

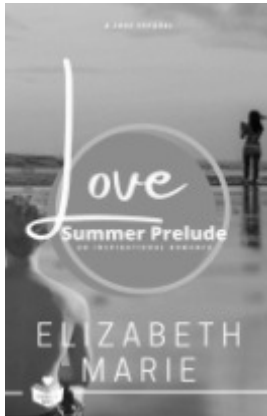
Love
UNDER
INVESTIGATION

BOOK ONE of THE LOVE SERIES

ELIZABETH MARIE

Free Gift

Click here to sign up to my mailing list¹ to receive this FREE subscriber-only copy of *Love: A Summer Prelude* as well as to be notified of any new releases, giveaways, contests, cover reveals and so much more.



1. <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/wi7ktrkhuah>

Description

SARA WARD IS RUNNING from her past but ends up working with the last person she wanted to see again, Ezekiel Cane. He's a cruel reminder of the past she ran away from to New York and a mockery of how little she has accomplished.

Ezekiel Cane has published numerous successful articles as an independent investigative journalist and isn't ashamed to credit God with leading him to the right sources for each investigation. This time, however, he can't help but question God's sense of humor when the only person who can truly help him is the person who hates him the most: Sara Ward. Yet, even when faced with her unwarranted and scathing hatred, he wonders if he can get through to her and lead her to Christ.

If a complicated history between the two wasn't enough, the task ahead of them will be no easy feat.

How can they prove that one of the largest corporations in the country is hiding its own CEO's murder? You won't want to miss this edge of your seat ride.

==

Chapter One

SARA TOOK A DEEP BREATH, stood up tall, and plastered a smile on her face. She moved towards a group of guests who were engrossed in conversation. The men were in 1920s-style suits with waistcoats and slicked-back hair, the women in flapper dresses adorned with sequins, pearls and feathers. Amongst the swaths of glittering gold fabric tablecloths, elegant floral centerpieces that towered above their heads, and the upbeat jazz music floating from the live band on stage, all under the warm glow of crystal chandeliers dripping from the ceiling, Sara could almost imagine she'd been transported back in time to the roaring twenties.

“Champagne?” Sara asked, extending the tray of glittering champagne flutes she held to each individual in the group. She admired how wealthy New Yorkers created an exclusive reality for themselves, with numerous balls and galas, and all for worthy causes like charity. *What a magical way to live*, she mused. Her life could use more magic. As an on-looker, she felt glamorous tonight, and perhaps some magic would rub off on her. The drop earrings she wore were fake, but no doubt the earrings she noted on the women she served were genuine diamonds. She blinked, the fake eyelash extensions irritating, but she knew she looked the part with her sparkling eyeshadow and red lipstick, although she had to continually resist the urge to tug her short, low cut ballerina style black and white cocktail waitress costume further down. She was no prude, and she'd left her Christianity behind in her teens, so she vaguely wondered why she felt so 'exposed' in this outfit. No doubt it was because it was quite clear the costume was from the wrong decade, judging by the slim-fitting, knee-length or below glittery costumes of the

wealthy guests, but this was what she was handed when she arrived for work. Yes, that was surely it. She was just in the wrong decade.

The group she approached brushed her off with a wave of one of their regal hands and she moved on. “Drinks?” Sara asked another group of guests. A dark-haired man turned and Sara noticed his reaction to her. A honeyed smile oozed over his face as he gazed at her appreciatively. “Yes, please.”

Sara attempted to ignore his eyes traveling up and down the length of her body as she passed out the glasses of champagne to the rest of the group, whose impatient hands were held out towards her. The tray was empty before the dark-haired man could take a drink.

“I’m sorry, sir, let me go back to the bar and get you one,” Sara apologized, turning quickly toward the kitchen, where she intended to ask one of her coworkers to return with a drink for the overly friendly man.

“Hold on,” the man blurted as he stopped her, grabbing her wrist. Sara looked down at his hand on her arm in mild shock, then back up at his face.

“Excuse me, you seem to have caught my wrist,” she managed coolly, despite the rising heat in her face and fire in her eyes.

Sara had learned a lot while working for this exclusive event planning agency; the Marionette only took on elite New Yorkers as clients. Her primary lesson? Some clients believed they could do, or get, anything they wanted, and far too often, they did.

“I want you to stay with me for the rest of the night, sugar.” He leaned in closer. Sara caught a whiff of his fetid alcohol-tinged breath, and held back the gag reflex she felt rising in her throat. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Sara couldn't help the shiver that went down her spine. She jerked her hand from his grasp.

"Someone else will get you that drink," she growled through clenched teeth. The smile she usually held on her face had slipped away. She began to turn away again, but the man grabbed at her once more and knocked the tray out of her hand. It clattered to the floor. No one in the group even bothered to look up from their chatter as the man swayed toward Sara, and she noticed his unsteady stance.

"I like that you're playing hard to get, honey, but I'm getting impatient," he crooned and moved as though to put his arm around her waist. Sara darted toward the floor to avoid his grasp and grabbed her tray in a deft move.

Their exchange had now attracted the eyes of the other guests.

"I'm not your *honey*," Sara stated firmly, trying to keep her voice low and even. She took a step away toward the safety of the kitchen, but the drunken guest lunged at her, once again grabbing her by the arm. "Hey, wait up, baby...."

Sara didn't wait for him to finish speaking as she let her free hand swing hard to punch him in the face, her reflexes springing to life. All that self-defense training she'd done since coming to New York had apparently kicked in, and despite her pulse pounding in her ears and the throbbing in her hand, she felt surprisingly calm. The other guests gasped in horror as the stricken man stumbled backward, swearing loudly and covering his eye with one hand.

"That'll teach you," Sara muttered under her shaky breath and turned away. Ignoring the whispers and stares around her, she hoped to make a stealthy exit from this embarrassing scene. No such luck.

"You little piece of—"

Sara spun around at the sound of his voice, ready to fend off another attack, and managed to step aside just as his fist flew through the air. She winced at the sound of his fist slamming into an innocent man who had been standing behind her. The dark-haired man attempted to recover himself immediately, mumbling an apology to the tall blonde man he'd just punched in the side of the head, who turned to glare back at him.

“Hey, look—sorry about that... I—I didn’t mean to hit you,” he fumbled.

The other man, his blue eyes now boring fiercely into the stuttering guest’s own, clenched and released his fists at his sides.

“No, you meant to hit a woman,” he retorted, controlled anger evident in his tone.

The inebriated guest held his swelling eye with his hand but scoffed and began to shuffle away as he cackled, “So what? She’s just a waitress....” He had barely finished speaking before the blonde man swung at him, sending him to the ground this time. Sara’s eyes widened in shock. Oh, no. This was bad. Now a small cluster of guests had formed a sort of ring around the action, with Sara at the center of it. There was no escaping now. She would be fired for sure. She didn’t have time to think about what to do next before she heard her name barked shrilly behind her.

“Sara!”

She recognized the thick French accent before she even turned around. Julien, her boss, had approached the scene, his thin face red and his nostrils flaring.

“Kitchen! Now!” he screeched, then immediately turned toward the two men to offer his personal apologies and assistance.

Sara marched towards the kitchen, relieved to find some refuge but prepared for the tongue lashing she was about to receive. She knew she was in serious trouble.

Sara sat at a small foldaway table in the kitchen where event staff would take their breaks a few minutes later, drumming her fingers and trying to calm herself with deep breaths. It wasn't working. Julien would fire her, she had no doubt. She had been a lousy employee from the start, she had to admit. Sara had found it practically impossible to keep silent when guests were rude, which happened far too regularly.

But with focused determination, she had found strategies to avoid those guests as much as possible, and had achieved positive reviews—and even a couple of encouraging comments from satisfied clients—over the past three months. Julien had actually even agreed to make her an assistant event planner as a trial on this gig, and she had poured herself into the task. She had been so proud of her work, and dared to hope that Julien might even consider her for a promotion if it went well. Working as a waitress for the Marionette paid so much better than any job she'd had previously in New York. But now... Now what would she do? She closed her eyes and groaned inwardly at the thought.

“Sara, I have no words!” Julien approached her with his hands raised, fingers pressed to his temples, and his eyes squinting almost shut. She shot to her feet immediately.

“Julien, I can explain. I didn't mean for it to escalate. The first guy had it coming, and the second one I—”

Julien raised a hand to stop her.

“Before you start running your mouth, like you always do, let me introduce you to—”

“The man who took the punch instead of me and knocked my assailant out cold,” Sara interrupted before Julien could finish. She hadn’t even noticed he was standing there until now but couldn’t resist blurting out what he’d done.

The man smiled and tilted his head forward in a slight bow in Sara’s direction. Suddenly it hit her that he was actually quite attractive. He was at least a few inches taller than she was, even in her high-heeled work shoes, and the bright kitchen lights reflected off the natural highlights in his slightly tousled sandy blonde hair. Something in his eyes, a unique shade of deep gray-blue, struck her as familiar, and she wondered briefly which movie she must have seen him in. He wouldn’t be the first famous actor she’d encountered at a plush New York party during her job, but she rarely recalled celebrities’ names until she had described them to her best friend, Debra, who seemed to know everyone. This handsome—no doubt arrogant—stranger was still grinning at her, but his gaze unsettled her for some reason. What *had* she seen him in? He obviously imagined he’d done her a great favor, clueless rich guy that he appeared to be. He was probably used to women fawning over him, she mused, and her irritation at his warm smile grew.

She shook the thought away and focused on her boss, who now stood with his hands on his hips, one eyebrow raised imperiously in a stern glare at her.

“Sara, this gentleman has agreed to handle any fall-out from tonight’s *unfortunate* events, including any trouble that the first gentleman might wish to make. We are, of course, extremely grateful for his gracious offer. So, if you would kindly thank him—”

“Thank him? For what?” Sara burst out in reply without thinking. “Accidentally walking into a punch that I had already dodged, or knocking a creep out that I could have handled myself? Or perhaps for doing the decent thing and standing up for someone else? I wasn’t aware that

simply being a decent human being warranted special appreciation, but apparently, we average humans are supposed to grovel at the feet of the benevolent upper echelons.”

Sara stood squarely facing the tall man, her eyebrow raised and her face flushed. His smile had faded into a look of slight confusion. *Okay, maybe I was overreacting a little*, she thought; this man didn't deserve the ire that had been building in her over the months that she had endured this job. But she was so sick and tired of famous, wealthy clients always getting what they wanted, seemingly just because they had the money to pay for it.

Julien's face paled, his jaw dropped. Sara had succeeded in making him truly speechless. Yup, she'd probably gone too far. Like her reflexive punch at the drunk man's head, her verbal tirade just flew out before she could think to stop it.

“Excuse me...” the handsome man finally spoke, but he didn't sound perturbed. If anything, he looked rather amused. Sara blushed as he smiled at her again, annoyed both at the realization of what she had just said to a client, and at the fact that she still couldn't place that attractive but gnawingly familiar grin.

“I am so sorry, sir. She is such a clown. Didn't you mean to say ‘thank you?’” Julien awkwardly intervened. “I'm sure that she did.”

“Look, it's totally fine, sir. I really wasn't fishing for gratitude,” the man spoke up.

He wasn't fishing for gratitude? How cocky of him, Sara thought. Starring in his own private action drama. Ugh, these actors are all the same! Good looking and arrogant.

“Well, you are most certainly humble,” she mumbled sarcastically. Her hand flew over her mouth. Oops, she hadn't meant to say that out loud.

She really was on a roll tonight. What was it about this guy that she just couldn't seem to hold up her work façade?

Julien turned to her in shock and she averted her eyes from his disgusted gaze. She caught a hint of surprise in the gentleman's face in front of her, before a wide amused smile slowly took over his expression. She narrowed her eyes at him, not trusting his knowing look, when Julien's explosive tone captured both their attention.

"Sara Ward! You're fired!" Julian blasted at her.

"What? No!" Sara cried as the stranger interceded, "That isn't necessary."

"Necessary or not, I have had enough of your smart mouth. Excuse me," Julien huffed and stomped away.

Dang it, why am I such an idiot? Why couldn't I just shut up for once? Sara scolded herself silently. The angry, sarcastic words just seemed to stream out of her mouth like champagne from an uncorked bottle at times, and now she'd totally screwed up.

"Hey, I'm so sorry about this. Can I—" the gentleman started to say, but Sara didn't let him finish before groaning and walking away, her head in her hands. She would *not* let this irritating stranger see her cry.

Sara grabbed her bag from the shelf where the staff kept their belongings when Debra, her best friend, roommate, and now ex-colleague, hurried up to her.

"Sara! I saw the whole thing! I've warned you about not controlling your feelings and mouthing off! I don't need to remind you that this is your seventh job in two years! Ugh, you had been doing so great, and now this..."

“You came here to lecture me?” Sara could feel a hint of moisture increasing in her eyes. She swallowed and fished in her purse for her subway card.

