

UNCONDITIONAL

Unconditional

PM ZELAYA

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To my beautiful daughter Isabella. I love you Unconditionally. May you Rest in Peace

UNCONDITIONAL

UNCONDITIONAL
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	THE GALA	1
2	THE TWENTY-FIFTH FLOOR	23
3	BIRTHDAY SURPRISE	50
4	DECISIONS	71
5	THE ONE PERCENT	87
6	THE RIDE	106
7	THE PHILIPS	117
8	SOMETHING AMAZING	128
9	SOMETHING UNEXPECTED	139
10	BROWNSTONE	155
11	BLACK GIRL	168
12	CONFESSION	181
13	BEST FRIENDS	188
14	DO NOT OPEN	202
15	SOMEONE UNEXPECTED	213
16	THE HAMPTONS	228
17	THE NEW GIRL	245
18	CONFLICTED	256
19	CHOICES	270
20	DRUNK	284
21	LET ME GO	295
22	ADDICTED	309
23	THE BELAMERE HOTEL	330
24	UNCONDITIONAL	345
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii

UNCONDITIONAL

1 THE GALA

“Here I am again playing dress-up for you tonight, Arabella,” I exclaimed to my best friend who is finishing up her make-up in the bathroom. I examine myself in the floor-length mirror astonished by the energy my friend has put into tonight’s preparation.

Arabella and her family host an annual charity gala for children who suffer from leukemia after her little brother died of the same disease ten years ago. Her parents always insist we attend the gala each year. Even though I have protested in the past, I have chosen to show support for my friend although she knows how much I despise mingling with high society. Most are pretentious philanthropist who are too eager to shell out money for their latest projects. Those projects seem to focus on underprivileged groups for the perfect photo opportunity. She attends a lot of these events throughout the year, since her parents are the pillar of our community and may possibly own half the town. But for sixteen years Arabella has been by my side, through all my craziness, so each year I concluded that I can sacrifice one evening of posturing for my best friend.

Arabella has me decorated in an emerald green, floor-length chiffon gown with hand-stitched Australian crystal strapless bodice. The dress clings perfectly snug

UNCONDITIONAL

over my silhouette and flows fearlessly loose just below the apex of my thigh, exposing a long slit revealing my thigh and legs as I walk. She has managed to straighten my ferocious charcoal curls, which are now pulled back with jeweled hair combs on each side, creating a sleek look casting its length down my back. My exposed caramel complexion is shimmering with gold sparkles from my favorite boutique lotion. I'm wearing her tear-drop diamond earrings, and no other accessories except my favorite gold open-toe bejeweled d'Orsay Manolo Blahnik shoes. I turn to admire myself, and I must admit I clean up pretty good.

“Ciara, you are and have always been my beautiful caramel complexion Barbie doll, and I'm proud I've known you these sixteen years,” Arabella exclaims.

“Well, I love you too, my beautiful white chocolate chip.” I compliment jokingly as our nicknames for each other seem juvenile compared to tonight's seriousness.

Arabella emerges from the bathroom in a beautiful cobalt blue floor-length gown, more conservative than mine, that she insisted on purchasing at her favorite boutique shop two weeks ago. Her soft golden blonde mane, flat ironed and pulled tight in a high ponytail. Her beautiful blue eyes, brighter and more lucid than normal are accentuated with mascara and smoky eye shadow. I prefer the minimalist look, mascara and shimmering nude lip gloss. Make-up has always been my nemesis even though Arabella insists on teaching me the skill of contouring my make-up. I prefer simplicity, and she understands, so I am happy she did not protest much tonight. She realizes that I'm wearing a gown that exposes more of my body to the world than I ever have in my life, so she leaves me in peace. After sixteen years of friendship, we both have learned to compromise when it's important.

We hug, embracing each other as we always do, posing in front of the mirror to get a good look at ourselves.

