

[50% Sample]

Love Unfortunate

A Miserable Love Story

Claudia D. Christian

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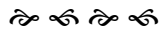
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Love Unfortunate

A single tear snaked down her cheek. The pale-faced woman brushed it away listlessly. Nightmares became spikes designed to tear into her paper-thin flesh. Memories, ancient and new, melded into a macabre dream book. The ink crimson, the text reprehensible, it told part of a perverse tale.



Soft, chubby fingers clutched at the rotting counterpane. The little pixie-faced girl climbed onto the enormous bed, one that had witnessed her conception, birth, and now life. Careful not to touch the lush hills and valley hiding beneath velvet and down, she gazed at the exquisite summit.

“So pretty.” The innocent words disturbed the motes swirling about like dispossessed souls. “So very pretty.” Rapturous euphoria made the child’s mind buzz. Falling into temptation, she reached out to touch a softly rounded breast.

She immediately snatched her hand away with a whimper. She scooted back, nearly to the edge. Stuffing raw fingers into her mouth, the little girl suckled them much as she wished she could her mother’s breast.

The woman lying there now burned with coldness. Although smooth, every facet of her perfect countenance promised retribution for daring to touch where unwanted.

“I’m sorry,” the girl whispered.

“It’s not enough.”

A voice droned in her tiny ears. She gasped and her gaze darted fearfully. She slid off the bed, tearing several silken threads in her haste.

“You’ll pay.”

“Mother?”

“No, I’m not your mother.”

Immediately, she sought the comfort of her sleeping sibling. Wrapping her arms around his thin chest, she buried her head beneath his pointed chin.

“I am you. You are me. We destroy the sons of God. We shred them apart—make them do our will. We defile the pure, annihilate the weak.”

“I don’t want to,” the poor creature moaned.

“But you will, Liana. You will.”

“Yes, little bird. You will rip out my heart and devour it slowly.”

She looked up from her huddled position. A beautiful man crouched a few feet away. “Who are you?”

Silver flame reflected a woman’s perfection. “Your sin.”

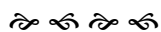
“Who is looking out at me?”

“You.”

The little girl touched her face and found it to feel just like her mother’s. Wonder had no time to develop for suddenly her arms lay empty. “My brother! He’s gone!”

“Of course he is,” the handsome stranger replied in detached amusement. “And I am here. I have something for you, little bird.” Without another word, he reached into his pale chest.

Her shrill screams haunted the room as the man pulled out a disgusting mass of veins, muscle, and flesh. “Here,” he offered with a pained smile. “Taste my suffering.”



She rubbed her eyes, weary of fighting the cords threatening to tie her down into misery.

“It always comes to me on this day. Always.”

Dreams and memories meant nothing and everything to Liana. They spoke to her in strangled whispers. They marked a seductive madness running swiftly through her veins.

Soon Liana would talk to her dream and this time she would make the ending different.

An hour. Maybe less. Maybe more.

The broken thoughts forced her gaze to slide to the barred door. Rigid lines of wood and iron mocked her.

How long has it been? How long have I been locked in this room?

Her question meant nothing. Liana already knew the answer because it was always the same.

Twenty days.

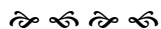
Memories of the world beyond her cage disintegrated.

“Taste my suffering.”

More tears seeped into Liana’s dark hairline. A few slid across her chin, splattering onto the sheets. The noise assaulted her ears. She imagined her tears sounded like dripping blood.

Liana shifted. A grimace tightened her colorless mouth. Although ebony sheets of the softest linen lay across Liana’s naked limbs, they felt like sand. She brought her knees up and winced as pain burned between her thighs.

Scattered all over her body, several fresh scrapes overlapped old ones. Deep punctures wounded Liana’s breasts, thighs, and arms. Their horrible presence depicted a tapestry of depraved pleasure.



“I can’t bear it!” The hoarse cries spilled from her bruised lips as a giddy offering.

“Yes, you can,” he answered with chilling arousal. “You can and you will bear it for me.”

Splayed beneath him, Liana whimpered as his lean hips ground against hers. “My lord...”

He threw back his head and growled with pleasure. “I love hearing you say that. Say it again.”

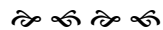
“My lord...my lord...please.” Liana’s legs fell away from his waist, exhausted from the incredible strain of holding him so tightly.

“Again.”

“My lord...” The world grew smaller as he started thrusting harder and harder.

“Again.”

“My lord...more...ah!”



Liana touched a particularly vicious cut on her abdomen and hissed. Reaching up, she ran her fingers over the scabs encrusting her neck.

Almost healed but it doesn’t matter. I’m happiest when they get ripped open again.

She braved shifting positions once more. Mist swirled about the edges of her vision. Not waiting until it subsided, Liana gritted her teeth and moved again, albeit gingerly.

A mangled growl seeped from Liana’s throat.

Please make it right this time. Please.

The agony continued to intensify and it became bitterly clear.

God’s ears were closed to her.

Liana moaned in black anguish. Her prayers mutated into venomous curses.

No matter what I do, it ends like this. How can I change my fate? How can I make tonight different?

A murder of crows flew by, startling Liana out of miserable turmoil. Their raucous chatter warned of what her raw core already knew. Liana’s moans ceased abruptly and the tears ran dry. She eyed the lone window. Terrible longing stained her vivid green irises. Night was coming.

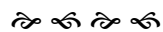
So was Laurent.

Voracious hunger stirred inside her veins. Liana embraced it with desperate conviction. Her flesh crawled with the exquisite memory of his tainted touch. Color returned to Liana's pale cheeks and the sharp note of hunger altered its melody—becoming something more torturous than before.

Soon he'll be here, but by tomorrow will he still?