Debra pulled Sara into a small alcove away from the bustle of the kitchen around them, placing her hands on Sara’s shoulders and fixing her gaze with her own dark brown eyes. “No. I came here to tell you to go and apologize to Julien. I fought to get you this job, and if you would just hold it together, maybe I could get you a promotion to a position like mine, senior event planner. Or maybe you could eventually get a position doing something you are actually great at, like, I don’t know—*public relations*?! But Sara, that won’t happen if you keep pulling stunts like this.”

Sara drew a ragged sigh and huffed it out. She knew Debra was right. They’d been over this before. She felt jealous that Debra seemed to have grown up so much in the past three years since they’d met, and Sara still felt like she was running in circles, like a silly puppy chasing its tail. Why couldn’t she just learn from her mistakes, get a grip on her anger, and move on? She placed her bag back down on the shelf.

“Okay, fine. Just stop looking at me like you’ve just lost your best friend.” Debra grinned ruefully at her. Sara wiped her eyes, took a deep breath, eyelash extensions thankfully still intact, and went to search for Julien.

She found him giving the chefs instructions.

“Julien? Excuse me. I am so sorry. What can I do to get my job back?”

Julien sighed, dismissed the chefs, and turned to her. He crossed his arms over his chest defensively, pressed his lips together, and arched his eyebrows with a look of both resignation and pity. Finally, he dropped his arms, let out a sigh, and rolled his eyes.

“I knew you would do this. Luckily for you, the French are very forgiving. If you apologize to the blonde gentleman from earlier, you can have your job back.”

He smiled humorlessly.

“Well, that’s easy. What’s his name?” She beamed, relieved he wouldn’t subject her to something like work without pay.

“Oh, let me see. It was an E something...” Julien twisted his mouth in thought. “Ah, yes. Ezekiel Cane. I believe he’s staying at the Fairfield Inn. Debra will no doubt have his contact info; you can check with her. Good luck.”

Sara’s mouth fell open as Julien walked away. Ezekiel Cane? No way. That handsome gentleman was Ezekiel Cane? She had thought he looked vaguely familiar. She could never have imagined she would run into him, of all people, here in New York. He was the one person she could confidently say she had actually hated growing up. Great. This apology was going to be far more complicated than she thought.



THE NEXT MORNING, SARA caught a train from her apartment and then walked down to the Fairfield Inn, part of a high-rise building not far from Times Square. Standing in front of the double sets of sliding doors at the entrance, she felt a knot twist in her stomach, inwardly kicking herself for letting Ezekiel Cane see her as a waitress after all these years, when he obviously was better off staying in this nice hotel and rubbing elbows with the clientele she’d been serving.

“Hi. I’m here to see Mr. Ezekiel Cane?” she said as she approached the man at the reception desk.

“One minute.” The man typed something into his computer, then placed a phone call. After speaking hurriedly, he hung up. “He’s not in his room, Miss. Do you want me to take a message?”

“Um, no. Do you know where he might be?” Sara asked, hoping not to have to postpone this humiliating task any longer than necessary.

“You could check the breakfast bar or the outdoor dining area of our rooftop restaurant. That’s a popular spot for our guests at this hour.”

“Thank you!” Sara replied, not waiting to hear his “you’re welcome” before walking towards the elevators to find the restaurant. She spotted him as soon as she walked out onto the rooftop deck with expansive views of the city. She hated that he’d grown up to be so handsome. Were transformations like that even possible? He was reading a large book, a Bible perhaps, as he leaned back, relaxing in his chair. As Sarah watched, trying to gather her courage, a waitress approached him. She attempted to offer him more juice, even though Sara could see that his glass was practically full. She rolled her eyes. It was so clear the waitress was looking for reasons to visit his table. He said something, and the waitress blushed before leaving. Well, it was now or never. Time to face the past she had successfully run from for three years—until today.

==

Chapter Two



EZEKIEL LOOKED UP FROM the well-worn pages of his travel Bible again; it was hard not to stare at the cityscape spread before him, especially with the warm light of a late spring morning catching and reflecting off countless windows and multicolored architectural structures. He had been to New York before, but it struck him again why so many people were drawn to this city; however, it wasn't the architecture on his mind just now. Woven through his meditations on the Psalms, he kept having flashbacks to the events of the night before, at the charity gala he'd scored a ticket for after a couple of phone calls. And... her. Sara Ward, in person.

It had taken Ezekiel all of two minutes to spot her amongst the crowd. He was sure that his sudden increase in heart rate and the fluttering sensation in his chest was just excitement at seeing an old friend he hadn't been in contact with for years. Dressed to the hilt in some period costume, she definitely did look distractingly gorgeous, though. He'd decided to hang back for a while before speaking to her, instead just chatting casually with other guests in what appeared to be her zone of the room. After he'd seen her return to the kitchen several times for refreshments, he'd managed to work his way quite close to her. And then that jerk had attacked her. He thanked God again he'd been close enough to get in the way of his punch. *Then again*, Ezekiel chuckled to himself, *she was holding her own pretty well without my help! Was she always so tough, or has the city just rubbed off on her?*

Whatever the case, he was even more surprised that she didn't seem to recognize *him* when he came back to the kitchen to try and smooth

things over with her boss. He'd seen enough to know it wasn't her fault, but he couldn't do much to help her after her tirade in front of Julien. He almost laughed aloud at the thought of her chewing him out the way she did. Man, she had spunk! And possibly some unresolved anger issues... well, he'd keep praying for her. And hopefully, talk to her more in the coming days. That is, if she'd let him...



“EZEKIEL CANE.”

Ezekiel knew who it was before he looked up.

“Sara Ward.”

He flashed her a smile. She hadn't changed much at all. Well, except for her hair. The long, curly, dark chocolate locks that had developed coppery highlights every summer from the sunlight were now a dark shade of red, or more like burnt orange. But she was still a gorgeous woman with a unique set of emerald green eyes, perhaps made even more striking by her new hair color. She'd always been tall for her age as a kid and had grown into her fit, athletic body very nicely over the years. She could have been a model; he knew that for a fact through the grapevine, but for some odd reason, she'd always shied away from 'girly' type aspirations and preferred instead to play the tomboy. Albeit a lovely tomboy...

“Some things never change,” she said, snapping him out of his reverie.

She nodded her head towards his Bible as she sat down opposite him at the outdoor table for two. He would usually have opposed anyone interrupting his morning quiet time, where he liked to read God's word in peace, but this time it seemed more like a divine appointment.

Sara looked around her at the upscale restaurant decor, industrial and spare with stainless steel tables and chairs, and long, low glass panels instead of walls, to better showcase the city skyline around them. “Did you know it was me last night?” she asked, her tone insinuating she already knew the answer as she focused back on him.

Ezekiel smiled again.

“Yes,” he admitted, finding the situation rather amusing. If he hadn’t been confident it was her already, her reaction to the situation was confirmation enough. Sara Ward had always had a fiery personality. “Some things never change,” he teased, repeating her words to her.

She didn’t look amused.

“Whatever, Cane. Look, I need you to call my boss and tell him I apologized to you.”

Ezekiel feigned a frown. He tilted his head as though thinking it over. “I don’t know. Wouldn’t that require you actually apologizing?”

Sara glared at him. She shook her head. “You’re just as annoying as ever.”

Ezekiel was sure he could hear her teeth grinding if he listened closely enough.

“That’s slander, Miss Ward,” Ezekiel retorted, smiling at her. He had never tried to be annoying, though admittedly, he did like to tease her; hence, he could never see why she hated him so much.

Sara shook her head again in obvious frustration. “This was a mistake.”

She stood up.

“Okay, wait,” he said finally, his hands up in mock surrender. He didn’t want to be difficult about it, and of course, he wanted her to get her job back. It was the right thing to do, and he sensed God had orchestrated this situation. He needed to make the most of it.

“I’ll call your boss,” he said, his tone more serious now. She sat down. “In fact, I spoke to him for a while last night after you left, so he is expecting to hear from me. But I need something from you, too.” She gazed at him warily. “I need your help with a story I’m working on.”

“A story?” She looked intrigued in spite of herself. “Let me guess, you work in Hollywood now and want to make a movie in New York?”

Ezekiel chuckled at the fact that she thought he could be the Hollywood type. Younger him would have never fit that profile.

“No. I’m a journalist. An investigative journalist like your dad...” He stopped talking, realizing what he had just said. Her expression turned thunderous. “Sara, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to mention...”

“Forget about it,” she muttered tersely and looked away. The last thing he wanted to do was remind her of the past and scare her off. The fact was, they had practically grown up together. Their families had once been so close that they had gone to the same schools, the same church, and even had dinner together once a week. But as they’d reached high school, things had changed between Ezekiel and Sara, and for reasons he couldn’t understand, she had grown to hate him, seeming to take every opportunity to make it clear in both words and actions during that turbulent time. He had tried at various times to talk with her about it, but it never went anywhere good. So much had happened since then, yet she still apparently held her grudge. Even now, he couldn’t shake the desire to make things right with her, if he could only discover what he’d done wrong in the first place!

“What do you need my help with?” Sara changed the subject.

He frowned. “Sara...”

“The story?” Sara interrupted. He understood she did not want to talk about the past. He would leave that discussion for later.

“Right. Well, I was writing an article on the Wentworth Corporation, ‘America’s Partner in Growth?’” He recited the company’s famous motto, which conjured up decades of commercials depicting successful American industries from oil to manufacturing and even technology, looking at her face for signs of recognition. “The company’s CEO, Donald Wentworth, Jr., the second son of the founder Donald Wentworth Sr., just died recently. He is to be succeeded by his son—well, you know, Donald Wentworth III.”

“And this is relevant... why?”

Ezekiel shot her an incredulous look.

“Because my article was supposed to be on whether the company that handles the Wentworth Corporation’s health insurance was contributing to company deaths by funding unhelpful treatment protocols. That story had to be scrapped.”

He looked around and then pulled his chair next to hers to sit side by side. He leaned closer. The scent of her soft floral perfume caught him by surprise, and he shook his head slightly to focus his thoughts back on the topic of his investigation.

“While I was researching, I discovered something else: one of my trusted sources claims that Mr. Wentworth’s death was ruled a homicide by an autopsy report, but the records were sealed for some reason by the corporation itself, and the police investigation seemed to just disappear. At least, there has been no apparent ongoing effort to solve the murder, implying a cover-up of some magnitude.”

Sara turned to him, unimpressed by the serious allegations he was making.

“This is still just a newspaper story to me. What is my part in all this?”

“Right.” Ezekiel had forgotten that not everyone found every little detail of an investigation as intriguing as he did. He often found himself carried away by the stories he investigated. “Here’s where you come in. The Wentworths host an annual charity gala, and I need to be involved in it to complete my investigation. I have a hunch it’s somehow tied to the murder, odd as that sounds. However, it’s a very private event, planned by an in-house team they pick from the best events companies. Word on the street is that Donald the third has a new direction for the company and that this event is crucial. He gives the outward appearance of just powering on, in spite of his father’s recent untimely and mysterious demise, as if it were of no real consequence. But I know there is more to it, and I need to be there.”

“So... you want me to help you go undercover as an events planner?” she asked incredulously, putting two and two together.

“Well, only one of us here works for the Marionette, one of the city’s most exclusive events companies,” he replied with a confident smile.

She stared at him for a moment. He could see the wheels turning behind those intense green eyes.

Suddenly she held up her hands in protest. “Wait, I’m not sure you understand, Cane. I’m just a server at the Marionette. I’m not an event planner. My friend, Debra, is. Why don’t you ask her? I’m not even qualified to apply for that Wentworth job.” She frowned at him and crossed her arms, sensing she may have deterred him. No way did she want to spend days or weeks on end working closely with Ezekiel Cane. True, she wanted a chance at event planning, but at the cost of enduring his presence forty plus hours a week? She didn’t see it happening.

“Actually, I already knew that,” Ezekiel conceded. He looked down, then gave her a bashful look. “You know, I’m not too bad at my job. So after you left the kitchen last night, Julien and I had a great talk. I had the chance to share with him about my part in my uncle’s investment business, and how I would be interested in becoming a primary investor in the Marionette. That is, if he wouldn’t mind me shadowing some of his key staff for a time to see the company’s operation up close and to ensure it’s one that we feel confident investing in. He was pretty excited at the prospects. In fact, when I told him I was impressed with your work in particular, he told me that you had been the assistant for last night’s party, and he had actually been considering you for a promotion—before he fired you in the heat of the moment. He seems a little... on the dramatic side. But there you have it: you can keep your job, *and* if you decide to work with me, you can try your hand at a serious promotion.”

Sara couldn’t believe it. Ezekiel had dropped into her life out of nowhere it seemed, and turned it upside down. Or was it right side up? She felt herself blush, and didn’t know if she was embarrassed or just frustrated that this exasperating man had somehow magically managed to hand her the best offer she’d had in ... well, years, but at the same time caused her such torment just by his presence.

