. Mr. Abiwu is rushing the man-man deal to increase his influence and power so that he won't be subdued by the rising clan—and

having me on his side makes things easier for him to put down the rules like always. Like I said before, ruthless people should not be allowed to be smart.

And brother. I had forgotten his existence for a while now—I mean wasn't he supposed to be in hiding—my breath gets caught in my throat—if he has been hiding from the mad man Mr. Abiwu he surely wants to come back and take revenge. Surely this child is standing in the way for a much heated war.

I can't believe the bastards have already dragged my unborn child to this madness and should I be thrilled that they are making her a pillar of peace?

I shake my head bringing my mind back to the present, Alex is staring at me with a smug smile on his face, Julian and Hannah seem to be holding their breaths, and I don't have the strength to see what Celine is doing. But by the silence that has engulfed the large living room I know that I am the only one who had no idea about this little piece of information.

Taking a deep breath and I give a nonchalant shrug, 'well what do you know? The Abiwus are born dignified.'

Alex's smug expression is quickly replaced with surprise, Hannah and Julian match his expression. What did they expect? A tantrum? My usual frozen with shock stance?—not this time Johnny.

'Well are you all going to stand there gawking at me like your pants are full?' I say in a commanding voice, 'it's Christmas Eve—get on with it.'

I leave their speechless presence and waltz easily into the kitchen like my brain is not about to explode and something inside of me is about to snap and break. Every time I have soft feelings towards these people I get to find out a little more of their hidden selves—I need a holiday.

'Madam Heather.' Gertrude beams at me as I grace the kitchen with my presence, 'good morning.'

'Merry xmas.' I put all the cheerfulness similar to my inner grief into my voice, 'I need a sweet fix I am famished.'

'Oh dear you didn't have to come all this way, you could have just rang me.'

I scoff, 'I am not inclined to call someone who is in the same house as me, its laziness bordering towards insanity.'

Gertrude smiles and rolls her eyes, 'I just need you to take it easy these final days.'

I roll my eyes as well, 'I am sick of sitting in some stuffed chair feeling like a whale—I just want to feel normal.'

'You are the only normal person in this house and Judith.'

I nod in approval at her statement.

'So what's a sweet fix?'

Good, now we are talking. I watch her eyes grow wide as I explicitly explain how I want my sweet fix to be like. Who said sundaes were only for desert? And so what if I want it to be completely chocolate with Mt Everest pillar of cream and chocolate chips on top instead of cherries. It's Christmas Eve and I want it. And why should she be shocked that I want a milkshake along with that? Hasn't she ever heard of a milkshake?

'I don't know if I can pull that off without food poisoning you.' She mumbles, smart way to deny me my cravings.

'You Gertrude can pull anything off – you made stuffed fish for dinner last night—you deboned the fish by yourself and they were so good they brought a moment of awed silence at

the dinner table.’ I rumble on, ‘if you can make a meal to shut the great uncles up during meals, you can do anything.’

Gertrude is gaping at me and I think she is beginning to wonder if I am alright. I realise motivation isn’t working so I settle for staring her down with all the bitter vengeance I am feeling towards all the lunatics at the moment for keeping such vital information from me.

She gets the point and nods reluctantly, ‘you are right madam—I will whip it together and bring it to you.’

I smirk at her, ‘I wasn’t born yesterday—I will wait for it here.’

Gertrude smiles nervously. That’s right sister—no escape.

Chapter Three

The woman has a talent. My imaginary sweet fix delight is right here staring at me and I have a large spoon in my hand as my tongue licks my bottom lip. I sink my spoon into the soft yummy delight, pushing the spoon down the one and a half liter desert glass I can’t help but pick a chocolate chip and pop it into my mouth.

Hmmn. I love stress food. Since when did I start having stress food? Since I started living a soap opera. Wild mind answers. Why do they have large dessert cups? Logic wonders. Mad house, my sense sings. I am so mad I don’t know what to do with myself—that’s emotion and heart.

I moan as the chocolate delight slide down my throat, its sweetness lingering for a moment and I decide that it’s time to attack the sweet fix fountain. I pull the spoon out from the gooey delight and lift it ready to lick the living day lights out of it—and Judith walks in—no dancing into the kitchen like she is one of those Disney maidens who have a song in every scene and a charming prince at the end of the movie.

She halts when she sees me and her eyes go starry when she sees my sweet fix, it only lasts a moment before she looks at me with concern.

‘That’s a lot of sugar to take before dinner.’

I give her a dirty look, ‘mind your own business.’

She raises an eyebrow and walks to the kitchen unit. Moments later she return with a spoon in her hand.