The thoughts crowding her consciousness left Liana naked in spirit. She eyed the chests lining the stone walls. They lay empty of clothing or possessions alike.

Once given to her in contempt, the trunks now stood as a constant reminder of who and what Liana had become.



“What are you doing? Answer me!” Panic laced her veins, banishing all signs of lethargy.

“Go back to sleep, little bird. You need it.” The black smile he flashed matched his tousled hair perfectly.

“That’s not what I asked you!”

Displeasure tightened the line of Laurent’s now-flawless jaw. “I’m just ensuring your safety and comfort.”

“Stop it.”

Laurent’s movements never faltered, nor did his hands show mercy. Newly-developed claws shredded through the voluminous skirts, brightly colored undershirts, and heavy overdresses. When finished with one pile, Laurent began on the next.

Horror overtook Liana as she watched the methodical destruction. Springing up from her musty bed, Liana ran to him and grabbed the trailing end of an endangered skirt. “You can’t do this!” she shrieked while pulling back. “Stop it!”

Laurent’s emotionless stare flicked to her hand.

Despite Liana’s fear, she forced herself to keep his unnatural silver gaze. “You can’t take them away.”

“Why? Who could you possibly see that would require clothing?”

Liana scented danger and changed tactics. Her voice became reasonable and placating. “You can’t keep me in this tower forever. You’ll let me out eventually.”

“You think so?”

His lazy smile cracked her brave façade. “Don’t take them away, Laurent. Let me have something to wear. Please!”

“No.” With insulting ease, he sliced through the soft fabric.

Tears filled her eyes as a pitiful scrap of violet cloth fluttered from her hand. “Why are you doing this? Why?!”

“You know why.”

“No, I don’t!” Liana wanted to wail her misery. He wasn’t the kind soul who had found her along the riverbank one month prior. He wasn’t the same boy who had gifted her with his innocence four days before. He wasn’t the man who had sworn to live his life with her one day after.

That one was dead and this damnable creature now stood in his place.

She hated him. She wished she could destroy him. She wished she could destroy herself.

“Control your anger, little bird. Control it before it causes us both grief.”

Liana’s face mimicked ice. The cold, smooth surface didn’t betray the helplessness running rampant in her heart. “There’s no point in this, Laurent.”

“Of course there is. You’ll leave.” A dangerous grin tweaked his pallid lips. “I won’t let that happen.” Laurent’s pleasant response seemed obscene in the midst of his violent hands. Finally finished shredding her clothes beyond repair, he picked up the scraps and threw them out the narrow window.

Liana’s shoulders sagged. Sharp gasps tormented her lungs. The urge to weep picked away at her heart. Liana fixed her gaze upon him and wished she hadn’t.

Framed against the night sky, Laurent's lean body reminded her of what was forever lost. She DID hate him. She DID wish she could destroy him. But most of all, Liana wished they could go back to the way things were.

Why couldn't I stop this?

"Now, go to sleep. I'll be back again tonight." Laurent barely glanced in her direction as he strode out the room.

"And the sheets? Blankets? Will you take them too?"

Don't leave me. Please.

He stopped at the door. "No."

"Why not? I could wrap myself in them and find a way to walk out of here!" she pointed out snidely, angered with her detestable weakness.

I SHOULD want him to leave.

Laurent turned. He answered with a tiny smile. "You could."

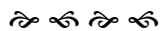
"I will!"

The gentle façade vanished. Ruthless cruelty took its place. "You won't."

"Why not?"

Coming towards his wife, Laurent gave no answer.

Only a smile.



The faint odor of urine tainted the air. Liana felt humiliated.

I couldn't control myself. It just came out.

Instead of being disgusted, Laurent had simply laughed. And after the laughter, nightmarish gratification had taken over. Thick, sweet, acrid...nauseating. Liana saw herself greedily gulping it down, swallowing every bit of demented passion.

It's too much. I'm weakening. Eventually I'm going to break. Then what will happen to him?

Therein lay Liana's strength and torment.

You keep me here, locked away, not knowing I do the same to you. So which of us is the monster?

Her cage, her prison, wasn't made of stones and iron. The pain tearing her apart, piece by piece, wasn't the present circumstance of captivity. The tower meant less than nothing to Liana.

Her agony was something else entirely.

It's all my fault. I should've never tried to manipulate Laurent. I should've known this would happen.

Liana did know. She knew and didn't care enough to change her course.

And now we're both paying the price.

Beneath her fragile façade lay a busy demon—one tirelessly carving a jagged hole in Liana's conscience and heart. Known as Blame, it had burrowed its way deep inside, branding her with every breath she took, every dream she tainted.

My fault. It's my fault. All of it.

Blame possessed an addictive quality for Liana. It tempted her to accept wretchedness while giving despair beautiful purpose. It wrecked, tempered, destroyed, and renovated. Blame amalgamated truth and lie, keeping Liana in black obsession.

Tonight will be different.

Night descended and the air turned cold. Sounds of castle life ceased, leaving Liana completely alone. Sprawled on her back, legs open with wanton need, she felt her world shrink. It became a void where sadness, regret, and misery retreated.

Soon.

Liana's limbs trembled with manic anticipation. She wondered at what familiar torments Laurent would devise for their mutual pleasure.

Restraints? Asphyxiation? Gentle, normal lovemaking?

Liana didn't have to wonder for long. First came the scrape of metal. Inanimate groans spiced the air before footsteps whispered across cold stone. Liana grimaced in a travesty of excitement as the cloying smell of scented water hit her overwrought senses.

"I've missed you." Cool hands lifted Liana from the bed. "Have you missed me too?"

She linked her arms around his neck, too anxious to do more than murmur, "Yes, Laurent."