It was too much. She had to get out of there, to think clearly. “I can’t believe this, Cane. You really are full of yourself, aren’t you? I’m out of here.” She stood up and walked toward the door leading inside. He should have known she would be difficult about it.

“Well, I tried,” he said quietly, watching her walk farther and farther away.

I didn’t ask you to try, he immediately sensed in response. He knew that voice.

“I...” Ezekiel caught himself before he began to argue with God. If God had told him to get her on the story, she must be essential for his success. He sighed, stood up, and chased after her. She had gone down the elevator and was already out the main door when he caught up to her. They entered the street.

“Sara.” She ignored him. “Sara, please. Look, I know it’s a lot to take in all at once, but I saw you last night, you were amazing. You have a way with people; they’re drawn to you. And the party itself was really marvelous.” He grinned while dodging people on the sidewalk, trying to stay alongside her as she almost race walked away from his hotel. “Remember the homecoming dance you helped plan back in high school? The disco one? You missed our ten-year reunion, but seriously, people were still talking about it fondly. I know you can do this, and you’ll be the exact partner I need so I can uncover vital information for my story. Where else would you find an offer as exciting as that?”

“I don’t know. But I won’t find it by talking to you,” she retorted, not sparing him a glance.

“Okay, wait. I’ll pay you for your work on the story as well.” He would have said anything at that point just to halt her brisk pace and engage her in conversation again, but he guessed he had said the wrong thing.

She stopped abruptly, turning to face him. She scoffed. “Okay, so Sara is poor; throw money at her.” She folded her arms.

“No! That’s not what I meant at all. I just meant that I get paid for my work, and it would only be right to pay you for your work.”

He swallowed. He didn’t want to upset her. It was glaringly apparent to him that her feelings about him hadn’t changed over the years.

Sara rolled her eyes. “I think it’s fantastic that the moment you, of all people, decide to waltz into my life is when I’m down on my luck,” Sara

said. She closed her eyes and sighed before opening them again. “And now, unfortunately, you’re the best option I’m presented with for help. So, as much as it pains me to say it....” She looked up at him. He tried not to feel any hurt at the amount of pain and distaste in her features. “I’ll do it. But once we’re done, please, just disappear.”

He desperately wanted to ask her what he had done to so deeply offend her. He needed to understand why she hated him, but he knew it would be premature, not to mention selfish, to bring that up. Of course not everyone would like him; he had to live with that. It was part of being an investigative journalist. He knew it was his calling, and he had to answer that call. But Sara had always been special to him, and the memories of her and their families were bittersweet. If the most she could offer now was to help with the story, then he would have to accept that, but it wasn’t what he desired in his heart. He preferred reconciliation, and he had been praying for that.

“It’s a deal,” he said, his mood dampened by hers. God would really have to help him now.

==

Chapter Three

EZEKIEL HAD INVITED Sara to lunch to discuss the details of his plan. She entered the little café and spotted him seated alone. She was still wondering if the torture of working with him was worth her promotion at the Marionette.

“Hey.” He smiled, his face lighting up as he did. That face again. What business did he have being that handsome? His broad jaw was covered by a well-trimmed stubble, his dark blue eyes striking. Sara looked away.

“Hi.” She sat down. “I am meeting Debra soon. I have to convince her to submit us to the Wentworth Corporation as the representatives for the Marionette. She should have been the one to apply for that gig, and I would have considered myself lucky to be her assistant. Now I’m asking her to give up the lead position to me. I’m hoping she’ll do it if she knows I can pay her back. And if she talks Julien into it, he’ll listen to her; he always does. He loves her work, and totally trusts her. I suppose you have already worked out how you can attach yourself to my team after your talks with Julien? You’ll be my unofficial slash official assistant ... or something? Anyway, if we’re selected, we’ll get called in for an interview, and if they like us, they’ll hire us to plan their event.”

“Thank you, Sara. Although we didn’t need to get right into that.” He gave a small sheepish smile.

“I don’t think you and I have anything else to get into.” She wasn’t about to tell him anything about her life. He stared at her thoughtfully for a moment, and when she thought he was about to say something, he instead called for the waiter and ordered coffee.

Sara played with her hands awkwardly.

“So, why didn’t you become a pastor?” she asked. Maybe if she got him talking, he wouldn’t ask about her. Besides, she couldn’t deny that a little part of her wasn’t curious about him.

“God didn’t ask me to. Or, at least, He hasn’t yet.”

Sara frowned. He was one of the lucky ones, she decided, to feel such a direct connection to the divine. She had never experienced God the way he did.

“What led you to become a waitress? We both know—”

“We both know nothing.” She cut him off. The last thing she wanted was him commenting on her life choices.

He raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Okay. I’m sorry. Not my business.”

“I’m sorry. I just—you’re not someone I want to talk about my life choices with.” She looked away.

“I understand. Completely. You don’t like me.”

She looked up at him. He almost looked like he cared, the way his lips twitched downwards. She was surprised to find there was a momentary pang of sadness on his handsome features, but it was gone too quickly for her to decipher what it meant.

“Let’s talk about the story. How does it go?”

He seemed to jump at her change of subject. His eyes lit up as they always did when he was talking about a story. He seemed to come to life around his work. The truth was out there, and Ezekiel Cane would be the one to reveal it.

“Yes. So, we need to plan the event in order to gather solid evidence for the story.”

She nodded and tried to listen as he explained his strategies as an undercover journalist. She wasn't sure she even heard half of it. She felt so tense around him; all she could focus on was her posture and not looking directly at him. Would she give something away of herself if she crossed her legs, if she met his gaze? Would he see her past, her present, flash through her eyes, and feel he knew her? She needed to keep the distance between them. Ezekiel cleared his throat.

“Were you... even listening to me?” he asked.

“Hm?” Sara just wanted to get their little meeting over with.

Ezekiel sighed. “Sara, can I ask you a favor?”

“Another one?” she snapped.

He recoiled and took a breath. “Look, I would appreciate it if we could be civil to each other. I won't have a problem with that, but I need you to try on your end too.”

Sara rolled her eyes.

“Of course, you wouldn't have a problem with that. What did people call you in high school?” She thought for a moment. “Ah, yes. Sugar-cane. And why? Because of how ‘sweet’ you were.”

“Well, no one calls me that anymore. But please, do. I don't mind being sweet,” he teased.

“Oh, and it's so sweet of you to blackmail me into helping you,” she mocked.

“I told you before: I was helping you get your job back regardless,” he remarked calmly. “You could have just gone back to waitressing and hoping for that promotion. Instead, you agreed to help me, and take the promotion early. Let’s just focus on learning some fundamentals of being undercover. Okay?” he said. Sara could tell she was annoying him. She kind of liked the feeling.

“Fine. Sorry. Can you tell me again how this works?”

“No problem,” Ezekiel grinned.



AFTER THEIR LUNCH, Sara’s next task was to persuade Debra to help them make the whole plan possible. She stopped at her local café to buy Debra’s favorite drink.

“Hey,” Sara greeted Debra as she walked into their apartment. “I brought you coffee ... and a scone!”

“You what?” Debra stopped reading her book, peering up over her reading glasses from her place on the sofa. When she saw Sara carrying the coffee and brown pastry bag, Debra jumped up to take it from her friend. She inhaled the delicious aroma and sighed with pleasure before she began to sip the dark liquid. A peek inside the paper bag revealed her favorite maple scone, and she popped a corner of it into her mouth, savoring the texture. Then she paused dramatically and narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“Wait,” she eyed Sara. “Why did you bring me this? It’s not anywhere near my birthday.”

She held the coffee away from her as though it might be poisonous. Sara lifted her eyebrows. Debra was always suspicious.

“Because I love you, Deb. Gosh, way to make me feel like a horrible friend,” Sara said, pouting and acting as if she was offended.

Debra lifted the corners of her mouth in a fake smile. “Good one. What’s the real reason?”

Sara hated that Debra knew her so well. “I need a favor,” she conceded.

“There it is. What can I do for you?” Debra asked, her tone light-hearted as she took another sip of her coffee.

“Ezekiel Cane, the man who took the punch for me at the party the other night? He agreed to get me my job back, but he asked me to help him with something.” Sara puffed her cheeks out and blew out a rush of air. “I can’t believe I’m doing this, now that I think about it, but here goes...”

Sara sat down at the kitchen island and started to tell Debra about her deal with Ezekiel.

Debra put down her coffee cup. “So let me get this straight: you want me to tell Julien that he should submit two people, neither of whom is an actual event planner, to the *Wentworth Corporation* on behalf of the Marionette for their big annual gig?” Debra clarified. Sara nodded sheepishly, suddenly realizing the risk to which they’d be subjecting Debra. She hadn’t even thought of that before. She’d only thought Debra might be upset about losing out on the chance at the assignment herself. “I could lose my job for something like that! I mean, what if it doesn’t work out, or you get caught?”

“See, but it will work out. You can help us and everything,” Sara pleaded, trying to convince herself as well as Debra. “And he promised to pay me, so I can share that with you, since you’d basically be giving me your position for the time being. Come on, I don’t want to do this any more

than you do, but I already agreed to it, and I can't pull it off without your help."

Debra hesitated for what felt like a good five minutes, seeming to stare through Sara, then nodded slowly.

"Fine."

"Really?! You are the best! Thank you! I seriously owe you."

"I'm only doing it because you brought me coffee," Debra mumbled as Sara did a celebratory dance around the living room. Debra couldn't help laughing at her clumsy friend, all limbs, as she shimmied across the room.

==

Chapter Four

JOE WAS A FRIEND OF Ezekiel's from college. He was the only son of David Galligan, the owner of Galligan Oil, but you wouldn't know it from how laid back he was. Joe didn't like to showcase his family's wealth, almost apologetic in his humility, and kind to everyone, regardless of their station in life. At least, that had always been Ezekiel's impression of him over the years.

"Hey, man!" Ezekiel greeted Joe with a wide smile and a friendly punch to Joe's shoulder. It had been almost a year since they'd seen each other in person.

"You look great, Zeke. You're definitely keeping in shape," Joe laughed as they man-hugged and then sat opposite each other.

"Likewise. I have to thank you for agreeing to help again. I know it's always a risk for you every time you use your connections to help me," Ezekiel said sincerely. Joe was like one of those God-sent friends he could always trust with his stories.

"Hey, with how business is at the company, I might have nothing to lose," Joe said. Ezekiel didn't have time to ponder the words before Joe spoke again. "I've called a contact in the Wentworth HR and you'll for sure get the interview, but word is Belinda Wentworth is doing the interviews herself, so, at that point, I can't guarantee you get the job."

"I'll prepare as much as I can for that part. Thank you," Ezekiel said.

Joe nodded. They fell silent.

“So, this Sara Ward you asked me to also get an interview for, is this the same Sara Ward from...”

“Yep. Ironic, I know,” Ezekiel cut him off.

“I thought you said she hated you. For the whole first year of college, half of everything you told me about your life had to do with her and how she didn’t like you.” Joe leaned forward.

“She didn’t like—I mean, she doesn’t like me,” Ezekiel sighed. “Honestly, as kids, I could understand picking some random reason to hate someone, but I thought she would have let that go by now.”

If he was being honest, it bothered him that she didn’t like him, which affected him even more because he didn’t know why.

“And you don’t know why?” Joe said, echoing Ezekiel’s thoughts.

Ezekiel shook his head thoughtfully. “I don’t have a clue.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“No. No, I can’t do that,” Ezekiel shook his head emphatically. “Our whole childhood experience seems like a sore topic for her.”

Joe sighed and sat back.

“Is she helping you with the story? I mean, is she a part of it, or does she just genuinely want to work for the Wentworths?”

Ezekiel looked up at his friend.

“Why do you ask? You know I only discuss my stories on a need-to-know basis.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to help you here,” Joe shrugged.

Ezekiel realized that Joe had helped him too many times for him to be hiding information from Joe about his story. He was used to being guarded, but he didn't need to be around Joe.

"Yeah. She's helping me, although she is mainly doing it in hopes of a promotion at her own company."

Joe nodded. "I see."

They ordered their food and ate. The conversation turned away from the story, and soon they were catching up as they always did. It was good to hear what was going on in Joe's life and to know his friend was doing well. Only later did he remember he'd not asked Joe what he meant by his comment about his work at his dad's company.

A few days later, Ezekiel walked into a mini-conference room in the Marionette building. As he expected, they had gotten the call to come in for the interview. Debra insisted that they practice for the interview because it reflected well on her and the Marionette if the people they had submitted got such an exclusive job.

"Welcome to Client Management 101," Debra smiled and wiggled her eyebrows. Ezekiel smiled back. He had never met Debra; he only knew of her because she was Sara's friend and agreed to submit their names for the Wentworth interview. She seemed friendly enough though, unlike Sara.

"I don't think we've met," he said as he extended his hand.

"No, we haven't. But I've heard quite a bit about you," Debra replied with an amused grin.