‘What are you doing?’

She sits opposite me and shovels her spoon into my giant sundae before shoving the spoon into her mouth. She groans loudly I absently hoped no one heard and got the wrong impression. It all happens so fast I only have time to gape and then glare at her before she swallows the whole thing and her face breaks into a –er—crazed expression?

‘Wow I think I had a trance.’ She marvels, ‘Gertrude has outdone herself.’

I can help but smile. But I can’t let her enjoy the delight I had to bully Gertrude into making. I swat her hand way when she is reaching for another shovel.

‘You can’t eat all that? Are you trying to kill yourself?’

'It's Christmas Eve—mercy abounds during this time.' I finally lick my spoon—holy crow, if I ever escape this house I am kidnapping Gertrude.

Judith's face becomes sober, 'it does.'

I scowl, 'what's with that look?'

Judith sighs, 'today is the eve party and dramas at church.'

Oh I get it, 'who must have taken over the plays this year?'

Judith shrugs, 'the group is pretty much proactive and adaptive to changes—I just can't get over what pastor Luke must be thinking of me.'

I snort, 'that man never thinks anything about anyone—and if there is any person who has a terrible reputation is an on and off church goer like me.'

Judith shakes her head, 'Malcom has no right to judge you like that,'

I really don't want to think about this, 'he was just hurt Judith, the man is mad about you.'

'Was.' Judith rolls her eyes, 'I don't think he'd ever want to see me again.'

I give her a rueful smile, it is apparent that she cares about him a lot—he is her friend after all. If only she hadn't winded up in the arms of that caveman Lawyer. Love is a blind bat soaring towards an inevitable death.

I dig my spoon into my gooey delight and shove an impossibly large amount into my mouth. Yes, so kidnapping Gertrude.

'Try him.' I say as soon as I swallow and still in the aftershocks of sweetness because I go on to say, 'you may need to clear your feelings before tying yourself to caveman.'

Judith gives me a funny look, 'I should be offended,' she lets out a short laugh, 'but are you okay?'

I raise my eyebrows at her, 'I am enjoying a sundae that would send any five year old to an early grave—why would I not be alright.'

'You just said.'

'Do you like it here?'

Judith blinks, 'no of course not—this is not my usual Christmas fest,'

'There you have it,' I say in a revelation-filled voice, 'it's stress food.'

Judith shakes her head and we start to attack the sugar gooey in silence.

Someone clears their throat. We both turn and sigh in relief when we see Hannah. I am the one doing something dangerous.

'Can I talk to you Heather?'

I blink at her, 'uhm sure.' I get up and reach for my sundae, Judith slaps my hand away. I flash her a scowl before I follow Hannah out to her room. She shuts the door the moment I step inside. Something about all this reminds me of the days we were conspiring against this household and got caught within twenty-four hours. Yeah it's not my destiny.

'What's up?'

Hannah hesitates, 'look, this is none of my business and I may be out of line but I thought I should talk to you about what Alex said.'

I shake my head, 'I don't--.'

'Just listen Heather—the decision is still yours. Thing is I have known about this for a while and Mr. Abiwu didn't want you to learn about your brother's work yet—I think Alex did you a favor but outing it and you can have more time to think about it.' She sighs, 'I just wanted to tell you that you are not obliged to stay if you don't want to. Your brother has the power to finally grant you your freedom—they won't hurt you.'

I stare at her as her words sink in, ‘why? Why are you trying to help me?’

‘Because you don’t deserve to be treated this way and be terrorized by them.’

I snort, ‘I am not being--.’

‘Heather, you think you are staying here for love? Has Taylor done anything to stop his father from mistreating you? Threatening your family and killing your father?’

‘Stop.’

‘Has he? His loyalty to his father always comes before anything else, before you—why would you stay here just to hold on to a person like that?’

I stare at her for a long moment before I start laughing. Mr. Abiwu that clever bastard. He made me sign that stupid pact so that I will never leave even if I had the way to. But why does he suddenly want to keep me here?

‘I got it Hannah, I will think about it.’

I don’t give her a chance to say another word before I walk out of the room.

And yes of course hours later after not able to face dinner I am bend over the toilet emptying Gertrude’s poisonous delight. Maybe I should have listened earlier. This feeling sucks. I already had it for the first weeks of my pregnancy I was sure I promised myself to never subject myself to such a torture. Or to put it more clearly. No more babies.

‘That’s what they all say we are five in the family.’ Lawyer had mused then, finding my predicament rather funny. I had given him a glare and said, ‘should I be grateful that your parents brought five raging serial killers in the world?’ and the only thing he could say was, ‘Outch!’ and continued to rub my back.