"Good." A gentle kiss brushed across her damp temple. Laurent's tongue snaked out in a delicate caress. "You've been crying," he accused while setting her on her feet.

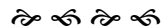
"Yes." The air grew heavy, stretching Liana's nerves unmercifully. She rubbed her cheek against his chest. Liana felt his hands rake across her back and trembled like prey.

Laurent's whisper fell like decaying petals before the wind. "There'll be time for tears later." Despite the softness, his tone brooked no room for disobedience. "Not now."

"I know." Nestled against his cold body, she felt her own come to life. Heat seared her naked breasts and stickiness dampened her plump thighs.

"Later. Yes?"

Laurent's voice tickled her ear and the dulcet tones became a carnal torture in itself. "Later, Laurent."



"Why are you crying?"

She hastily wiped her eyes. "I'm not crying." Belligerence gave way to embarrassing grief. "Don't mind my childishness. It'll pass."

Laurent reached above her head and plucked an apple. Crouching down in front of Liana, he took the hem of his tunic and polished the ruby skin. Once finished, he extended his arm and murmured, "Here."

"I don't want it." Although not stated unkindly, her rebuff remained all too obvious.

Instead of being deterred, Laurent offered his gift again. "Please take it. You'll never find another so sweet."

Liana bit her lip in a vain effort to keep her heartache from pouring out. Although she knew running away from her life would carry consequences, Liana never expected fear to be one of them.

How can I survive on my own? But how can I go back?

"Take it. I promise you'll feel better."

Liana opened her mouth to refuse when she chanced looking into his eyes. Benevolence and empathy burned within.

"Here."

Her tears subsided and Liana once more found herself moved by the living enigma before her. She reached for the apple. "Why are you so kind to me?"

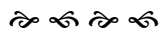
Laurent's glance thought his knee fascinating. "Because I could never bear to cause sorrow or harm to another."

"Why?"

"Because I know what it's like to cry." He stated his feelings without shame or hesitation.

Something lurched inside Liana.

"Thank you."



Liana pressed her parched mouth against his. Thirsty beyond redemption, she moaned with abandonment as Laurent's tongue filled her.

"Tears..."

Passion possessed Liana. She was dying, drowning, sinking into an abyss of shameless lust. Old wounds and burning aches meant nothing. Nothing mattered except the crimson beast panting in her veins.

"For you, for me..."

Liana sank her teeth deep into his bottom lip. Laurent hissed before responding in kind. Hot rivulets slid down her chin, painting her throat with obscene beauty. Liana laughed deliriously.

“I want more from you. Kiss me harder. Harder, Laurent.”

He moaned her name in charming distress. Fresh pain became an exquisite prelude to enthralling pleasure. Laurent knew her depravity, even if he didn't understand its origins. His tongue probed the jagged tears, deepening them and calling forth more blood.

Liana's blunt nails dug into her lover's pale flesh and for exceptional moments, she rejoiced in what she was. What she always came to be.

“They'll be there...”

His words poured into Liana's avaricious mouth. Her instincts disconnected her from everything except anticipation.

“Do you hear me, little bird?”

“Yes,” she sighed between hungry kisses. “I hear only you.”

Laurent's arms squeezed her tightly before pulling away. He swallowed once and admitted, “Tears...they'll be there for me as well, Liana.”

Passion evaporated, leaving her adrift.

“I miss you so much, Liana.”

His name traveled on her breath and craving blossomed in her mouth.

“I hate leaving you. I can't stand it. I hate locking you up in this...this...prison!” Agony drenched each syllable, courting her sympathy and forgiveness. “I don't like it. I don't know why I sentenced you here.”

Laurent seemed to fold in on himself. His words grew raspier.

“No, that's not true. I DO know why. I know...but you DON'T. And I'm too afraid to tell you.”

“Laurent...I...” Audible words deteriorated into silent prose, leaving her heart to shout.

Why won't you forget?!

“I’m breaking apart out there, Liana. I hate when I should love...I love when I should hate.” Desolation carved lines of despair into his smooth skin. “I’m going insane, aren’t I?”

Liana’s small hands worked to banish the unhappiness from his brow. “Don’t think that way. You can’t. You’re stronger than this.”

Laurent leaned into her touch. “Tell me what’s wrong with me, Liana. You know. I know you do.”

“I can’t—” Liana’s throat closed and her hands stilled. The truth threatened to tumble out from her tightly pressed lips. “I can’t answer—”

Laurent pushed her away in a fit of temper. Standing above her sprawled figure, he insisted, “You’re lying! Tell me!” The menacing shout dissolved into a pitiful whine. “Please.”

Fatalism held Liana down by the throat. She felt like an insignificant insect beneath its booted foot. Liana tipped her head back and met Laurent’s stare. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Liana couldn’t bear seeing the horror twisting his ethereal face. “The power running through your veins is too much for one not of pure blood. If it continues to control you rather than you control it, you’ll go completely mad.”

“How can I—how can I stop this?”

“I can’t help you.”

Laurent dropped to his knees besides her, ignoring her bitter answer. “Don’t say that, Liana. I need your help, little bird. Please help me.”

“Laurent, I wish I could...but...I’ll just end up making it worse.”

“No, you won’t!” Controlled sincerity replaced raw frustration. “Liana, if you won’t help then let me stay here with you. Always.”

Liana stared at her love, her husband, her life—her sin.

His immortal eyes, no longer rapacious, betrayed old humanity. Their exquisite depths mirrored her love for him, wrenching forth anemic joy out of Liana’s battered conscience.

Yes.

The word hovered on the tip of her tongue like a tempting drop of poison.

Yes, Laurent. Stay with me. It’s what I’ve wanted for so long.