UNCONDITIONAL

Since freshman year of college, Arabella and I have been living together with our other roommate Alexi who is returning tomorrow from her parents to celebrate my twenty-first birthday. Each year, to celebrate our birthdays, we drive down Pacific Coast Highway; stopping along the different beaches for nude swimming. It was Alexi's idea four years ago. She convinced me that I needed to emerge from my cocoon and open myself up to the world. My protest of her idea only resulted in me caving into her ridiculousness, and so we stripped naked and dove into the California coast. And that has remained our tradition ever since.

Even with my compliance, she still believes that I am too uptight. It has been our constant disagreement for the past four years, but I love her and know she means well. Alexi and Arabella have completely different personalities; they both have qualities I admire. Arabella is bold, confident, supportive, protective, and loyal and sees the good in people, whereas Alexi is free-spirited, charismatic, flirty, unpredictable, yet fun. They both have qualities I secretly wish I possess.

"Ciara, sweetie the car is here," Arabella announces, grabbing our shawls and purses, and ushering us out the door. Her parents insisted on arranging a chauffeur since alcoholic beverages flow loosely during these events, which help numb the monotony of the night. Her parents have always been supportive of their daughter. They lavish her with an expensive lifestyle, freedom and unconditional love. They have always embraced me into their home, even as a child when Arabella brought me to their home on the very first day of first grade.

I remember her pulling my hand eagerly through their heavy, Spanish, handcrafted front doors, ushering me across their stark marble floors into their oversized family room announcing to both of her parents that she was adopting a Black Barbie. Her mother, Anabel, quietly reprimanded her daughter, insisting that people were not toys, and that others' racial identities should be respected with the utmost sensitivity and empathy. The gentleness of her mother's reprimand spoke

UNCONDITIONAL

volumes to me. Arabella, being the gentle soul that she was, would apologetically invite me to her bedroom to play dress up. And since then, we have been tied at the hip.

“Ciara, are you okay? I lost you there for a moment, didn’t I?” Arabella asks.

“Yes, I’m fine. I was just thinking about the first day we met,” I reply. We laugh quietly at the exact memory of when our friendship was solidified.

“Ciara honey, I know things are always difficult for you around your birthday, but tonight I want you to let go of all your worries and have fun. Do something spontaneous and relax.” Arabella pleads. I lean embracing my friend, acknowledging her sentiments.

“I promise I will, only because you asked me,” I speak reassuringly but more so because she will protest until I give in.

We pull up at the Santa Barbara Country Club in front of the red carpet. Paparazzi surround the area with heavy cameras trying to capture a glimpse of any potential celebrities that have been invited to tonight’s gala. Arabella and I slide out of the limousine, and the photographer’s cameras flutter simultaneously in our direction. We pull our heads down, gliding effortlessly across the red carpet to the entrance, where we hand the attendant our invitation. Arabella’s parents, Theodore and Anabel Lexington stand side by side, with picturesque smiles graciously welcoming their guests.

“Arabella, sweetie, you look lovely,” Mrs. Lexington states, welcoming her daughter and I.

“Thank you, mom, dad; you both look stunning.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Lexington, thank you for inviting me again,” I add as her dad and mother alternately welcome me with a warm embrace.

“Of course, my dear and as always, you are absolutely radiant.” Mrs. Lexington compliments.

UNCONDITIONAL

“Thank you.”

“Ciara, please save this old man a dance tonight,” Mr. Lexington requests, gleefully.

“I sure will.”

“Hey dad, what about my dance?” Arabella teasingly asks her father.

“Of course, my love.”

Mrs. Lexington encourages us into the ballroom to allow the procession line to continue with ease. “You two enjoy yourselves. We will meet you at our table.”

Arabella and I lock ourselves arm in arm as we maneuver our way to our table through the already crowded ballroom. The room is extravagant, with gold and crystal lighting fixtures, iridescently lit. The large round tables dressed in white linen and chivari gold chairs surround the bank of the dance floor.