"Oh. Only bad things, I'm sure."

"You would be correct," Sara said as she strode into the room.

Ezekiel decided to ignore her as he took Debra's hand and kissed it.

"Ezekiel Cane."

Debra blushed.

"Debra Wallace."

"Who has a boyfriend," Sara interjected pointedly as she took a seat at the conference table. Debra glared at her.

"That was totally unnecessary," Debra muttered sideways to her friend. Sara only smiled sweetly.

Ezekiel crossed to the table and sat beside Sara.

"Sara," he nodded professionally, deciding against the friendly handshake he'd offered Debra. It seemed important to move at her pace. If she only wanted them to speak when necessary, he would respect that. If she wanted them to be friends, he wouldn't mind that either. It was all up to her.

"Ezekiel," she replied without looking at him. Her flat tone did not surprise him. As she began paging through the folders laid out on the table, Debra took a seat opposite them.

"I've heard Mrs. Wentworth is conducting the interviews herself, and I'm sure she is no stranger to event planning, so you'll need to know your stuff too," Debra informed them, folding her arms. "Let's start with the essentials."

She dropped a massive binder on the table with a resounding thud. Ezekiel gulped. Oh boy, this was the part of his investigation he wasn't sure he liked: going undercover in an industry he knew next to nothing about always meant a steep learning curve.

“This will be a breeze for me,” Sara said, throwing a cocky glance in Ezekiel’s direction. He shook his head.

“Good, then you wouldn’t mind answering some questions. What’s the first thing you ask the client about the event?” Debra squinted, focusing on Sara.

“Event goals and objectives. What do they hope to achieve with this event?”

“Ok, smarty pants. Do you make the budget for high-profile clients, or do they give you one?”

Sara smirked.

“You make the budget, of course. I thought we were here to learn. I’m not learning.”

She faked a yawn. Ezekiel watched the two friends with amusement. It was nice to see a side of Sara that wasn’t angry, annoyed, or scowling.

“Oh. You want to push it, do you?” Debra leaned forward, the playful tone of her voice giving away how much she was enjoying this. “Branding! Does the event have its own brand, or does it match the client’s?”

“It...” Sara started to reply confidently, then stopped. “Wait.”

She paused, her face thoughtful. Ezekiel could guess that it depended on the client.

“Wouldn’t it depend on the client?” he said quietly, more so thinking out loud than speaking to anyone. The two women turned to him with surprised looks on their faces. Ezekiel laughed.

“Oh, c’mon. I was guessing.”

“You guessed right,” Debra smirked, obviously impressed.

“You sure there isn’t something you’re not telling us, Sugarcane?” Sara teased, a surprising mix of playfulness and astonishment lighting up her features.

Ezekiel smiled, feeling a bit proud of himself.

“Maybe I’m a natural.”

“Oh, please,” Sara rolled her eyes and gave him a playful shove. It seemed being around Debra put her at ease. “Wait till we get into the nitty-gritty stuff.”

“Like color schemes,” Debra said, her face full of mock horror.

Ezekiel glanced between the two women silently for a moment.

“Bring it on,” he said finally, with a challenging grin.

“Ohhhh. Ok, Sugarcane,” Sara whooped. “Debra?”

Debra nodded.

“Color schemes.”

She moved the first binder aside and thunked a second one down in front of them. The sheer size of it made Ezekiel think that maybe he had spoken a little too confidently.

Several hours later, they had made it through most of the binders, at least on a surface level, and it was getting dark outside.

“Hey guys, I gotta run. It’s getting pretty late, but I expect you two to keep studying,” Debra winked, packing her things into her bag.

“Thank you for all your help, Debra. We’ll try not to let you down,” Ezekiel smiled at her.

“Oh, I know you won't. Success is your only option. Goodnight, guys.” She left the room.

“It's just you and me now,” Ezekiel joked.

Sara didn't look up. “Didn't you hear her? Back to work.”

He watched her for a moment. She was obviously more at ease around him now after a day in Debra's company. But her walls had started to rebuild themselves as soon as Debra left. Maybe it would be up to him to help break through them a bit.

“You know, I feel like taking a break.” He jumped up abruptly.

She looked up at him, unamused. “Sit back down, Sugarcane.”

“I think I've heard enough about monochromatic color schemes and vendor relations.” He gave her a look that said, *You know I'm right*, raising one eyebrow.

He could see her mulling it over.

“Ok.” She dropped her pen and sat back. He smiled victoriously, crossing to the window, and perched on the sill.

“New York looks incredible at night,” he admitted, the view making him appreciate the creative ability God had given man.

“It's not too bad,” she shrugged as she wandered over and plopped on the other end of the sill.

He watched her as she admired the view. As he did, he felt a warm glow rise inside his chest; she too appeared happy in the moment, surveying the city.

“You know, I remember when we were kids, Sunday evenings were the highlight of my week.” He waited to see if she would react, but she stared steadily out the window.

“Hmm,” she murmured as though she’d barely heard him.

“My parents were super relaxed when we were at your house or when you guys came over.” He smiled at the memory. “The laughter, the conversation. I mean, we were kids, so how much of it did we really understand? But it just felt good, like a safe space. I don’t know if you ever noticed, but I didn’t get along with many kids at school. But at home, or in church, or with your family, I felt accepted for the most part. That felt good.”

She finally turned to him, a distant look in her eyes, as though she was reliving the memories he had spoken.

“That’s one way to remember it.”

She gave a brief, tight smile, then looked away again.

He knew something must have happened between them, and he just wanted to find out what. He knew Sara didn’t want to talk about it yet though, so he wouldn’t press his luck tonight.

“Where did you go to college?” he asked, changing the subject. Maybe she would be more forthcoming if he eased her into it.

“Michigan.” She turned to face him now. “Let me guess, you went somewhere close to home, like UCLA?”

“Stanford,” he corrected.

Sara nodded. “See, I know that because you weren’t looking to run away from Santa Monica, unlike me.”

She was right. Ezekiel knew she had run as far away from California as possible.

“Which is why you chose to settle in New York.”

“I’m not doing too well, but New York is a big city, and I felt like I wanted to blend in. I didn’t want a nosy community or Sunday family dinners. I just wanted to be a girl in a city. It’s silly, I guess.” She looked down.

“No. It’s not.” He shook his head quickly. “You have your reasons.”

She looked up at him. “I did some research on you,” she confessed.

“Oh. Did you?” he asked with an amused grin.

“Yes. Mr. Ezekiel Cane, hotshot fast-rising journalist,” she said in mocking grand tones. Ezekiel couldn’t think of a reply. He didn’t understand why she sounded so bitter about it.

“Do you only hate me, or is it the whole world?”

Sara couldn’t help her jaw dropping in shock at his pointed question, but, truthfully, she wasn’t sure of her answer. She turned away in silence once more and looked out over New York.

“Are you okay?” Ezekiel frowned. Sara had to admit that she hadn’t expected his question. She stared at the dazzling lights of the city, blocking out her view of the stars.

“What does it matter?”

“We were probably friends at some point, Sara. I mean, we grew up together, all those dinners and...”

“Will you stop bringing up our damn childhood,” she burst out finally, walking away from the window. “Why do you have such a rose-colored

memory of it all anyway? I was miserable growing up, and you made it all worse when—” She stopped and turned back to face him, hating the look of pity on his face.

“Don’t do that,” she scoffed. “Don’t pity me.”

“I just want to understand.” His tone was somber, serious. “I don’t mean you any harm or hurt. I never have, so I don’t understand why you get upset every time I’m around.”

She eyed him wearily. It was late, and she was tired. She couldn’t deal with this now.

“It is what it is, Cane. If it makes you feel any better, I feel upset or angry all the time. Sometimes at just who I am or how my life has gone so far.” She looked him in the eyes. “If I didn’t have to see you, it would just be one less problem.”

Ezekiel opened his mouth to speak; the look in his eyes seemed to communicate genuine concern. It unnerved her.

“Sara, I...” He stopped as though he didn’t know what to say. He probably didn’t.

“Hey. We should get some sleep. Tomorrow is a big day.” Sara walked back to the table and gathered her things. “We have to actually get the job if the investigation is going to work. I don’t need to be an investigative journalist to know that,” she joked, hoping to change the subject altogether. She headed for the door. “See you tomorrow, Sugarcane.”

He still looked solemn, but he managed a smile.

“You too, Ward.”

She left.

==

Chapter Five

EZEKIEL WALKED INTO the waiting area of Mrs. Belinda Wentworth's office less than five minutes after Sara. She looked down as he took the seat beside her and hoped he wouldn't bring up their discussion from the previous evening. She had revealed way more than she had intended.

"Hey. Ready?" he asked quietly. She turned to him. He was smiling at her. Her breath caught as his blue eyes sparkled. She coughed and looked away. He had caught her off guard, she decided. She hadn't been expecting him to be so close.

"Fine, fine," she said hastily before his hand could reach her shoulder. She pulled away slightly, and he let his hand drop back into his lap.

He looked unsure, but he shrugged.

"I prayed a lot about this interview. I have a good feeling."

She didn't reply. Of course, Ezekiel Cane would pray about it. Sara was sure he prayed about everything.

"From the Marionette?" an attractive, dark-haired woman about their age called out.

"That's us," Sara answered, standing up quickly. Ezekiel followed after her as the woman ushered them into the office. It was a massive office, imposing, and clearly designed to convey the corporation's wealth. From the minimalist style of the decor to the choice of artwork hung about the room, it screamed affluence.

Belinda Wentworth was seated behind an enormous, no doubt one-of-a-kind desk. She looked every bit the ruthless business matriarch that the media made her out to be. Her silvery hair was cropped in a slanted bob, and she wore a classic navy designer suit with a white silk blouse. A string of pearls clung to her throat, and her manicured fingers were decked out in rings set with large stones of varying hues.

“Sit,” she instructed, though it was more of a barked command.

She did not look up from the documents she was reading. They did as she asked, seating themselves opposite her. It felt like minutes passed before she finally looked up. She scrutinized them for a moment before starting.

“You two are from the *Marionette*. They’re good, so I’m expecting you to measure up,” she clipped, her face straight. She took a breath. “Okay. I assume anyone appearing before me today knows a great deal about planning an event, so I’m not interested in that.” She sat up tall and leaned forward. Her gaze was intimidating. “Why should I trust you? This event is highly exclusive and will involve sensitive details our corporation wouldn’t want in the wrong hands. Why would I trust you with that?”

Sara spared a quick glance at Ezekiel. He looked like she felt: almost panicked and unsure of what to say. They had spent all day yesterday studying color schemes and budgeting, and this was what she was asking instead? Belinda raised an eyebrow expectantly.

Sara sat up and smiled with a confidence she willed herself to display. An idea had sprung to her mind, almost out of nowhere. She ran with it.

“I know exactly what you mean, Mrs. Wentworth. Are you familiar with Truman’s Toys?”

Mrs. Wentworth raised her eyebrows dubiously but replied, “Yes, I am aware of them. Why?”

Sara nodded and continued, “Well, I have a very unusual link to that company that I think may interest you. When I was little, a cousin of mine came to stay with us with his parents. He was skinny and painfully shy, and it looked like puberty wasn’t treating him well. He also had this stuffed rabbit. A small, shabby little thing, really.”

Mrs. Wentworth looked intrigued.

“I was walking by the ‘man cave,’ where the adults were gathered that evening, and I heard them talking. His parents were so embarrassed and scared for him. He had no friends, and he was getting bullied. They had tried therapy, changing him to another school, anything they could think of to help him, but in spite of their best efforts, he was just this shy twelve-year-old who still carried a stuffed animal everywhere, even to classes. They had come to their wit’s end.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ezekiel’s confused expression but ignored it.

“Cutting this long story short, I listened to them discuss how they were going to steal the rabbit from him while he slept and throw it away, and they would just not mention it. I thought this was cruel, and despite not being supposed to have heard any of it, I barged in uninvited and made it known to them what I thought.” She continued, trying to rush through the story. “They told me not to tell, and tried to explain that throwing away the rabbit secretly would help them to help him.”

Belinda looked expectant; she was waiting for the point of the long story. Sara couldn’t believe that she hadn’t cut her off by now. “However, I managed to convince the family—and later my cousin—that this toy could be the key to welcoming his new adopted sister into the family. And I was right: when his adopted sister, Sophie, arrived at their home,

he gave the rabbit to her and never looked back. He became a believer in the magic of toys. You may know him now as Truman of Truman's Toys."

"Why, yes, that is indeed a very interesting connection you have. Truman's Toys is a very successful company," Mrs. Wentworth said, intrigued by details she'd been unaware of regarding Sara's well-known cousin, as she leaned back in her seat.

"So Mrs. Wentworth, if what you need from us is secrecy to help the Wentworth Corporation, which will, in turn, help your clients and stakeholders, then we want to help you help them. I've understood the value of privacy and discretion, as well as creative problem-solving, from a young age. I believe these values will be an asset for you if you choose us to plan your event."