Laurent sensed her softening. Death flickered with silver brilliance and pale lips flashed a mouthful of wickedness. “Just say yes, Liana. Say it.”

Although ensnared by the eerie brilliance of her husband’s gaze, sanity clawed its way past helplessness.

It’s what I’ve wanted for so long, but not like this. I don’t want you to stay with me out of habit. I don’t want this tower to be the end. I want to walk out of here with you.

Laurent lifted Liana to her feet. His gentle, unfailing courtesy lay in marked contrast to his demands. “Don’t fight me anymore. Don’t resent me for becoming like this, Liana. After all, it wasn’t my will.”

I know. I also know that until that day comes, there’s nothing I can do for you. Nothing except this.

Swallowing down her impotence, Liana whispered, “I’m dirty. Please bathe me...my lord.”

He blinked once and then grinned. “Anything for you, little bird.” Laurent’s mocking, light words banished any hint of frailty. The vulnerable human fled, ephemeral as a pretty dream. And with no small regret, Liana welcomed his change.

I’m sorry that I just hurt you. But I don’t know what else to do.

Completely aware of his wife's ennui, Laurent scraped warning claws against her skin. "Later, little bird. Yes?" His obvious anger shattered the pleasant illusion of servile adoration.

Liana gasped her assent and arched against his cruel hold. Laurent's actions were no punishment. The pain only courted her perverted hungers. "Yes, my lord."

Soft laughter peppered the air. "I'm so happy when you strive to please me. At least in this, little bird. The way you cry out for me—the way you taste—it's all I crave. Now, hold onto me."

Liana waited until he lifted her before admitting, "I'm sorry I can't make you happy, Laurent."

"What are you talking about?" Sadness fluttered across his smooth brow with a dying bird's regret. "Happiness today, misery tomorrow. Moods change. You aren't responsible—"

Liana kissed his mouth hard, cutting off his ignorance. Her lithe tongue moistened the flakes crusted in the corners. Mouths agape, teeth scraping, their tongues coiled together in primitive adulation. Laurent broke their communion. Smug triumph dirtied his face as she gasped in abandonment.

"Do I make you happy, little bird?"

"Always."

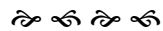
"It pleases me to know it." Laurent smiled, teeth glinting in the dismal darkness, unaware of her sorrow. "Are you ready?"

She let out a tired sigh. "Yes."

Ruby droplets followed in their wake as Laurent carried Liana to the small tub. Her wounds tempted his primal hunger, but Laurent refused a seat at his wife's bloody banquet. Instead, he set her within the shallow depths and murmured, "Soak. I'll be done soon."

Pendants of fire flickered to life behind her closed lids. Without opening them, Liana saw Laurent light several tapers throughout the small room. A humorless smile tugged Liana's lips when the door opened, closed, locked, and then opened again.

Even as devoted as she was, Laurent didn't trust that his wife wouldn't bolt for freedom.



Nightmares stalked her tattered mind, highlighting Liana's fears with a crimson brush. Suddenly, something ominous interrupted her uneasy slumber.

"Laurent!" The hushed scream betrayed Liana's panic and desperation. Her tired eyes scanned the small hut, hoping and praying to see his beloved form. Instead, cold emptiness mocked her prayers. Liana brought her knees up. She wrapped bare arms around her legs and rested a troubled brow.

Where are you? You've never left me alone for the night. Ever!

Worry knotted her stomach, keeping nausea close to the surface. Laurent had left shortly before sunset, laughingly telling her to await a marvelous surprise for their nuptial night.

Now Liana could smell dawn coming.

"Something's wrong. I know it." Speaking the words out loud magnified Liana's fear ten-fold.

"Little bird."

Laurent!

Liana scrambled up from the pallet. She ran to the hut's door before her instincts snarled a warning. Liana's feet froze, hand stretched halfway to the wooden latch.

Something malevolent awaited her.

Heart pounding with sickening force, she walked into the night air. Eerie silence asphyxiated the forest with a wicked claw.

“Little bird.”

Liana stepped forward and peered into the black shadows. “Laurent? Where are you?”

“I’m right here, little bird.”

The small clearing lay empty of life as did the trees beyond.

“I was worried when you didn’t come home. Where were you, Laurent?” Liana’s ears twitched, anxiously seeking sign of her husband’s presence.

“I got lost.”

Laurent’s familiar voice echoed with unfamiliar resonance. “Lost? How?” She whipped her head to the left. A shimmer of movement snared her attention. “You know these woods better than any alive. How could you get lost?”

Flat laughter made Liana’s skin crawl.

“Alive. What a telling choice of word, little bird.” Laurent’s cold hand clamped around her wrist. “I thought many things too. But now...now I know better.”

Liana swallowed her cry of fear. Turning to him with a relieved smile, she stupidly dismissed his cryptic statements as the ramblings of a nervous bridegroom.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m just happy you’re back and unharmed. Although, you better not...” Liana’s chiding tone died only to be replaced by horror. “Laurent, what happened?”

“Something terrible. Something wonderful.”

“But the blood...how did...is it yours?” Liana knew the answer as soon as she fumbled through her pitiful question. The stench clinging to his body was of terror, suffering, and death. Blinded by worry, Liana had missed the obvious.

“It didn’t come from my body, but it is mine.” Laurent brought her wrist up. He kissed the soft skin tenderly before releasing it. “Just as you are.”

Liana’s mind grew clouded, fear and denial fighting for dominance. “Whose blood is it, Laurent?”

He leveled his gaze on her and smiled.

Liana immediately whirled away and retched. Doubled over in the dirt, she felt the contents of her stomach rush up her throat. "NOOOO!!"

"I met a man. A man who said he knew you."