The elaborate floral arrangements of peonies, hydrangeas, orchids, and magnolias in various orange, white, lime, and green arrangements are positioned in different heights and sizes in the center of each table highlighting the delicate formal plate settings. An enormous stage decorated with the same flowers and colors heads the center of the event, awaiting celebrities, guest speakers, musical performers and the Master of Ceremony, Mr. Theodore Lexington. We arrive at our table where the Mayor and his wife, the president of the Leukemia society and her husband are already situated.

“Mayor Goodwill, Mrs. Goodwill, this is my best friend, Ciara Perkins.”

Arabella introduces and then repeats the same introduction to the president of the Leukemia Society and her husband.

“Nice to meet you,” I nod.

“Ciara, are you a business major like Arabella?” Asks the Mayor’s wife, as we sit. Her name already eluded me that quickly. Typical of me, not to remember peoples’ names. I usually prefer my normal exercise of repeating the name three

UNCONDITIONAL

times immediately after introductions as a trick to remember, but I feel oddly uncomfortable and embarrassed doing that tonight. And besides, *I should know the names of our Mayor and his wife, shouldn't I?* I ask myself quietly, trying to remember what the Mayor's wife just asked.

"No, Ciara is a Psychology major," Arabella answers for me instinctively as she always does whenever she realizes my nervousness. She leans towards me and nudges me with a smile, as her way to reassure me.

"I've always enjoyed studying the minds of people rather than their checkbooks," I reply rudely, but trying to recover from my awkwardness. The table bursts into laughter, which eases my nervousness and I begin to relax. After a few moments of light conversation, Arabella and I excuse ourselves to the bar.

"Thank God you are here Ara. I don't know how you do this," I comment as we walk towards the large bar area.

"Girl, you come with me every year. I am surprised you're not used to this by now."

"I guess I prefer being in a social environment where our dinner doesn't cost one thousand dollars per plate and I'm not dressed in a gown that's cutting off my circulation," I state playfully.

"You'll loosen up once you start drinking. Besides, have you noticed that hot piece of eye candy checking you out?" Arabella states matter of fact as she points in the direction of the young man, who is walking towards us at that very moment.

"Oh my goodness, he's walking over here!" I exclaimed nervously.

"Talk to him. You promised to be spontaneous tonight and remember not to give him your usual brush off attitude."

I grab her arm to pull her close to me but she quickly walks away and heads to the bar, leaving me uncomfortably annoyed.

UNCONDITIONAL

“Out of all the women here tonight, you, by far are the most exquisite.” The six feet tall stranger embodying the idealism of a Dolce and Gabbana model exclaims. He extends his hand for me to welcome his introduction. “I’m Sebastian Philips.” He states with such charismatic arrogance as if no woman can resist his overly crafted charm. I roll my eyes at his brazen attempt of seduction.

“I’m pretty sure you’ve exhausted that line with every woman here tonight. Am I the last woman to hear your obviously over-used pick-up line?” I retort audaciously, although not impervious to his undeniably good looks. His warm caramel complexion, glowing flawlessly under his perfectly tailored tuxedo, concealing what I imagine is an extremely healthy chiseled body. Every other aspect of him is even more immaculate. From his iridescent green eyes, almost the same color as my gown and his impeccably trimmed facial hair, outlining his strong, masculine jawline.

“Actually, no,” He begins to say, but I bark back to what I was sure was another attempt to charm me.

“Perhaps you thought your pick-up line would work on me?” I interrupted.

“What I was going to say was, you were the only woman here tonight that really lives up to their natural beauty,” He expresses with some sincerity. The softness of his voice and his genuineness catches me off guard and I begin feeling a little guilty of my rudeness. I am flattered by his honesty. I smile conceding, and I extend my hand finally to accept his introduction.

“Ciara Perkins,” I introduce. He takes my hand and brings my palm to his lips and softly lays a kiss.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ciara Perkins.”