At first, the older woman said nothing, didn't even move. Then, a slow smirk grew on her face. She looked impressed, in spite of herself, as she sat back.

"I like you," she nodded. "What's your name?"

"Sara Ward," Sara stated with all the confidence she could muster.

"Sara Ward," Belinda repeated.

They finished the interview, and as they left the Wentworth Corporation, Sara couldn't believe what had just happened.

"Where did *that* come from?" Ezekiel asked her, sounding amazed.

"I don't know," she laughed excitedly. "That was so unreal! One minute I didn't know what to say, and then it was like my brain just started talking."

“That was great, Sara! It really was,” Ezekiel said, his tone sincere. All those years I had no idea Truman was your cousin. That certainly was a well-kept secret!” Sara looked at him. They were walking through New York now, just the two of them. Sara didn’t mind walking; it was a beautiful day, though rain clouds still lingered in the sunny sky after morning showers.

“Thanks,” she smiled. “It was thrilling. What you do is thrilling.” She had to admit; he was like a spy or a secret agent, getting to put on various personas for investigations. “Is that why you do it?”

He glanced at her.

“No,” he replied. “I do it because I believe God led me into it, but the thrill is definitely one of the perks.”

She only nodded. She may not view God the same way he did, but she sure wasn’t going to discredit his beliefs.

“Why do you choose to work at the Marionette as a waitress?” he asked.

“Money,” Sara answered simply.

“I know you have a degree in media and PR. Why don’t you use that?” he countered. She turned to him with a look of surprise.

“How did you know that?”

He rubbed his neck. “I—You know. I keep in touch with your folks and....” he hesitated. “...I ask about you.”

They stopped walking. She stared at him in disbelief.

“Why?”

“I guess I want to know that you’re okay. You were a big part of my life growing up. Friends or not,” he admitted. Sara felt a strange warmth in her chest. She didn’t know what to say; she could only blink at him.

“Ezekiel, that’s...” She stopped abruptly as it suddenly began to rain. “Oh no.”

“Here, put this over your head.” Ezekiel quickly took off his jacket and gave it to her. They hurriedly found a taxi, for which Sara was grateful. They sat quietly inside, the only sound the windshield wipers ticking back and forth. Sara glanced at Ezekiel. His hair was wet, tousled a bit, but he still looked so handsome. He turned, and his eyes met hers. She swallowed and looked away from him quickly.

Finally, the taxi pulled up to her apartment. The rain had let up to a drizzle. Ezekiel got out of the cab with her.

“I guess I’ll call you if Debra hears from the Wentworth Corporation,” she said, her voice trailing off awkwardly. It was probably the rain; she felt cold and out of sorts.

“Yeah, that’d be great. Uh... Thank you again for doing this,” he stammered. She nodded and turned to walk away. “Sara?”

“Hm?” She turned back around.

“My jacket.”

“Right.” She realized she was wearing it over her shoulders. He reached out to help her take it off, his hand brushing her shoulder. She felt a rush of heat where his hand had touched her. She cleared her throat, keen to be rid of the unexpected feeling.

“Well, I’ll see you,” she said hastily and hurried into her building.

==

Chapter Six

IT HADN'T TAKEN LONG after the interview for the Wentworth Corporation to call and say that the Marionette had gotten the job. Ezekiel thanked God for how smoothly everything was going so far.

"This is where you guys will be working. You have this as an office area, and there's a small connected conference room through that door."

A professionally attired, dark-haired young woman showed Ezekiel and Sara around their new office at the Wentworth building. She had called it 'small,' but the conference room was bigger than Sara's apartment.

"If you have any questions, my name is Carly, and I am your go-to girl. I am Mrs. Wentworth's assistant, and as this event is very important to her, it is likewise important to me," Carly informed them.

"Nice to meet you, Carly; I'm—"

"Ezekiel Cane, and she's Sara Ward. I know who you are. Any questions?" Carly asked. She had a *go-go-go* vibe to her. Ezekiel could tell she had to be an efficient person to work with Belinda Wentworth.

"None on my end," Ezekiel smiled. Sara shook her head. Carly clapped her hands together.

"Good. I'll leave you to it."

Then she left the room. Ezekiel turned to Sara.

“So, what do you want to do now?” he asked, casually leaning against what he guessed would be his desk. There was one on the other side of the room for Sara.

“Maybe actually plan the event? We’ve got a lot of work to do. Places to go, people to meet. We’ve only got two weeks. Get off your butt!” She put her hands on her hips. Ezekiel thought she looked rather cute when she was being bossy.

“And what exactly, might I ask, do you find so amusing?” She raised an eyebrow.

He hadn’t realized he was smiling.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Let’s go, boss.”

He stood up. Ezekiel had known he would have to do the actual event planning tasks, but he’d never realized how much work that actually was. Until now.

They spent the next week going from vendor to vendor for one thing or another—catering, decorations, lighting, sound, entertainment—the list seemed endless. Then they would compare prices. Sara was a natural at it, though. Ezekiel found himself hanging back and watching in amazement as she handled most of it. He was mainly there to carry shopping bags or drive her places.

“What do you think?” She turned to him abruptly in the fifth store they’d found themselves at that day, and it wasn’t yet noon. “Is the price too steep for customized gift bags? It’s only about a hundred guests. Maybe we go with the plain ones?”

Ezekiel hadn’t been paying attention.

“Whatever you decide is fine with me. You’re doing a great job,” he assured her.

She frowned.

“But I want your input. A second opinion. What’s the point of you coming if we don’t do it together?”

“Um. Okay.” He cleared his throat and looked at the plain bag sitting on a table and then the customized samples. “We could...” He hesitated, thinking about his answer. He wanted his response to be what she wanted. “We could work the customized bag into our budget and see if there might be something else we could trim just a bit.”

She blinked at him for a second, then smiled.

“Yeah. You’re right. That works great.” She turned back to the lady who owned the store. “We...” She stopped and turned to him again, then smiled. “Thank you.”

“You two are so lovely; I must say,” the lady spoke up. She was an older woman, maybe in her late sixties, stylishly dressed but still giving the impression of being the grandmotherly type. They gave her confused looks. “Oh. Don’t mind me; I love that you are both here together. It’s just that the grooms rarely come in with their brides, and even when they do, they just busy themselves on their phones. Oh! And the way you look at her. Oh, my heart,” the woman gushed, her hand over her ample chest in a dramatic gesture. Sara half expected her to swoon.

Ezekiel didn’t know what to say to that. How had he been looking at Sara?

“You’re mistaken,” he said quickly.

Sara spoke up. “We work together. We’re planning a corporate event.”

The woman frowned. “Oh. Excuse me. I’m so sorry. You could have fooled me.”

They both offered her awkward smiles, and Sara hastily continued discussing the bags. Ezekiel glanced at Sara. She seemed unaffected, but he felt unnerved by what the woman had said for some reason. How *did* he look at Sara? He hadn't noticed any particular change in his demeanor. Maybe it was just because they'd known each other so long; there must be a hint of nostalgia that the woman was picking up on. Yes, that was it, he decided, relieved.

They went to one more store before Sara declared she was tired and that they needed to get lunch. They chose a small cafe nearby and ordered the daily special without even perusing the menu.

"Well, you have to admit, some of this is fun," Sara said, referring to the work involved with planning an event. Sara couldn't believe he wasn't enjoying himself more.

"A little," he conceded. "But it's rather stressful." At the start of a small frown on her face, he rushed on, "You're good at it, though. Patient with the vendors," he said sincerely, and she looked down. "You're good with people."

She looked up at him, smiled briefly, and then turned to look out the window. She had her hair up in her usual sleek, classic bun, but a few wavy strands had fallen down the sides of her face. The way the light from the window was hitting her made her look dreamy, like a watercolor painting. Ezekiel felt his pulse quicken as he took in the sight of her. He cleared his throat and drank from his glass of water. He shouldn't be staring at her.

"When we were younger..." she started to speak, then paused. She turned to face him. "When we were younger, my family wasn't as great as we'd seem at those Sunday night dinners."

She leaned forward, resting her arm on the table. Ezekiel leaned forward too, paying attention.

“The issue was that my dad had wanted a son.” She smiled again, but it was a sad smile. “Unfortunately, they had me, and my mother could never conceive again. He tried to hide it; he tried to do dad stuff with me, but he always ended up showing how disappointed he was with me.”

She was staring forlornly at a faint spot on the table.

“I didn’t get this at first, so I tried so hard to be the child he wanted, but, as you know, I could never be his son. As the years went on, it was clear he was happier providing for me than interacting with me, but to me, it felt like he was trying to pay me off and that I was an inconvenience. By my early teens, he would get upset and ask me to leave if I tried to spend time with him. Sometimes he didn’t seem to want to see me or talk to me. One day I heard him tell my mother, ‘I just can’t connect with her.’ Which, of course, hurt terribly.”

The waiter brought them coffee at that moment, and they thanked him. Then Ezekiel turned back to Sara and waited for her to continue. She took a sip of her cappuccino, sighing before launching back into their conversation.

“At some point, I got angry. I started to rebel—to be the opposite of everything he wanted me to be. In the process, I hurt my mom too, but she always took his side, so I figured she deserved it too.” She laughed a mirthless laugh. Ezekiel had had no idea. He had just thought she was a wild child, a rebel without a cause. He felt sorry for her, and instantly his view of Mr. Darren Ward was shifting. He guessed if he’d looked hard enough, he might have seen it for himself.

“My folks started getting close to your folks.” Her eyes met his for a second before dropping again. “And my dad all but fell in love with you. It felt like he talked about you constantly. ‘Did you hear about this or

that accomplishment? What a fine young man!” she mimicked her father bitterly.

Ezekiel felt his heart sink. Of course, it made perfect sense to him now why she would hate him. Her father had taken him under his wing and been a mentor to him from the get-go when Ezekiel had been just a kid. Darren Ward had been a significant influence in Ezekiel’s life, even in his career. Yet, he had done so at his daughter’s expense, and Sara held that against Ezekiel and obviously against her parents as well.

“Watching you grow close to a father who decided he couldn’t be bothered with me hurt so much.” She shut her eyes. “So when I look at you,” she said, opening her eyes and looking right at him, “It’s hard not to see someone who got the father’s love I never really knew myself.”

Ezekiel didn’t have any words. He could see the bitterness in her eyes even though her tone was quiet. They just looked into each other’s eyes.

“I’m sorry.” It was so inadequate, but there seemed to be no way to convey just how much he meant those words.

She looked away. “Sad to say, but many of my life choices have been driven by a need to upset him. As you can see, it hasn’t led to a life of any great purpose. I haven’t spoken to either of my parents in three years.” Ezekiel’s eyes widened in surprise and dismay.

The waiter came over and placed their food in front of them, though they’d apparently both lost their appetites, and the delectable entrees went largely untouched.

Ezekiel couldn’t help but wonder if she had ever tried going to God with this hurt that she felt. He was the only one that Ezekiel knew could bring people back from the deepest pain.

“What about God?” Ezekiel finally asked.

She smiled knowingly, and in her expression, he could almost hear her saying, *I know all about that.*

“I’ve heard the whole nine yards. We grew up in church together, remember? So you know I’m not an atheist.” She began to push her food around with her fork.

“Why don’t you talk to Him about this? Sara, it sounds like you’ve been really hurting for a long time. Don’t you want it to end?”

“To end? Ha! That’s rich.” She shook her head. “What I think about God is...” She hesitated, thinking as she poured some salt over her fries. “He has favorites. You’re one of them. I’m not, and I don’t think I want much to do with Him. I’m sure He knows I haven’t been a good person if we’re being honest.”

Ezekiel frowned. He couldn’t believe how wrong she was.

“Sara, it’s not like that. God isn’t like that.”

“Hey.” She raised a hand to stop him from speaking, her defensive mask falling back into place in an instant. “Can we not continue this discussion? Forget I even said anything, alright? Let’s just eat.”

She didn’t look at him and focused on her food. His frown deepened, but he decided not to push it. He nodded and followed her lead by concentrating on his food instead, which could have been cardboard for all he tasted. He knew he couldn’t let it go, though, especially now that he was fully aware of what had been causing her untoward contention. And he wouldn’t. Maybe this was why God had brought him back into her life, to help her find Him.

THE NEXT DAY, EZEKIEL wrapped up his prayer time and stayed there for a minute. He was so grieved over what Sara had told him the day before, but he knew God had a plan for her. He felt more at ease as he stared at her name in his prayer book. He'd written it in large capital letters. He sighed and put on his suit jacket. It was time to meet Carly for what he hoped would be an enlightening business dinner.

==

Chapter Seven



SARA WAS PACING THE living room.

“I shouldn’t have told him all that stuff. I don’t know... I just ... he just ... he’s easy to talk to.”

She groaned, then went to sit by Debra, taking the bowl of ice cream from her and scooping out a large bite.