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ Julian scowls down at me. I suppose he is not very informed about home remedies for vomiting nine months pregnant women. If he had just minded his own business when I had quietly excused myself from the table to throw up in peace without anyone knowing he wouldn’t have to go through this.

But no, the bastard was in the kitchen exchanging food bargains and blackmails with Gertrude he saw me rushing down the hall to the downstairs bathroom and now I couldn’t face my consequences in peace.

‘Nothing—I smelled something I don’t like.’ I let him help me to my feet and walk to the sink to splash water on my face. I don’t feel better but I am hoping against hope that the worst is over.

‘Oh—do you need to lie down?’

Phew he is buying into my story. If anyone finds out that I deliberately ate to get sick I am so screwed. Not that I wanted to get sick—no, I just wanted some sugar... but no one would understand that.

Julian has his arm around my shoulders as we exit the bathroom and we run into a traumatized Gertrude by the doorway. Crap.

‘Oh this is all my fault.’ She breathes, ‘I should have known better than to listen to you.’ What the hell?

‘Hey!’ I say the same time Julian asks

‘What do you mean?’

‘She ate gallons of sugar before dinner—I think she may need a checkup.’

‘What? Are you insane?’ I try to deny it but the thin line on Julian’s lips is discouraging, ‘I am not five.’

‘I thought so too.’ Julian says.

I whip my face between the two of them, ‘look I had a stressed out moment—okay—can’t we just let it pass and I promise never to do it again?’ thank god none of them know I had diarrhea before attempting to eat dinner.

‘I know you got stressed out—but when you start taking it out on hurting yourself we won’t have it.’

Oh geez I’m flattered, somebody cares about my existence.

‘That’s not it... you don’t even know what happened.’ I argue. I should have settled for a tantrum instead of stress sugar intake. Besides I only ate it this once—why should I get violently sick—oh this cruel world.

‘What happened?’ Taylor’s voice make me snap my head up to look at him as he strides towards us and pushes Julian’s hand away, replacing it with his. ‘Are you okay.’

‘I am fine.’ I try to stare the two traitors to shut up.

‘She is not fine.’ Gertrude stresses, ‘she’s been sick, you need to get the doctor.’

I groan and sag against Taylor’s strong body.

‘Of course.’ Taylor replies immediately and did I mention that I feel like fifty pound of concrete stone? Sugar is supposed to give energy not drain the little that I had left. Is anything trustworthy out there anymore?

I don’t know why Julian and Gertrude never mentioned the sugar incident—not that I should be grateful. But seeing doctor Focus saunter in here like he is on duty or something (which he is) makes me only picture his lovely injection he was stroking like a secret lover the last I saw him.

Thanks heavens, Julian or Gertrude do not come in the room as Focus does his diagnosis but so help me god Mr. Abiwu is there and Celine as the good old doctor—ironically—is asking me how I am feeling and exactly what happened. I recount he effects not the cause.

‘its pretty normal to have nausea even weeks before labor,’ the good old doctor explains to the two alike men who are nodding attentively like two clueless braggadocios receiving lecture from a noble well learned nerd. ‘Many women experience gastrointestinal upset late in the third trimester, the baby is growing making the uterus to crowd in the space of the GI tract.’

I growl, ‘English please Dr Care bear.’

He settles his eyes on me, ‘the baby is sitting on your intestines.’ He says as if he is talking to a five year old. I purse my lips in annoyance while Celine finds it so funny she guffaws. I give her a dirty look and Taylor rubs my back in relief I think.

He goes on to rumble other medical nonsense and I am too sagged with relief that my little sweet fix isn’t the cause after all before he makes his leave.

So at the end of the day I am absolutely cross with every breathing human in this house. I decide, that is the following day and its Christmas to put all the worries of this world aside and enjoy the day. I mean Mr. Abiwu did lay out presents and all down the Christmas tree that he

hated in the first place. Maybe it's a Christmas miracle. Besides I need to save up energy for the party later tonight.

While everyone is busy preparing for the party I am delighting myself in Mr. Abiwu's gardens. The man has great eyes for gardens I will give him that. The smart shrubs and smell of flowers are soothing and just beautiful. There are paved paths along waist long hedges in a puzzle like manner. The pavements lead to a green area with neat short grass and a large tree with a shade worth of a Disney picture. There is a wooden bench under it and I just want to sit there and bask in the peaceful moment.