Arabella returns with two glasses of champagne and hands one to me. Sebastian is still holding my hand, unwilling to release it. And so I withdraw my palm slowly from his and accept the champagne from her. I immediately take a long sip,

UNCONDITIONAL

allowing the cool bubbles to glide down my throat, in hopes it will cool me off and ease the tension and arousal from his kiss. Arabella stands politely looking at me to make sure I am okay. She waits for me to finish my champagne before I make a proper introduction of her to Sebastian.

Arabella understands the etiquette of friendship. She would never make a move on a guy that any of her friends likes or finds attractive. Even though most of the guys we meet always flock in her direction. She has perfect decorum in any situation and she carries herself well. I can't say the same for most of our friends, not even Alexi. It is one of the reasons why Arabella did not invite her to tonight's event. And I was relieved when her parents requested her presence this same weekend. Alexi was raised in the same affluent society as Arabella, but most of the time Alexi plays loosely with the rules and with the etiquette she was taught. Alexi by now, would have made a move on Sebastian and her and Arabella would have been arguing about her conduct. Tonight, I am grateful for Arabella being the perfect wing girl to her socially awkward best friend.

"Sebastian, this is my best friend Arabella Lexington. Arabella, this is Sebastian Philips." I introduce. Sebastian politely extends his hand to Arabella, which she graciously shakes. I stand in silence holding my breath, anticipating him to kiss her hand as well, but their handshake is cordial and friendly. He didn't molest her hand as he did mine a few moments earlier, a mistreatment I would gladly accept again.

"Lexington, as in the Lexington family who is hosting tonight's events?" Sebastian asks.

"Yes, the very same," Arabella replies.

"Well, I'm honored by your family's loyalty and dedication to such an amazing foundation." Sebastian remarks in admiration and refocuses his attention back to me. Arabella, observing the chemistry between us politely excuses herself.

UNCONDITIONAL

“I’ll allow the two of you to get better acquainted while I go speak to my parents,” She comments and embraces me then whispering an audacious comment in my ear as we both laugh amusingly. “Sebastian, it was nice meeting you.” “Same here.”

“Ciara, enjoy and I’ll see you at our table for dinner... or maybe not?” Arabella teasingly comments, winking towards me and graciously departs.

“Would you like to dance, Ciara Perkins?” Sebastian asks extending his arm, extinguishing any thought of my rejecting his proposal. He collects my empty champagne glass handing it to the maître d’. I accept his offer and he escort us to the dance floor.

A few couples have already occupied themselves, waltzing across the hall and Sebastian extends his right arm as I lay my hand on his. He then places his left arm around my waist, drawing me closer to him, locking us into our embrace as he glides us effortlessly across the dance floor. Our eyes lock in admiration of our fluidity and the eloquent rhythm of our movements. The whole room is quiet, as all eyes fall upon us. Others inspired by our gracefulness, join us on the dance floor and within minutes our waltz is interrupted by the limited space produced. Sebastian adjusts our stance and we continue naturally across the dance floor.

“You are absolutely breathtaking,” Sebastian compliments. I bow my head slightly, blushing. We are swirling through the dance floor and Sebastian places his hand on my chin, tilting my face towards his.

“No need to be embarrassed. You’re gorgeous,” He reassures softly. I nervously look into his eyes for the first time since we began dancing feeling under-deserving of his compliment.

“You’re very forward,” I state.

“I like reminding gorgeous woman how beautiful they are. Is that wrong?”

“Yes, if you think I’m gullible enough to fall for it.”

UNCONDITIONAL

“So, what works for you, Ciara Perkins?”

I smile nervously. “Realness,” I confess flippantly.

“You’d rather have a man that doesn’t compliment you?”

“I don’t understand why men can’t be decent without ulterior motives.” I exclaim.

“All men have their reasons. Most of the time, it’s for one reason,” He retorts.

“And you? What are your motives?” I ask curiously as we continue to dance gracefully across the dance floor. He never once takes his gaze from mine. My heart beats faster with each glare.