Tears flooded her eyes and nose. Gasping in vain, she fought to stop her vomiting.

"He told me you liked pretty things."

Low, guttural moans replaced her shrill denials.

"He said that he'd give me the clothes you left behind when you ran away."

Insanity gripped the corners of Liana's mind.

"All I had to do was wait until sundown."

Her arms began to shake. Long trails of spit hung from her gaping mouth.

"He gave them to me but not before he took something first."

Liana gasped Laurent's name over and over again, each time louder than before.

"When it was over he told me to claim everything that was mine."

She dropped back on her haunches. She shook her head with dizzying fervor.

"He told me I could be a lord. A lord, little bird. He said that my strength surpassed that of my mortal sire and his legitimate heirs. He promised that no decree would fall against me."

Liana murmured useless pleas of supplication. "This can't be happening. This can't be real. It just can't!"

"So I went there. Me, the insignificant bastard! I went there and you know what I did?"

She dug her fingers into her thigh. The combined stench of blood and vomit did nothing to distract her mind.

“I killed them, little bird. I killed my worthless sire, his bitch wife, and two pathetic brothers. I left nothing of their dignified line intact. Now, I’m ruler of all that you see.”

Pitiless venom coated each triumphant word. Their cruelty provoked her body to life. Liana launched herself against his chest. “Damn you! You didn’t! You would never cause harm to another! Why are you lying?!”

Laurent let Liana beat him for several moments before catching her arms easily. “I’ve elevated you from woodcutter’s wife to lady of the realm in one night. I thought you’d be pleased.”

“How can I ever be happy with what you did, Laurent?! How?!” Without giving him an opportunity to answer, she demanded, “Who did this to you?”

Laurent tightened his grip. He smiled viciously when she winced in pain. “If you think really hard I’m sure it’ll come to you. As I said before—I met a man. A man you know.”

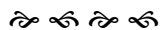
Liana’s face blanched. Betrayal seeped into every pore.

Cristophe? He promised! How could he...

Cold disgust lightened Laurent’s silver gaze. A mean smile tweaked his thin lips. “Come now, little bird. I want to show you your new home. You’ll like it. I know you will.”

The full implication of the night’s evil settled on Liana’s shoulders. “This wasn’t supposed to happen,” she mumbled in despair.

Laurent ignored her. Instead, he picked his bride up. Walking away from the clearing, he sang an innocent tune as he strode towards their irrevocable damnation.



Quick fingers made short work of domestic duty. Soon the small room was clean, bed made, and chamber pot emptied.

“Now, little bird, my service is yours.” Laurent sank to his knees besides the tub. He smiled at her, pausing until Liana returned his simple affection. “Where would you like me to wash first?”

His question never faltered. It was always the same. So was her answer. “My body. Then my face and hair.”

Laurent’s strong hands obeyed Liana’s request. Gentle, yet thorough, they followed the silken planes of her naked form faithfully. Delving beneath the water, two fingers petted and probed Liana’s core. “Still hurts?”

“Mmm. I could hardly move from the pain. I don’t think it’s ever hurt this much.”

Sympathy lightened his exquisite eyes. “I’m so sorry, little bird.” Laurent adjusted his touch, causing his wife to groan with an emotion other than discomfort.

Liana’s head fell forward. Delight danced along her spine, chasing Laurent’s touch with sycophantic devotion.

Pain doesn’t matter when he bathes me because his hands feel so good.

Laurent took special care with her legs, clucking over the numerous scrapes. “Little bird, look at what we’ve done to your beautiful skin.”

Liana whimpered in nameless zeal. “Make them better.”

“But I’m washing them,” Laurent protested as his fingers drew to a lazy halt. “Just like you ordered.”

“No...not like that.”

“Then how?” Sly torment masked itself in innocence.

“Mouth. Use your mouth, Laurent. Please.”

Wicked victory glowed like a living curse within his ageless gaze. “I exist solely for you, little bird. Do you believe me?”

She grabbed the back of the small tub. Laurent’s passionate declarations burned her soul, making Liana remember things she didn’t want to. “Yes. I believe you. Always.”

Laurent abandoned the washcloth. Lifting her leg, he waited until she looked at him. “Only for you.” He lowered his mouth. Crimson flowed into the basin with staccato harmony and Liana’s beautiful voice burst into an exquisite solo.

“Laurent!”

She was dying, breaking, falling apart, only to come to fiery life. She begged, pleaded, and screamed. Her free limb thrashed until Laurent captured it as well.

“Please don’t! Ah! Please...don’t...stop! Please!”

Laurent treated both legs with violent adoration. Jagged bruises dotted Liana’s tender thighs and still she sang for more. When he snaked an arm under her hips, she eagerly presented herself for his consumption.

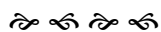
“Liana,” he hissed while parting her swollen lips with his fingers. “No matter how much I taste you, it’s never enough.”

Frenzied ecstasy courted Liana’s feral nature. Her legs fell open on either side of Laurent’s shoulders. When his lips brushed hers, Liana found the edge of sanity and turned away.

Laurent’s cool tongue bathed her battered flesh with quick strokes. Benediction rained down on Liana with every wet caress. “It feels so good, Laurent!” she babbled. “Don’t ever stop!”

“You taste so sweet. Give me more.”

Liana stared at the ceiling while winding her legs around his neck. The world’s colorless tint deepened in tandem with Laurent’s decadent avarice. She pressed her mound closer to his mouth and sobbed her joy.



“Tell me about your mother.” Liana’s fingers scratched his scalp, mindful to keep her touch gentle.

Laurent smiled with pleasant affection. “My mother was wonderful. Protective, kind, loving...she was my world. I would’ve done anything to make her happy.”