I stretch my legs in front of me as I bask in the cool peaceful area. Evil people's properties shouldn't have any location of peace. Or maybe for the sake of other people who do not cultivate evil for a living, there just have to be a little piece of heaven here. I close my eyes and tilt my head back against the wooden bench

I suddenly have the feeling of eyes on me. I slowly sit up straight and open my eyes. Taking a second to admire the natural beauty around me, I then turn my head towards the place I feel eyes coming from. My eyes land on Mr. Abiwu's large house, straight to the balcony where my starrer is. His arms are folded on the railings, body leaning forward, dark eyes glued on me.

Why is he giving me that thoughtful look? Most times I don't know what is happening in Taylor's head—okay every time... but that look is just dangerous for my existence. It makes him look so much like his father. As if he doesn't already. I sometimes have sleepless nights thinking about what I would do if my baby resembled the two men... okay none of that right now.

Do I wave? We are way past the waving stage. Waving is for when you are glad to see someone and you have all these good springy feelings when your eyes meet. (I do have springy feelings right now but that's beside the point.)—do I stare back? Staring back is declaring a challenge and I am soooo done fighting and gravelling with these people. Yes Taylor is now 'these people' welcome to the party.

Things are no longer the same as when we first met. Not all love scenarios are strong bonds that keep people glued together through storms and hurricanes. Because hurricanes are what we have been swimming since—well since I got crazed by those dark eyes. The same eyes that are glued on me from a distance and making me feel like I am out of breath.

Maybe it's his looks. Wasn't that the other thing that had the man's existence plastered on my incurable romantic self? It makes no sense to say that this could work anymore. I don't trust him and I soooo want out of here I so don't care if I never have to see him again. I have already done it before and it's a much better feeling than living in fear of him leaving again.

So no waving, no staring back—I stand up with as much speed as my whale sized body allows me and decide to just leave the place. Angry now, because that's what I feel whenever I think about our messed up relationship. Anger.

So without so much as a blink I turn to walk and guess who I almost collide nose to nose with?

'Can't I just not see you at all?' I glare at Alex as he looks down at me with the same expression on his face as mine. Did I mention that I have become shorter as the baby is growing?

'I could say the same thing.' He says in a bored tired tone, 'what the hell are you doing at this side of the house?'

I gape at him, 'what are you doing outside the house?' I scoff, 'I didn't know psycho killers also needed moments of peace—is there any space for the word peace in your head?'

Alex tilts his head to the side regarding me for a second before his mouth curls to an amused smile, 'I am beginning to learn that there is.' He says feigning thoughtfulness, 'seeing that the more I see of you the less I want to kill you.'

This sick bastard!

'Certain people should just vanish on Christmas day.' I mutter as I begin to walk around him and the man steps in front of me, blocking my way.

'Have you considered my offer to ditch the party?'

I look at him as if he is gone nuts, 'I hate my life right now but I don't have a death wish.'

'Me neither.' He raises his hands and I didn't even threaten him, 'I won't lay a finger on you—when are you going to learn that as long as Taylor claims you none of us will dare harm you?'

Oh right I forgot that Taylor is staring at this exchange from the balcony.

'When the cow finally jumps over the moon.' I answer Alex, 'now move over and stay a mile away from me.'

'Heather.'

I freeze in my steps to rush from him. Not that he just grabbed my arm and made me stay in one place. No. but because—geez since when did Alex start calling me so lovingly by name?

'Don't you want to know what happened to your friends back in college?'

What?

'What is wrong with you? That was two years ago, can't I just move on? You already are evil—you don't need to practice cruelty.'

The goof actually rolls his eyes, 'whatever—look I don't have much time alright? But like I said before, I just want to tell you this.' He sighs, 'what I told you in that cell that day was all true—Stephan worked for Mr. Abiwu under me. The little rat ran off and got me into trouble with the clan, they hate lose ends—anyway, he had to be taken care of and so I did and saved my head only to meet you.'

I gape at him again, 'are you insane? Is this a sob story or what? Do you need someone to talk to?'

'I just hate uninformed victims—you are the most uninformed I have met in all my years.'

I curl my free hand into a fist, 'fine? What exactly do you want Alex? You have been yapping nonsense all Christmas trying to put a damper on my mood—so out with it.'

'I don't want these families to come together... you are the only one in the position to stop this union.'

'What?'

'You Heather.' He exasperates, 'can walk away from this family and end this—your brother is powerful now—Mr. Abiwu or Taylor won't be stupid to test him—this time you can leave and put an end to all this.'

What the hell?

I start to pull my hand from his grip as my mind is beginning to want to process his words and I won't let it. But the bastard tightens his hold on my hand and goes on to say the only thing that can get through to me.

'If you return to your family, your baby will have a normal life—if she is born here--.'

He scoffs, 'I don't need to paint a picture of what she will become.'

'What's in it for you?'

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