“Honestly, I don’t see why you’re so worked up about it. So you two are becoming friends. Why is that such a big deal?” Debra shrugged. She picked up the remote and began scrolling through Netflix. They were sitting on the floor of their apartment. Occasionally, when they could afford the time, they liked to have nights where they intentionally hung out instead of just living and working together.

Sara glared at her friend.

“No! We’re not friends. I mean, I’m just spewing hate his way 24/7, and in return, he’s nice to me.” She sobered, thinking about the look in his eyes when she had told him why she hated him. “Sometimes, I almost think he cares.”

“Sara, that’s what friends do!” Debra shook her by the shoulders. “Being friends with him could bring you some much-needed closure. Or not. But you have nothing to lose. Why are you fighting it?”

Sara stared at Debra as her words sunk in. Maybe she was right, Sara began to realize. She remembered the compassionate look in his eyes when she had admitted how she felt. It was still so hard to let go of the

hurt she'd carried for so many years, but perhaps it was time she became the bigger person and made an effort to forgive him.

"You know what? Maybe that's true. Would you mind if we take a rain check on the movie?"

Debra nodded. Sara put down the ice cream, grabbed her coat and shoes, and left the apartment; she would find Ezekiel and apologize. None of it was his fault. Maybe they could actually start over and even be ... friends? As her train rattled along the tracks, she mulled over the idea of a friendship with Ezekiel Cane. She was surprised to find that it wasn't a repulsive thought; in fact, thinking back to the way he'd looked at her in the rain the other day and how she'd even had fun showing him all over the city in their travels amongst the various vendors, watching his smile as she made arrangements... yes, she was beginning to see this man in a new light.

She walked into his hotel with a sense of determination. For the first time in a long time, she felt like she was doing the right thing. She headed for the elevator; he had given her his room details in case of an emergency. As she approached the doors, she stopped, spotting Ezekiel walking into the building from the entrance on the other side of the room. He looked relaxed in a casual sweater and tailored jeans, his blonde hair swept roughly to the side, and he chuckled as he pushed open the heavy glass door.

She took a step in his direction but stopped when she saw Carly, dressed in jeans and a red flowing top, step in after him. She froze. Carly laughed and touched his shoulder playfully, and he smiled back at her. Suddenly, Sara felt exposed. She couldn't let them see her. Her breath caught in her chest, and she blushed hotly as she retreated back through the lobby, weaving around the glass-tiled columns to avoid being seen.

Once outside the sliding glass doors, Sara took several deep breaths, relishing the crisp night air filling her lungs and calming her startled nerves. Ezekiel was probably just friendly with everyone, including her. A flirt, she decided. It was his job to be friendly and get people to talk, to share details with him. He didn't actually want to be friends with her. He was just doing his job. She laughed at herself as she walked away from the building; she was stupid to have even gone there. He had a whole life, a great life compared to hers, and she had decided she wanted no place in it. She was losing focus. He was still the person who reminded her of her childhood pain, and here he was laughing and having a good time with some woman he just met at the Wentworth Corporation. She shook her head and headed home.



THE NEXT DAY, THEY had to brief Belinda Wentworth on the progress of their planning. When Sara arrived, Carly and Ezekiel were chatting. She rolled her eyes. In a workplace, it would be nice if he kept things professional.

"Hey," Ezekiel called when he saw her. "I was waiting for you."

"Were you?" Sara snapped before she could stop herself.

He frowned and walked over to her. "How are you doing this morning?"

She didn't look at him as she bent over to sort through some documents on her desk.

"Doesn't matter." She stood up straight and faced him. "I'm ready for the meeting. Let's go."

She saw his look of confusion but didn't give him a chance to speak before she walked away.

After the meeting, which was a resounding success, Ezekiel blocked Sara in the hallway before she could walk away.

"Move," she said, not looking at him.

"I know you're usually not fond of me, but today you're downright cold," he said, his tone accusatory. She looked at him.

"One of us actually has to plan this thing, and since you have an investigation to conduct, I guess that would be me. Let's not waste any more time 'working together.' You do what you're here to do, and I'll do what I'm here to do," she whispered so that only he would hear.

She tried to push past him, but he caught her arm. She sucked in a breath at the tingly sensation where he touched her skin. He shook his head.

"I'm confused. I thought we were..." He hesitated. "I thought we were at least being civil to each other. What changed?"

At her glare, he let go of her arm.

"I don't know what you mean, Sugarcane. We both have work to do. Let's not forget that I don't like you, and this is just a job." She walked away.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Sara was sitting in her office, going over the arrangement of the room for the party. She wondered why the Corporation had refused to provide them with the guest list.

“It would make my life a whole lot easier,” she mumbled. Next, she picked up the lineup for the event. It was filled with blanks. The media team she had hired had also called her and asked her for the PowerPoints, yet Mrs. Wentworth’s office had kept delaying.

“Sara.” She looked up to see Carly had walked into the room. “Where’s Ezekiel?” Carly asked.

Sara tried not to roll her eyes.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since the meeting,” she said, not looking away from the document she was reading.

“Okay. Belinda wants to see you,” Carly said and started to leave the room.

“Sure thing, I’ll call Ezekiel.” Sara reached for her phone.

“No,” Carly said, stopping her. “Just you.”

“Oh. Okay.” Sara blinked, trying not to be nervous. She knew that Ezekiel pulled minimal weight in the actual planning, but she didn’t think Belinda Wentworth knew it.

She knocked on the large oak door of Belinda’s office and then pushed it open when she heard a summons from within.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked, stepping into the office.

“Come in. Take a seat,” Belinda smiled. If Sara hadn’t been nervous before, she certainly was now. Why was Belinda Wentworth smiling at her like that? It looked more predatory than friendly. Sara sat down and folded her hands in her lap in an attempt to hide her nervousness.

“I think that I’ve told you that I like you. Haven’t I?” Belinda sat up and leaned forward. Sara only nodded. “I’ve been impressed with all that you’ve been doing,” the older woman added.

“It’s really been a team effort...” Sara began lamely.

“Don’t try to be humble, sweetheart. Being a woman in business, I can tell you that it wasn’t humility that got me to where I am now,” Belinda reprimanded. Sara kept quiet. “Well, I guess I should get to the point, shouldn’t I? I want you to stay on as a part of my company. My son is the new CEO, and he’s instigating a number of excellent changes. As a mother and a major stakeholder, I want to see him succeed. I think he could do with someone on his team he can trust.” She leaned in closer. “Someone *I* trust. Like you.”

Sara blinked at her. “I...I don’t—”

“I would be offering you an executive position, of course, with a very attractive salary and generous benefits. I see a whole lot of me in you. Knowing the important role I played as an executive helping my husband build this empire, I realize that’s just what my son’s tenure needs.”

Sara couldn’t tell if she was being pranked or if someone was playing some cruel joke on her. She was tempted to glance around for a hidden camera.

“You don’t even know me,” she blurted out, thinking out loud.

Belinda laughed.

“I know enough. Please consider my offer. You don’t have to say anything right away.”

Sara looked down and nodded. Should she actually consider this? It would be such a great step forward, but it would be crazy. They were

trying to expose the company for wrongdoings after all. She stood up and walked towards the door in a bit of a daze.

“And Sara?” Sara turned around. “There’s a party tomorrow night. You should come. I’ll introduce you to Donald and some other key people from the company. I’m sure you two will hit it off.” Belinda smiled. Again, Sara could only nod. “Carly will give you the details and find you something to wear. You can go,” Belinda dismissed her, and she left the office.

Sara couldn’t sleep that night. She lay awake, staring up at the ceiling. She didn’t want to feel like she owed any loyalty to Ezekiel, but the truth was he had been nothing but sweet and kind to her. He had even been fun to be around sometimes. At least when he didn’t remind her of what she hadn’t had as a child growing up. In exasperation, she asked aloud, “What do I do? Please help me! I’m so tired.”

She turned over again, pulling her covers up to her neck. She closed her eyes, and before her in her mind's eye, were two nail-pierced hands reaching towards her, lit by a blue fire. As she reached out to take those hands, the warmth from the fire consumed her, and an incredible warmth saturated every cell in her body. Love as she had never known. *Beloved, I have come to speak with you.*

Sara felt tears flow down her face as she communed with God, her body fully at rest for the first time in years.

==

Chapter Eight

EZEKIEL DIDN'T HAVE time to ponder what had just happened. He thought he had been making some progress with Sara but guessed that in her mind, he would always be the person who had stolen her father's affection. Ezekiel sighed and made his way to the little hole-in-the-wall bagel shop several blocks from the Wentworth Corporation, where he and Carly had agreed last night would be an innocuous enough rendezvous point so as to not draw any attention to themselves. Just to be safe, he chose the most circuitous route he could think of to get there, but still, he found himself nervously glancing around for any suspicious-looking persons. He had to chuckle at himself in spite of his jitteriness—he realized he was specifically assuming any criminal types following him would be big, beefy, muscle-bound goons. Apparently, he'd watched too many mystery movies.

As he approached the bagel shop, he was thanking the Lord that Carly's conscience had finally driven her to seek him out. From the things she had told him, the Wentworths all seemed to love their business, and their family life revolved around it, so it was a true mystery as to who and why the senior Wentworth had not only been murdered, but that no one in the family seemed bent on bringing the perpetrator to justice. However, Carly had also mentioned during last night's conversation that Donald Junior had been close to his father, but they seemed to have had a falling out not long before the older Mr. Wentworth's death. He wasn't sure just what evidence she had, but he hoped it would be enough to reveal who ordered the autopsy records sealed, which may, in turn, lead to the 'why.'

“There you are,” he greeted Carly as they approached the shop from opposite directions. She looked as nervous as he felt. It was sobering to realize she was putting her job, if not her very life, at risk to do the right thing by helping to expose evil. Once inside, they ordered a couple of bagels with lox ‘schmear’ and chose the tiny table furthest from the front window of the shop. As they were waiting for their order in silence, Carly reached into her large purse, which looked more like a small carry-on bag to Ezekiel, and withdrew a business-sized envelope with his name on it.

Glancing around one more time to make sure no one was paying attention to them, he slipped a single sheet of paper out of the envelope and skimmed it quickly. Eyes wide and face blanched, he muttered, “Bingo.” The document was a copy of the order to the coroner’s office, just as he had suspected. He shook his head sadly as he saw Donald Junior’s signature at the bottom of the page. He had hoped the top-secret document relating to Donald Wentworth II’s death would help him establish that something was amiss, but it nonetheless brought him sorrow to see evidence in black and white as to the depths this family had fallen, and for what? Greed? Jealousy? Power? Unfortunately, his job now was to prove motive, but if he could get a confession, it would wrap the story up nicely. That is, if one could use the term ‘nicely’ in relation to a murder investigation.



JOE HAD RECEIVED AN invitation to an exclusive party given by a wealthy family in New York, which the Wentworths would be attending. Ezekiel was grateful when Joe invited him, as he figured it would be advantageous for him to go. He was hoping to find one or two people who might be willing to talk to him about the Wentworths. Surely someone in their tightly knit inner circle might slip and divulge some-

thing that could help lead to motive in this investigation, especially after they'd had a few drinks under their belt or sash, whichever the case may be.

"Thanks for inviting me, Joe. I really appreciate it. I wonder if there's anyone here I could talk to about the story discreetly," Ezekiel said, looking around the room. It was full of men in thousand-dollar suits and women in elegant cocktail dresses, jewelry sparkling in the light of the numerous elaborate chandeliers adorning the ceiling.

"I wouldn't dismiss it. People do tend to talk a lot more when they're drunk," Joe said, confirming what Ezekiel had presumed about the guest's potential 'loose tongues.' "And don't thank me. I need this."

Ezekiel was confused about Joe's meaning, but he didn't get a chance to ask because someone else came in and caught Joe's attention.

Ezekiel had begun to casually meander around the room, trying to blend in and appear disinterested as he listened for any useful tidbits swirling in the conversations around him; he stopped when he caught sight of Sara. What was she doing here? She looked stunning in a shimmering gold midi dress that seemed to flow as she moved. He was about to walk up to her but stopped when he saw Donald Wentworth III touch the small of her back, and their heads bent together as if in intimate conversation. She smiled and laughed. Ezekiel didn't know what was happening, but he knew that Donald III was dangerous and that Sara shouldn't be moving with his crowd.

He strode up to them.

"Sara! I didn't know you would be here." He wanted to shove Donald's hand away from her.

"You don't know everything that I do," she replied with a bland face, though her green eyes were flashing a warning. "Excuse us."

She smiled and walked away with Donald in tow. Ezekiel stood there in shock. Was she out of her mind? Had she forgotten that they were investigating these people for murder? Ezekiel couldn't help the anger rising within him as he watched them. Belinda Wentworth had joined them, dressed like the queen she obviously thought herself to be, with no shortage of royal blue silk and diamonds.