Liana’s gaze grew hard and distant. “I felt that way once too.”

“About your mother?”

“Mmm.” She continued stroking his head, finding comfort in the action. Her silent rage dissipated. “When did she die?”

“A year ago.”

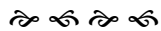
“You still miss her.”

“Very much so.” He turned on his back. “Many thanks for lending me your lap.”

The innocence in his face tempted Liana. She leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on his forehead. “Many thanks for making me forget.”

Puzzlement darkened his eyes. “Forget what?”

Liana shook her head and smiled. “It doesn’t matter.”



Liana’s heady scent intoxicated Laurent. He became a beast, devouring her without mercy. Liana’s sharp cries spurred Laurent to slide his fingers into her wet core. Their erotic rhythm demanded release as they plunged in and out, twisting, turning, and beckoning her body to obey.

Even after Liana screamed in fulfillment, Laurent pursued her pleasure to the grave. His lips pursed Liana’s tender jewel before scraping it with strong teeth.

She choked on his name.

“I love you, Liana,” Laurent swore while pressing his mouth against her sweet folds. “I love you. Always.”

Liana wept her love for him in return. Madness blackened her sight. Tremors possessed her body, driving into Liana with intoxicating violence. Desperate to touch Laurent, she wound her fingers in his silky hair. Her legs shook uncontrollably.

“Do it! NOW!”

Laurent understood as only a longtime lover would. He widened her thighs. Keeping his fingers deep within her warm body, he turned his head to the side. Laurent kissed her thigh once, twice, and then gave Liana what she craved.

She shattered. Liana's beautiful screams rang throughout the tower and into the night.

"I love you, little bird." Laurent moved up her body, raining sharp kisses along the way. "Never forget it."

Liana tasted herself on his lips. Bloody trails spilled into the water, making it as ruby as her swollen lips. Abandoned by his mouth, Liana collapsed into a boneless heap.

Laurent wiped the remaining traces of her passion very carefully. He smiled down into her insensible face. "The water is glorious now, little bird. How about I finish cleaning you, hmm?"

Liana nodded. Giving over to his clever hands, she became pliant to Laurent's every wish. "I love you. You know that, don't you?"

He merely glanced at her once before resuming his task.

Liana sank into the tub and whispered, "You have to know that I do, Laurent. I do."

Laurent's eyes darkened. However, his voice remained soft as he commanded her silence.

An enigmatic smile touched her lips while depression cloaked her heart. Liana's declarations meant nothing in face of her misguided sins.

I do love you. Maybe tonight I'll finally be able to prove it. If not, then I'll wait. One day you'll believe in my love, even if you can't believe in me.

The water lost its languorous heat by the time Laurent was done bathing her. Liana wobbled as he crouched at her feet, tenderly drying her flushed skin. Giving into temptation, she tunneled her fingers through his inky strands.

"Stop. I don't want your kindness or your pity."

Messy circles rouged her cheeks. "I thought we were better." She inhaled quickly. "I thought we were more like lovers."

"We're not."

Her hand fell by her side. “Then what just happened?”

His eyes narrowed. “It was for you. Not for me. You know what I want. Until I get it, none of this means anything to me.”

Anger overtook his aura. He carried Liana the short distance between tub and bed. Promptly occupying the room’s lone stool, Laurent set about finishing her absolutions in stony silence.

Eyes watchful, senses alert, Liana mimicked the undead with her stillness. She took great pains to appear remote, but beneath the meticulous surface she reveled in his attention, even if still hurt by his rejection. Weakness her downfall, Liana adored how Laurent courted her with gentleness, much like he did so long ago.

Primordial memories stalked by, ripping adoration apart.

Oh, Laurent. You made me feel like I was an angel. Pure, untouchable...safe.

Liana knew exactly where this was headed. However, knowing brought a different brand of desolation.

You should’ve left me on that riverbank. Better yet, you should’ve pushed me back in.

Laurent’s mood shifted from unforgiving spite to frantic normalcy. His graceful hands parted her soaked locks. He toweled each section patiently, all the while humming a melancholy tune. “Do you remember this song, little bird?”

“I do. It’s what you were singing that day.” Emotion flushed her cheeks. “The day you found me half-dead by the river.”

“I was so scared to touch you.” His hands stilled in remembrance. “You were the most beautiful creature I ever saw.”

That’s what I made you think.

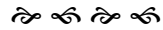
“And I thought you were an angel come to take me to heaven.”

“An angel? As ugly as I was?”

“You weren’t ugly! I never thought you were ugly!”

“Hmm...but I’m much prettier now, aren’t I, little bird?”

Laurent’s seductive purr pricked her skin. “You are.” Their gazes caught, leaving Liana to tremble in perfect dread.



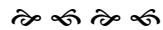
She could hardly remember his face anymore.

His real one.

Gone were the silvery lines crossing his skin, remnants of a woodcutter’s life. Gone were the few pockmarks, proof of adolescence. Gone were the tiny wrinkles bracketing his mouth and eyes.

Laurent’s perfection sickened her. There was no flaw in his face or form.

Liana shifted, bringing the coverlet over her naked shoulder. His sleeping face haunted her, a false reminder of another.



He leaned forward, abandoning the damp linen in favor of placing his hands on the bed. Laurent brushed his lips against her neck. “Don’t you like me this way better?”

“I liked you the way you were. You never had to change for me.”

“Oh, but you know that’s not true.” He kissed her scabbed wounds. “So that’s the dirtiest lie you’ve ever uttered.”

Liana’s conscience recoiled. No matter her resolve, no matter her strength of will, Liana always unraveled. Her need to justify only equaled his need to torment. Anger warred with guilt, ensuring Liana’s personal demon Blame would find its insatiable appetite whetted.