Suddenly, he stops then gently dropping my hands interlocking our fingers and then stepping towards me, even closer than our stance permits. Our breathing is in sync from the dancing, or maybe from this sudden rush of adrenaline flowing through our bodies. I instinctively step towards him, my breathing intensifying even more as Sebastian leans towards me as if to kiss me, but then whispers softly in my ear.

“To know your truth.”

Then, suddenly the Master of Ceremony, Mr. Lexington, announces, “Welcome ladies and gentlemen, to the tenth annual fundraising gala for The Leukemia Society of Santa Barbara.”

Sebastian and I are still staring intently at each other longer than expected while everyone pauses their movements on the dance floor, turning to face the center stage applauding to open the evening rituals. I replay Sebastian’s words in my head, “*To know your truth,*” and I inhale deeply curious to discover the intent behind his words and to know more about Sebastian Philips. The continued applause jolts us back to reality and Sebastian leads us off the dance floor through the crowd. He delivers me directly to my table where Arabella is situated. He acknowledges the

UNCONDITIONAL

Mayor and his wife by name, as well as the President of the Leukemia Society. I'm somewhat ignited by his formality and the presence he commands.

"Sebastian it is good to see you. We weren't sure if you were able to make it tonight, but your parents reassured us that you would." The Mayor expresses.

"Well, my parents are proud to be a part of tonight's event. I wouldn't miss it," Sebastian replies. Sebastian's attention then focuses on Mrs. Lexington.

"It's always good to be graced by your elegance, Anabel." Sebastian states as he embraces her. He then nods in Arabella's direction acknowledging her again.

"Arabella, we meet again." She smiles back before glancing towards me, possibly wondering if this man is for real. I acknowledge her glare and we nod slightly knowing we are thinking the same thing.

Sebastian then whispers gently into my ear while discreetly caressing my back, arousing every part of my body.

"Ciara, thank you for the dance and I hope to have your dance card to myself tonight." I nod, acknowledging his proposal as he makes his way to his table. I sit down beside Arabella, resolved and composed, yet my gaze follows in his direction curiously where he is greeted at the table next to us. He sits down confidently smiling at me with mysterious buoyancy.

"Ciara, you are on cloud nine," Arabella teases and we both turn our heads towards Sebastian laughing like little school girls.

"He is way too egotistical for me, but oh God is he sexy," I confess energetically.

"Enjoy the moment girlfriend, because he is a ride that I wouldn't want to get off."

"There is just something about him that makes me want to ignore the huge stop sign, gawking 'proceed with caution!'"

UNCONDITIONAL

“First of all, it’s called lust that you’re feeling. Second, it’s not like you’re going to marry him. Just enjoy his attention, that’s all.” Arabella encourages.

“I know, but it’s his attention that worries me. It’s seductive.”

“Ciara, girl, no one is asking you to lose your virginity to this man.” Arabella responds, reprimanding.

I know she’s right. For the last twenty-one years, I have remained adamant about maintaining my virginity. Although it really hasn’t been difficult, because I bury myself in my studies and rarely date. One of the things Arabella admires about me. One thing she wishes she had done after losing her virginity to her high school boyfriend Gregory, the night of our graduation. We both had made a virginity pact to wait until we were madly in love, or married. I think Arabella truly believed she was in love. She and Gregory had been dating since sophomore year. They spoke constantly about their future together and about marriage. When she decided that Gregory was the one, it was not a decision she came to lightly. It required tens of hours of us discussing the pros and cons, her feelings, the possibility of accidental pregnancies, plans and other what ifs. She then discussed it with Gregory, who reassured her of his love for her. Arabella believed him and was certain they would live happily ever after. When she lost her virginity to him on graduation, I was happy for her.

Things were great between her and Gregory for about a week and then suddenly, Gregory broke up with her. He told her that she was too clingy and that he was not ready to settle down, especially since they had college to look forward. Arabella and I spent weeks after her break up in bed, crying and mourning her lost virginity. Since then, Arabella has guarded her sexuality and recommitted herself to abstinence until she is married. I was glad to join the recommitment of my friend, which alleviated any pressure for me to be sexually active.