If this was what Sara wanted, he could not stop her. He made his way through the crowd, down the elevator, and out into the street; he couldn't face polite conversation with strangers right now, murder investigation or not. He needed some air.

When Ezekiel reached his hotel room, he opened the door and then slammed it behind him, rattling the pictures on the wall. He leaned back against the door, attempting to slow his breathing, and loosened his tie. He couldn't even understand why he was so upset, nor why he'd blown his chance to gather more information, but he knew what to do about it and Who to go to.

"Lord, I know you want me to share Your love and keep praying for her, but she's so difficult! She's spending time with the very people we're trying to investigate," Ezekiel prayed, his voice thick with emotion. "I know You know all and You see all, but she could jeopardize the story, not to mention her life! What if she pushes me away completely? Then how will I help her?" He shut his eyes and fell to his knees. "Lord, I don't know why I can't escape this urge to help her, but I trust You. It's just difficult to love someone who hates you," he admitted quietly. He realized he was currently in a position Jesus must have found Himself in dozens of times.

My beloved, all is not always as it seems.

As he heard the words in his spirit, a sense of calm slowly washed over him. He released a breath. That was all God said to him that night,

and he was content with it. He would choose to trust God, because he knew that God's ways and thoughts were far greater than his own, as the scriptures said.

JOE CAME TO EZEKIEL'S hotel room the next day.

"Hey. What happened? I had no idea when you left last night."

"I'm sorry about that." Ezekiel rubbed his neck and walked into the kitchen area of his room. "Coffee?" he asked Joe.

"No, no. I'm good, thanks."

Ezekiel made a cup for himself and leaned against the counter, sipping it.

"Did you get anything for your story last night?" Joe seemed a bit on edge.

"Uh. No, I left early. I'm sorry about that."

"Why did you leave early?" Joe took a seat at one of the barstools in front of the counter.

"I know, but I don't know," Ezekiel tried to explain. "It's Sara, right. She's walking around with Donald Wentworth, who has questionable ethics at best, and whether he had anything to do with his father's death? I don't know. I just think that she needs to be more careful. I can't help but imagine that this is the reason she's been so cold to me."

"Okay, I understand you are concerned about the company she is keeping, but why do you care if she's cold to you? From what I understand, she's always been cold to you," Joe said.

Ezekiel sighed.

“I don’t know, okay? It’s just that it’s been different since we’ve been working together. Suddenly, I’m getting to know this woman I had supposedly known my whole life but apparently never known. Not really. And I liked it. I liked her energy, her laughter. I liked being on that side of her.”

“Well, as long as you don’t fall in love with her,” Joe said pointedly. “Because I don’t need to remind you that she hates you. I think she’s doing a good job of reminding you herself.”

Ezekiel shook his head and scoffed, “I’m not in love with her. I just enjoyed being her friend, that’s all.”

Ezekiel felt Joe’s eyes on him. It was apparent Joe didn’t believe him.

“You know what? Let’s get back on track here. The story.” Ezekiel sat beside Joe. “I found evidence that the cover-up came from Donald. All I need is for him to give some sort of motive in maybe his speech or something like that at this event, and I’ll have all I need.”

“Sounds like you’ve almost wrapped up the story.” Joe nodded.

“Why would he do it, though?” Ezekiel wondered out loud. From what Carly had told him, he and his father had been close, until that last falling out, but still... things didn’t really add up.

Joe looked down.

“America isn’t what it used to be. People, companies. They’re forced to change and evolve or get swept away,” Joe said solemnly. The tone of his friend’s voice caused Ezekiel to look up.

“Is everything okay?” Ezekiel asked. “I mean with you?”

Joe's eyes snapped up quickly, and he plastered on a huge smile.

"Sure, life is fine. Never better! Anyway, I should get going. Busy day at the office today." Joe stood up, and Ezekiel escorted him to the door. *I ought to pray more for Joe, too*, he thought.

Ezekiel got ready for the day and headed to the venue they had booked for the event. It was already four in the afternoon and he knew that most of the work would be done already, but he decided that it was better late than never. Tomorrow was the main event and it would hopefully lead to the end of his investigation, or at least Sara's involvement in it.

He forced his mind away from that. He didn't like that many of his thoughts these days involved Sara. She was a grown adult, and she could handle herself. He had to leave her in God's hands.

He walked into the main hall and spotted her. She was standing in the middle of the room, which was beautifully decorated with elaborately decked out tables seating eight each, covered with the finest in china, cutlery, and crystal. Each place setting had the elegant custom bag they'd chosen, filled with delectable custom made candies. The centerpieces on each table were nothing short of amazing, one of Sara's stunning finds in a tiny, tucked away florist shop she knew of, that no doubt would soon be enjoying a booming business once the party goers learned of it. It was one of the things Ezekiel admired about her: she was determined to find and help unique, small businesses in her pursuit of delivering an excellent result. She seemed to derive more pleasure from that than planning the actual event, a compassionate side of her he'd not seen before, but was truly moved by. As he observed her, she was going over last-minute details with the set-up team. She had her hair in a thick ponytail down her back, but some strands had come loose. She looked like she had been working hard, but she seemed ra-

diant, in spite of her casual appearance, with the passion evident in her features as she gave instructions.

Ezekiel walked over to her. She turned around. He had startled her, he could tell.

“This all looks wonderful, Sara. You really are a natural at this.”

She smiled, her cheeks turning a light pink.

“I don’t know. It’s not that great.” She looked around at the room almost nervously, then down. Ezekiel couldn’t help but smile. Then, she looked up at him, her face serious, her eyes intense. “Ezekiel, I should apologize...” she started to say.

“No,” he stopped her, stepping close to her. “You don’t need to.” He could feel himself getting heady again, being so close to her, all his senses firing at once. “I should have trusted that you can handle yourself. You’re a very strong and capable woman, and I know you’ll always do what’s right.”

She took in a shaky breath. She bit her lip and instinctively Ezekiel’s eyes dropped to her lips. He looked back up at her eyes, and saw a look of turmoil. It was like she was fighting within herself. He frowned. Why did he find himself leaning closer? His heart was beating more rapidly as their lips came closer together.

She closed her eyes. He closed his. It felt like his heart would stop when their lips finally met; he realized everything in him wanted this moment to happen.

“Mr. Cane.” Sara jumped back as Belinda Wentworth entered the room. Ezekiel had never been in a situation with worse timing in his life.

“Mrs. Wentworth,” he said, his tone betraying his annoyance.

“It’s nice of you to join Miss Ward finally. You could pull your weight more,” she said, then turned to Sara.

“The room looks delightful. I love it.” She smiled, a gesture Sara returned. Ezekiel kept looking at Sara, but she wouldn’t look at him. Belinda walked to the other side of the room to inspect it, and Ezekiel took the opportunity. “Sara, I didn’t mean to—”

“Let’s not talk about it, Cane. I have work to do, and like she said, you should pull your weight more.”

Sara’s tone was brusque as she walked away. Ezekiel looked at her blankly. It was like she had turned a hundred and eighty degrees when Belinda came in. He shook his head and turned away. He should have realized that maybe they had both just been caught up in the moment.

The rest of the day, she avoided him like the plague and stuck to Belinda Wentworth’s side until he left. He decided to forget what had happened, no doubt a result of an obvious momentary lapse of judgment.

==

Chapter Nine



IT HAD BEEN A LONG day and Sara was exhausted. She just wanted to get home and shower. She most definitely felt relieved that the event was tomorrow; Sara was thankful she could get it over with and finally get some rest. She was also glad that her time on the story was ending. Sara didn't want to think about what had happened today—or had *almost* happened.

“Sweetie, let me give you a ride,” Belinda offered as Sara walked out of the building.

“No, I'm fine, thanks; I can walk,” Sara said politely.

“No. I insist,” Belinda said, her face straight. Sara understood that it wasn't a request.

She slid into the back seat of the luxury car next to Belinda. She hadn't heard of the brand of car and didn't recognize the logo on the front of it.

“Donald enjoyed meeting you the other night. He had a lovely time,” Belinda said as the car slid away from the curb and melted into traffic. Sara kept a smile on her face. Belinda Wentworth was an intimidating woman. When Sara didn't say anything, Belinda moved on from the subject.

The older woman pulled out a flash drive and handed it to her. Sara slowly took it, confused.

“It’s the guest list and the multimedia for the event. I’m giving them to you because I trust you,” Belinda said, her tone very serious.

Sara looked down at the flash drive and then back up at Belinda. She knew what that meant. It meant that whatever was on there was incriminating. She tried to stay composed and not feel unnerved.

“Thank you for trusting me.”

“I’ve more than trusted you, Sara Ward. I’ve made you a wonderful offer too. I’ve invited you into mine and my son’s lives. It’s a rare privilege.”

The look on Belinda’s face made Sara want to crawl into herself. She swallowed.

“I understand that you have some reservations. I’m not blind. I could see what was happening between you and Mr. Cane.”

Sara’s eyes shot to Belinda’s. Belinda wasn’t supposed to see that.

“I assure you. It’s nothing. It was just in the moment,” she said. Belinda only smiled.

“I want to show you something. I had someone look into Mr. Cane.”

Sara’s eyes widened in alarm. Oh no, Belinda probably knew that he wasn’t an event planner. Suddenly, she was painfully aware that she had gotten into the car with Belinda, and no one knew where she was at that moment.

“There’s no need to be tense, Sara. We trust each other, you and me.” Belinda touched her shoulder. “That’s why I’m giving you a gift.”

Sara watched as she pulled out a document. It couldn’t have been less than four pages long and then a second one.

“These are his call records. The first record details a call to the Mari-onette before he came to New York. He didn’t bump into you by accident; he meant to find you. He asked about you.”

Sara took the documents from her in disbelief.

“That’s not true. It was a coincidence...” She stopped short as she read what was on the page.

She felt like the air around her was growing thin. Why had Ezekiel never mentioned this?

Mr. Cane. Yes, Asking for a Miss Ward. Can I know if she’s assigned to any events within the first week of September? The call transcript read. She’ll be working at a party that week. Would you like the details?” Sara stopped reading. Ezekiel should have mentioned this.

“That’s not all, dear,” Belinda interrupted her thoughts. “Read the second one.” As Sara started to read, her heart dropped. She didn’t know why it hurt this much, but she knew this was what betrayal felt like. “I’m only trying to help you,” Belinda said, but Sara barely heard it. She was angry, her blood was boiling, her heart was breaking, and all she could see now was Ezekiel Cane in her mind’s eye.

They pulled over outside Sara’s apartment. Sara got out of the car and headed into her building without a word. She was trying so hard to manage her emotions. She was feeling so many simultaneously and didn’t notice him standing at her door until he’d said her name.

“Sara, we need to talk.”

Sara looked up into Ezekiel Cane’s blue eyes. They were so clear, and spoke of honesty, though she realized he didn’t have a shred of that in him. Sara hated that he looked so handsome. She hated that he was even here.

He took a step toward her and she took one back. She looked up at him and saw his surprise at the look on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“You won’t like anything I have to say to you, so I suggest you leave,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Sara, if this is about us almost kissing, we’re adults...”

“It’s not about the stupid kiss!” she yelled. He looked taken aback. “I thought that I hated you before, but I think I hate you more now for letting me believe that maybe, just maybe, I had been wrong to hate you all these years. You made me feel like I could trust you!”

“You can trust me. Sara, that’s all I’ve been trying to say to you.” He stepped closer and touched her arm gently. She shook him off and stepped backward.

“No. I can’t,” Sara said, her voice breaking. She threw the documents at him. “You were more his son than I’ll ever be his daughter. I should have expected this.”

She watched him read the documents and stayed quiet. They were snippets from calls between Ezekiel and her parents. He had been telling them everything about her since he had come to New York. She had fought so hard for years to distance herself from them, shut them out, keep them in the dark, and even though now she knew that she had to forgive them, as God had instructed her when He spoke to her, it didn’t make the betrayal hurt any less.

“Sara, I can explain.”

“Save it.” She grabbed the documents from him, walked into her apartment, and slammed the door. She released a breath, all her strength

leaving her; she didn't know how to deal with this. She slipped into bed and repeated, "Lord, help me." Somehow, she knew He would.

THE NEXT DAY ARRIVED and Sara attempted to pull herself together. She looked at herself in the mirror as she put one final pin in her hair. An elegant woman looked back at her. Early that morning, Sara had looked at the flash drive Belinda had given her. It had horrified her, especially Donald's speech and the other information on it. All she needed was a smile that she could fake and to do one thing after the other, and, somehow, she would get through the day.

The guest list wasn't any less terrifying, making Sara cautious as she walked into the hall. She recognized the guests by their names because she had done Google searches on most of them. Novak Viktor, a Russian arms dealer with powerful connections to the Kremlin. Santana Lopez, wife of the ex-Mexican President who was jailed for corruption. She still had many ties to prominent politicians in Latin America. Sara watched them all converse. Crooks, corrupt leaders, and a good handful of them internationally wanted criminals.