“You’ll never forgive me, will you?”

Mirth lightened his eyes to frightening proportions. “You don’t want me to forgive you. If I did, I’d have to let you out.” His low laughter elicited shivers. “And you don’t want that, do you?”

Liana bit her lip, gaze heavy with honest lust. “No. I don’t want you to ever let me go.”

“Good girl.” Laurent allowed his words to trail off as his tongue flicked across the small punctures. “Does this feel nice?”

She turned into his body. Shivers racked them both. “Very nice.” Her strained voice elicited a throaty chuckle. Liana wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, “Please do it again.”

“Again?” Laurent nipped the underside of her chin. When Liana shuddered in pained delight, he blew softly in her ear. “Do you love it, little bird?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Very good.” He rested his smooth chin on her shoulder. “But if you want to play, we need to talk first.”

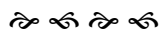
“Talk? What about, my lord?”

Not again. Every single time it’s the same. It doesn’t change no matter what I do.

“I want to talk about lies.” Laurent turned his head and smiled into her hair. “Let’s talk about how your last lie is filthier than the first one you told me.”

“What lie, Laurent?”

He ignored her question with chilling precision. “You remember the first lie you ever told me.”



“Why are you running?”

Liana glanced at the awkward man-child sharply. Her melodic voice held the ferocity of a wolf. “Why do you ask?”

He ducked his head in apology. “I meant no disrespect, my lady. Forgive me.”

She felt something hot slither about the bowels of her suspicion. It was guilt. Looking away from him, Liana murmured stiffly, "I'm your equal. There's no need to give me an honorific."

"My equal?"

She heard the hope spring forth from his well of loneliness. "Yes."

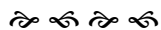
"Then may I ask..."

His voice trailed off when she met his clouded gaze squarely.

Liana expected him to fall beneath his discomfort and cowardice. Instead he surprised her.

He cleared his throat and finished his query. "May I ask your name?"

"Liana." She raised her chin in perfect challenge. "My name is Liana and I mean nothing to no one and that's why I ran away."



Liana swayed towards him and whispered, "Laurent, I never foresaw it would come to this."

"Really? The thought never occurred in that selfish, careless mind of yours? No, don't answer." Laurent brushed her hair back with poignant tenderness. "You'll just lie to me again."

"Please don't say that."

He yanked her head back. "I will say what I wish!"

"Forgive me."

Her submissiveness appeased Laurent's volatile temper. He released his grip and began again. "You told me you were a runaway of no real consequence." Laurent paused for several moments, searching for the scent of drawn blood. "You remember telling me that lie, don't you?"

Liana's heart pounded with the sick rhythm of a condemned woman's plea. "I lied because I had to."

“Hmm. Did you?”

“I didn’t know I was going to stay with you, Laurent. I never imagined I’d be here past one night. I didn’t tell you everything because I didn’t think you needed to know.”

“Then once you stayed—why didn’t you say anything then?”

Liana felt her feet walk the same rutted path. Damnation loomed on their horizon but she couldn’t turn back. “Because I was afraid you’d reject me.”

“So you were being selfish.”

She wet lips gone dry. “Yes.”

Laurent hauled her naked body onto his lap. Keeping one arm about her waist, he used his free hand to stroke her taut stomach. “You wanted to keep your human pet, is that it?”

“I didn’t see you as my pet.”

“Liar.” The word slid from his throat with serpentine grace. “You lie like a devil, little bird.” Laurent flashed Liana a delightful smile. “You’ve already taken my heart and reason. Do you wish my soul as well?”

“I’m not lying. I just wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me? Keeping quiet about that beast hot on your trail was protecting me?” Laurent’s claws pierced her flesh and five drops sprang up. “That wasn’t protection. It was a death sentence.”

Tears salted the air, streaking her skin like the blood running down her thighs. “I know that now, Laurent.”

“You should’ve known it then!” Before he could vent his rage, sanity lurked like a ghost behind Laurent’s inhuman stare. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Ssh!” Laurent pushed her off his lap. “Did you hear that?”

Liana shook her head but he never saw it. Instead, his attention darted from one part of the shadowed room to the other. “I’ve asked this before, haven’t I?” Without waiting for an answer, Laurent leapt from the bed.

Liana’s lips were stiff, words pliant with deception. “I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“I’ve said these words to you before. All of them.” Laurent held out his thumb and forefinger in warning. “Ssh. Ssh! I hear things, things that shouldn’t be. The forest...it’s smaller.”

“You’re mistaken, my lord. Nothing has changed. Come to bed. Perhaps you’re tired.”

Laurent darted towards the tiny window and inhaled deeply. “The game...their packs aren’t as large. When did this happen?”

“It’s approaching winter, my lord. The herds have gone to ground.”

“No, that’s not it.” Concentration knit a deep furrow across his brow. “There’s less food, but more people. Why do I hear so many voices?”

“Voices?”

“Yes! People—thousands of them!” Laurent whirled about, intensity burning a hole through his crumbling awareness. “Why do I hear so many voices, Liana?”

“Harvest is upon us.” Her calm reply belied the sickness ravaging her heart. *Don’t do this. Not when I’ve worked so hard!* “The fields are heavy with grain and the workers are many.”

Laurent looked at her in bewilderment. “How do you know? You haven’t left this tower in over a fortnight.”

Liana rubbed her palms across the sheets, sure her actions would communicate nervousness. “I can hear them when they leave the fields. They say this year’s bounty will surpass all others.”

Suspicion hardened his ethereal beauty. “Did they see you?”

“No!”