UNCONDITIONAL

“I know. I’m just nervous because this is the first time where I’m worried that I may want to have sex.” I admitted shyly to my friend, who suddenly removes her champagne glass from her lips.

“What?” She yells abruptly, louder than she intended. She graciously apologizes to the table and her mother with perfect grace. She leans towards me, asking me to accompany her to the ladies’ room. We stand up cordially, asking the table to excuse us. I glance towards Sebastian, who is looking at me with concern. I smile to reassure him everything is fine. He nods as we make our way out of the ballroom.

“Ciara, are you drunk?” Arabella snaps abruptly. She stops suddenly realizing her tone was quite judgmental and she quickly apologizes. We resume our walk quietly towards the ladies’ room.

“No, I’m not drunk,” I acknowledge finally. “Aren’t you the one who told me to have fun and be spontaneous?”

“Yes, but I didn’t mean for you to lose your mind completely,” She responds cautiously.

“None of my usual red flags have gone up and it’s not like he’s a complete stranger.” I stammer out. Then quickly realizing that I might be a little drunk as I process what I have just considered doing.

“I am happy that you want to let go and I want you to have fun, but this is a big deal, Ciara.”

“I know it is. I’m not saying I want to have sex with him tonight.” I lied

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t know. I know it’s way too soon, but there is just something about him that’s causing me to reconsider my position.”

UNCONDITIONAL

“And you realize this after one dance?”

“Yes... No... I don’t know. I just know that he’s hot and he’s interested in me,” I confess, still bewildered by what I’ve just considered doing.

“Yes, that he is.” She laughs in agreement. Our amusement burst through the silence of the ladies’ room and the few ladies in our presence gawk at our childish conduct. Arabella and I look at each other and erupt louder in laughter. We collapse on the couch situated in the foyer entrance forcing the ladies who were occupying it to leave.

“Okay, let’s think about this,” Arabella starts. “He is absolutely gorgeous, right?” She continues and I agree merrily. “He’s charismatic, a great dancer and obviously well connected,” She mentions.

“Which screams, ‘Stop! Don’t go any further, Ciara!’” I interrupt, confessing a potential red flag.

“Stop it. But I’m guessing his family is the Philips my parents have been discussing.”

“Your family knows him?”

“Yes, but indirectly. I rarely pay attention to all the society functions my mother is involved with. She had mentioned them receiving the humanitarian award for their financial support and his father’s contribution towards Leukemia research.” Arabella recalls.

“Oh great,” I state sarcastically. But inwardly anxious that I’ve opened the door to what could be a potentially disastrous situation. His family is the most pretentious of them all, regardless of their contribution towards an important research. I should have known by the way he carried himself with such arrogance.

“Ciara, don’t start overthinking the situation. You can’t fault him for his parents’ situation and he certainly hasn’t warranted your judgment.”

UNCONDITIONAL

I roll my eyes, annoyed that she's right. Yet my insecurities of how I will fit into his world scream "*Proceed with caution.*"

"I wouldn't worry about it. You come from a great family and any man who doesn't see how great you are can meet my right hook." She declares.

She then leans in and hugs me, trying to reassure me that things will be alright.

"And besides, I think he really likes you and that's all that matters." She states matter of fact.

"That's what worries me, because I think so too."

"You both certainly made a statement on the dance floor though. I think everyone was aroused by the both of you."

I smirk, thinking about our waltz.

"The adrenaline that surged through my body worries me. I have never felt like that before and I'm scared that I may just let him take my virginity right on that dance floor."

"Oh girl! What did this man do to my friend?"

"I don't know, but I want more of it." We burst into laughter.

"Let's just get through the night and simply enjoy the rest of the evening. You can think about the other stuff later." She instructs.

"I suppose I can do that."

"I think my buzz is wearing off. Let's get back before my parents worry."