Sara tried to remain calm as Donald got ready to take the stage. She looked up, and her eyes caught Ezekiel's from across the room. The overhead light cast a surreal glow over him. He looked terrific, his hair perfectly styled, his suit expertly tailored. She wanted to look away, but she found she couldn't. It was that feeling when two people spot each other from across a room, and felt like they were the only ones there. Her breath caught, a hollow feeling in her stomach. She didn't want to feel this way for him. There was so much between them that she wasn't sure they could surmount.

Two bodyguards approached him and spoke to him. Sara's eyes widened and she blanched. She knew what was happening. His cover was blown. He glanced at her again as they escorted him from the room, but she looked away this time, desperate to maintain her composure. She turned around, only to bump into a dark-haired woman.

"I'm so sorry," Sara said, looking up to see that it was Carly. "Carly. Hi," Sara said in surprise. She noted the man with whom Carly's arm was linked.

"Oh. Sara, this is my husband, Jonathan." Carly smiled at Sara's confused look. Sara shook her head.

"Right. You're married." Sara shook Jonathan's hand.

Carly smiled and looked around. "Is Ezekiel here?"

"Actually, you just missed him. Is there a message I can take to him?" Sara asked cautiously.

Carly leaned closer to her.

"Tell him I said good luck. And that no matter how tonight goes, I'm still willing to go on record about the things we discussed for his story." Sara's eyes widened. Of course! Carly had been helping with the story, she realized belatedly.

"Well, I'll be sure to pass on your message."

"Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for coming tonight. To the re-birthing of a company." Everyone's attention turned to the stage, where Donald was now speaking. That was Sara's cue. She took a deep breath for courage and slipped out of the room into a side corridor. She knew this had to work. She stopped when she heard voices and flattened herself against the wall.

“Lord. Do your thing. Protect us and make this mission successful, or whatever you plan to do,” she whispered.

==

Chapter Ten



EZEKIEL SAT IN A CHAIR in the middle of a dimly lit room, just like he'd seen in so many movies, but he'd never imagined real criminals actually did this. The guards left the room after securing his hands to the chair with zip ties. He knew what this meant, bizarre as it all seemed: his cover had been blown.

“Lord, thank You that You are the God Who makes a way where there is none. Please help me now.”

“Of course, you would be praying.” Joe walked into the room.

Ezekiel looked up slowly in shock. “Joe. What are you doing here?” he asked. His mind raced, scanning through his memories of all their recent interactions. What had he missed?

Joe laughed.

“That’s a rich question. You know, Cane, I have always known that you would get in over your head sooner or later,” Joe sniffed.

“What are you talking about, Joe?” Ezekiel asked. He refused to believe what was becoming crystal clear: Joe had somehow betrayed him.

“I’m talking about the damn Wentworths, Ezekiel. You just had to mess with the Wentworths. I didn’t want to do this, but you left me no choice. The country isn’t what it used to be. I tried to warn you. We were going under, and Dad sold in a moment of desperation.

“Your father sold Galligan Oil!? Why wasn’t it in the press?” Ezekiel asked. He was still having a hard time comprehending that Joe had actually betrayed him. This plot was becoming more predictable by the minute but he never in a million years thought he’d be in the middle of a nightmare like this, investigative journalist or not.

“Because it was an underhanded type of deal. Wentworth Senior worked it all out, but it left my father no better than a slave to Donald Wentworth. He would have ruined our whole family.”

“So, when I went to the Galligans for help to kill my husband, they were much obliged,” Belinda Wentworth said as she walked into the room. “I’ve known about your plans from the beginning, Mr. Cane, and I have waited so eagerly for this moment.”

“Why would you kill your husband? You were happy.” Ezekiel could see the Galligans’ motives, but not Belinda’s.

“We *were*,” she said, walking closer to him. “But he’d lost his mind. He couldn’t see that things had changed, and the business needed to change with the times. I, however, could see the writing on the wall, so to speak. All our political connections had begun to disregard us, literally avoid us, if you can believe that. We were losing our clout in Washington and other key power centers, so it was only a matter of time before our empire would follow suit.”

Ezekiel was still confused.

“So, what? You conspired with your son to kill his father?”

“Oh my, no. Donald Junior had no idea. He loved his father too much. But neither would ever put himself aside to protect the treasure that we had built.” Her eyes glazed over as she spoke. “I knew it would be easier to whisper in my son’s ear, little by little. Like getting him to agree to this event, where he will unveil our plans to create alliances with the

guests so that we can expand our sphere of influence beyond US shores. We should have made this move years ago, but it's better late than never. Our enterprise must expand its horizons now."

"By working with criminals."

"What difference does it make? They're just useful idiots anyway, though they don't realize it. The company success is what matters and if I succeed, they may survive, of course, providing our business is mutually beneficial." She turned to Ezekiel now and smiled, her eyes strangely vacant. "But it was never my plan to play second fiddle to my son. I don't have the heart to murder my own child, but I'm not above framing him for his father's murder and organizing tonight's gathering of criminals with an intent to commit treason."

Ezekiel stared at her in shock. She was mad, at best, possessed at worst, and he strongly suspected the latter.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. The Wentworth corporation will thrive under my rule, and I'll have him out in no time, or at least moved to a comfortable prison." She smiled. "That's where you come in, Cane."

"Oh, I have a part to play in this?" he asked. A lot was wrong with her if she thought he would help with her scheme.

"Yes. That's why you're still alive, Ezekiel. So that you can finish your article." She smiled deviously. Ezekiel looked between her and Joe.

"Except, you'll write what you initially thought, that my son is behind everything, with no involvement from me whatsoever. You'll do this, or I'll take Miss Ward down with me if you expose me. I'm sure you are intelligent enough that I don't need to provide details of just what that means."

Ezekiel's eyes snapped to hers when she mentioned Sara.

“You wouldn’t dare...”

“Dare what? Hm? Did you really think I’d just magically taken an interest in her? *Trusted* her? Why? Because of an awkward childhood story?” She laughed. “You must think me stupid.” Her tone had turned ominous.

“You know, I had a feeling that you didn’t like my story and all that friendliness was a load of garbage.” Everyone turned to the door in surprise as Sara stepped into the room.

Belinda’s eyes widened. “What are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here.”

“No, actually, I am. See, I wouldn’t expect you to understand, because I didn’t for the longest time, but the strangest thing happened to me. One night I was tossing and turning, considering your weirdly generous offer, and... God came to me. And as plain as the nose on your evil face, He told me you would try to use me and just to follow His lead instead.”

Sara smirked in Ezekiel’s direction. Ezekiel was in awe that God had spoken to Sara and brought the answer to his prayers. God never ceased to amaze him.

“Well, *God* should have told you not to come here because it is such a waste that you have to die now, instead of when I’d originally planned. You could have been most useful to me in my plans for Wentworth.” Belinda faked a frown.

“Not so fast,” Sara warned. At the same time, they heard a commotion from the main room.

Belinda looked at Joe. “What is going on?”

“The police,” Joe answered after a quick glance into the hallway, with an anxious look at Sara’s calm face.

“I’ve been wired this whole night, and they have heard everything you’ve said,” Sara stated confidently, a relieved smile flickering across her face.

What a woman, Ezekiel couldn’t help but think. If he hadn’t been tied up, he would have hugged her until she was breathless. He would thank her and tell her how beautiful and strong she was. Since he was still tied up, he gave silent shouts of praise to the Lord for this miraculous deliverance.

The police reached them in mere seconds, having been stationed at various locations around the building, waiting for the signal. Teams of armed officers had begun to break up the party in the main room, with two particularly burly cops unceremoniously escorting Belinda out in handcuffs, along with a few other choice characters who had been in attendance at the event. Joe seemed to have disappeared before the police came into the room. In the flurry of activity that took place during the raid, Ezekiel had no time to wonder if Joe had been captured elsewhere in the building, but a sense of deep sadness over Joe’s betrayal gripped his gut, the only damper on this satisfying end to the entire adventure. He made a mental note to re-double his prayers for Joe and perhaps pay him a visit in jail.

The remaining partygoers, who were innocent but fearful of any negative publicity, made a hasty exit, and the dazed and confused staff were left holding half-empty trays of hors d’oeuvres and drinks. Ezekiel had finally been untied and set free, questioned by the detectives who had come in just after the arrests, and was standing outside the venue talking to an officer when he saw Sara walk out of the building. She looked divine in her long-sleeved emerald velvet dress, her hair expertly pinned up in a smooth chignon, remarkably still in place in spite of all the ex-

citement of the last half hour. It was as if the entire escapade had not fazed her at all. Ezekiel felt his chest tighten as she strode toward him. The weight of what she'd accomplished began to sink in, and on top of it all, she was radiant: the color in her cheeks enhanced the green of her eyes, and he was suddenly overcome. But she could have been killed in there, all because he'd asked her to be involved in this crazy investigation. Would she ever forgive him now?

"Sara I..."

Without a word, she cut him off, rising on her toes and kissing him. Impulsively he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. He felt warmth seep through his body. His mind muddled completely, his words forgotten as he took in her scent and her taste and the feeling of holding her. When she stepped back, it took him a minute to steady himself.

"Why?" he asked. "I thought you still hated me."

"And you're going to hold that over my head?" she joked, laughing.

He laughed too. "What changed?"

"I read the full transcript of the phone calls," she admitted sheepishly. "Something I should have done right away." Ezekiel looked away. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"I hope that you understand that I didn't do it to hurt you or betray you. I did it to give a dying man some peace. I know that it wasn't my place, but I was with my dad a lot leading up to his death, and I... just wanted to encourage your dad somehow."

Sara's eyes shot up to meet his.

"Your dad—your dad died?" she asked, her voice breaking as she did. "Ezekiel, I had no idea."

She hugged him. He held her tight before letting go.

“That’s why I kept telling your dad about you. He’s dying, Sara, and his one regret is how he treated you all those years. He can’t stop talking about it.”

He placed a hand on her cheek.

She smiled. “I know. I understand now. And I know God is going to help me restore that relationship.”

She kissed him again. Ezekiel felt truly at peace. He had thought she was abandoning him for the Wentworths, but she had had a plan all along. Correction: GOD had had a plan. When God had told him that things were not always as they seemed, it made sense now.

“Ezekiel Cane,” she said, grinning up at him. “I don’t think I hate you anymore.”

A wide smile spread slowly across his face.

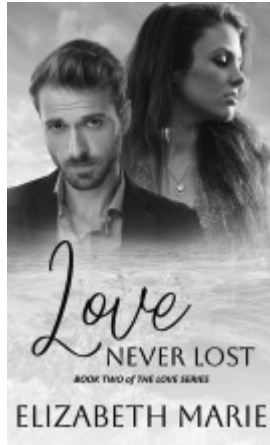
“Well, I guess that’s a good place to start over, isn’t it?”

She chuckled.

“Look out!” someone shouted behind them.

It felt like slow motion to Ezekiel as they turned around just in time to see a gun pointed in their direction. They didn’t even have time to move before the explosion of a gunshot ripped through the air.

Click here to read the next installment in the Love Series¹: Love Never
Lost²



1. <http://mybook.to/TheLoveSeries>

2. <http://mybook.to/LoveNeverLost>

Other Books By This Author¹

Coming soon:

Love Never Lost²

Love Called to Serve

Love After Trauma

Love In Hiding

Love Comes Around

1. <http://mybook.to/TheLoveSeries>

2. <http://mybook.to/LoveNeverLost>

About This Author

Elizabeth Marie lives in the Northern part of the South Island of New Zealand on a farm with her husband. She loves all things related to stories and devours books and movies. She loves to walk in the hills and hang out with her dog and her friends. She also loves music, singing, and playing the guitar. She attends the local New Life church.

Find out more about Elizabeth Marie at www.elizabethmarieromance.com¹

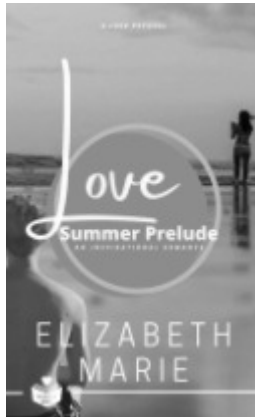
[Click here to follow Elizabeth Marie on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/elizabethmarieromance)²

1. <http://www.elizabethmarieromance.com/>

2. <https://www.facebook.com/elizabethmarieromance>

Free Gift for Subscribers

Click here to sign up to my mailing list¹ to receive this FREE subscriber-only exclusive copy of *Love: A Summer Prelude* as well as to be notified of any new releases, giveaways, contests, cover reveals and so much more.



1. <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/wi7ktkhuah>

==

Review This Book



P.S. It means the world to me that you bought my book. Writing is my passion, and I look forward to YOUR feedback.

So if you liked this book, I'd like to ask for a small favor. Would you be so kind as to leave a review on Amazon?

It'd be very much appreciated!

From your friend, Elizabeth Marie