Laurent nodded in arrogant satisfaction. “The men know you are forbidden. Seeing you would mean instant death—wait!” The haughty lord disappeared, leaving a frenetic creature in his place. Laurent ran over to Liana and whispered, “You heard it this time, didn’t you?”

“No. I didn’t hear anything, my lord.” She bowed her head and waited for his madness to grow.

“You had to have.” His dark brows formed a fierce scowl. “I just heard your voice. Mine too. But not us. Or maybe...how could you not have heard it?”

Liana watched the despair overshadow confusion. Her heart broke all over again. “Let us talk of something else, my lord. Please.”

Laurent brushed aside her husky plea. “No. This doesn’t make any sense.” He strode towards the door. “I’m going to see for myself.”

“Come to me, Laurent. Now.”

Her aristocratic demeanor made him obey instinctively. When Laurent realized his actions, resentment dripped from his false smile. “You like my loyalty, my faithfulness, don’t you?”

Liana nodded in affirmation, memorizing every word, every nuance of her beloved’s demeanor.

I can’t give up. I WON’T give up.

“You command and I obey. Just like a dog.” Crawling over her, Laurent bent down and pressed his mouth against Liana’s newest wounds. His tongue lapped at the dried blood roughly.

She threw her head back and pushed her body against Laurent, wordlessly demanding his carnal consideration.

I won’t feel guilty for using his insecurity against him. I’ll do whatever I have to in order to break this cycle.

“I can still be your pet, little bird.” Laurent sat up and removed the damp tunic. His smooth chest gleamed like a perfect pearl. “I can do, be, whatever you wish. Tell me what you want from me and I’ll obey.”

He mocked her with servility. She knew it but fell anyway. “I just want you to love me like you did before.”

“Impossible.” He leaned forward to whisper against her ear, “Ask for something else.”

Liana turned her head. Raw lips met his. “Then love me as you are now.”

“Oh, you give up so easily!” Laurent shifted so he could nuzzle her cheek. “And that’s why I know you for a liar, little bird. You never really wanted the boy I was.”

Hot tears slipped free. Liana didn’t know what hurt worse—his calculated accusations or rejection of her embrace. “That’s not true.”

Laurent’s hand neatly pressed her mouth closed. Still keeping it in place, he drew back and stared Liana down.

“Don’t misunderstand me, little bird. You enjoyed dominating that pathetic boy, making him grateful for even tolerating his presence. You bullied him with your beauty, breaking his will while pretending to hold him in esteem.”

Liana shook her head and moaned her denials.

“Well, he’s dead and I’m glad he’s dead.”

“That’s not true!” His hand muffled her raw screams, but it couldn’t mute her anguish. “That boy is still you! He’s not dead!”

Laurent’s devastating temper broke free.

“Yes, he is! That ignorant, bastard woodsman died when you let him get slaughtered!”

“I swear to you—I didn’t know! I would’ve protected you if I knew!”

“Protected me? A pitiful little bird like you?” Maniacal grief possessed him. “Don’t insult me with your stupidity, Liana.”

She winced at his contempt. “I would’ve done it, Laurent. I swear.”

“Why did you make me think you loved me? Why do you pretend now?”

His tortured question shredded her heart into bloody pieces. “I’m not. I love you, Laurent.”

“Did you pity me? Is that what it was? Is that why you agreed to be mine?” Laurent’s voice deepened to a menacing growl. “Don’t be timid, wife—tell me. I can take it.”

Finally maddened with grief and persecution, Liana bit into his palm. Pink saliva dribbled down her chin a few seconds later. “I never pitied you!”

Laurent released her mouth only to dig his claws into either side of her. He seemed completely unaffected by her attack.

“Tell me something, little bird. Did it give you pleasure to mock me?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Did you laugh at the poor, dirty bastard for believing you actually saw past his birthright and position?”

“I never laughed at you—”

“Did you scorn my honesty, my ease at letting you into my heart?”

The accusations hammered in her aching conscience, relentless and brutal.

“I didn’t lie about that—”

“How long were you planning on staying until you were done using me? A month? A week? That night? How long, Liana?!”

“No! Believe what you will, but not that!” Emerald warred with silver. “I wanted to be with you forever!”

“Liar.” Laurent hissed the word as if it was the most abominable curse he could summon.

How can I win against this hate?

Liana dropped her gaze, unable to bear seeing the putrid poison tainting his visage.

“Can’t deny it, can you?”

Behind the rage, Liana heard his plea for dissent. Unwilling to fail him, she swallowed once and let out a shuddering breath.

“Laurent, I may have lied to you about many things, but there’s one thing I never lied to you about.” Braving the lash of his bile, she cupped her husband’s cheek with tender fingers. “I married you because I loved you. I’ve always loved you. Even now, I would give up everything to stay here with you, Laurent. Everything.”

An inarticulate cry of rage exploded deep within Laurent’s throat.

“LIAR! BITCH! WHORE!”

“No!”

“YES!”

“Why won’t you believe me?” She beat her fists against the bed. “Why?”

Laurent lurched back. Bloody anguish stained his luminous gaze. “I don’t know why!” Carmine tears spilled onto his ashen cheeks. “Something inside my head screams when you say it. It disgusts me.”

“Disgusts you?”

He saw her pain and dropped to the floor. Ugly sobs filled the dim room. “W-What’s wrong with m-me? Why d-do I care? W-Why does seeing your pain h-hurt?”

Liana watched her husband’s deterioration in horror. Knowing his torment was her sin made her want to die.

“You’re a l-liar, Liana. You lied to m-me and I... all I ever, EVER did was t-take care of you. Love you! My will, everything I w-was became yours.”

She couldn’t stomach the wretched sight of seeing Laurent on his knees for her.

“And it still wasn’t enough!”

Liana turned away from him. Incoherent words spilled alongside her tears.

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