We raise ourselves off the couch, check our make-up and head out of the ladies' room. We embrace each other arm in arm, laughing childishly as we saunter through the halls, making our way back to the grand ball room. Sebastian seems to have materialized in front of us as we idle carelessly. He is standing directly in front of us with his hands in his pocket, about ten feet from us smiling lasciviously. My

UNCONDITIONAL

breathing escalates rapidly and I nervously fidget with Arabella's arms. She turns me slightly, facing towards her, then looks into my eyes and instructs firmly.

"Calm down and don't overthink it."

I shut my eyes, absorbing my friend's words. She releases my arms and ushers me with a small push in Sebastian's direction. Arabella walks swiftly ahead of me towards the ballroom.

"Have fun you two!" She exclaims as she saunters past him.

He nods acknowledging my friend, but never veering his eyes from mine. He walks towards me boyishly wrapping his arm around my waist, pulling me towards his body. I quiver at his touch, breathing deeply, surrendering myself to him.

"I was worried about you," He expresses.

"No need," I reply, shyly.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, we just needed some air. I think we had too much champagne." I manage to explain nervously, his arms still wrapped around my waist.

"Are you ready for another dance?"

"In a minute. I'm trying to catch my breath," I express as I try to ease slowly from his arms. He releases me slightly and I exhale. I take a small step backwards feeling freer and more relaxed.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asks questioning my disposition.

"Yes, I'm a little nervous, that's all." As soon as the words release from my mouth, I quickly regret admitting to him that he's affected me in anyway.

"Nervous? Why?" He asks surprised by my confession.

"Why do you think?"

Sebastian steps closer closing the gap that remains between us.

"I think you underestimate how intimidating you are Ciara, and how completely enamored I am of you."

UNCONDITIONAL

He brushes my face softly with his hand and draws me into his arms. Then gently, he presses his lips against mine and my mouth welcome his soft seduction. He pulls me closer as our mouths part, welcoming the warmth of each other's tongues. My body responds willingly arousing a deeper longing. In that moment, my lips betray any steady composure of modesty and latent virtue. I realize the intensity of my body and I pull away suddenly.

“What’s wrong?”

I step back regaining my composure. Then I shake my head in response, unable to utter my reassurance that I’m okay. Sebastian takes a step towards me and I pull back slightly away from him. My reality slapping me in a wave of realization, that if I continue engaging with this man, my virtue will be lost forever.

“I’m okay. I may be in way over my head.”

“You’re not the only one,” Sebastian confesses. I stare at him, uncertain of his sincerity.

“You think you understand my dilemma?” I ask reluctantly. He looks offended by my insinuation and steps back, begrudged.

“You’re questioning my motives?” He asks, offended by my question.

“Yes... I don’t know. I barely know you.” I admit.

“Why do you find it so difficult to believe that someone would show interest in you?”

“Because, like you said, all men have ulterior motives and I don’t know what you want from me?” I confess in frustration more at myself for how out of control he makes me feel. He steps back again slightly in disappointment of my response. He then slides his hands through his perfectly charcoal, curly, well-maintained hair and then steps towards me, grabbing my hands. He hesitates briefly.

“Ciara,” He starts, then pauses nervously fidgeting with my hands, circling my palm with his thumbs. My breathing escalates waiting for him to continue.

UNCONDITIONAL

“My only motive is to get to know you. If that seems like I want something from you, it’s only because there is something about you that has me completely unhinged and it’s welcoming.” He admits willingly. I linger in silence, trying to process his confession. My breathing steadies and I find solace in his honesty. I step towards him surprisingly kissing him gently on the lips before making my own confession.

“I feel the same way.”

Our honesty leaves us vulnerable and we welcome our insecurities.

“Let’s go, I want to introduce you to some people.” He announces excitedly as he takes my hand and leads us towards the ballroom.

“What people?” I ask a little hesitant of who he is eager for me to meet.

“My mother.”

I stop abruptly feeling overwhelmed that things are progressing too quickly. He reassures me of his sincerity and I realize there is no changing his mind. He is serious and just as nervous to introduce me to his parents. A gesture I believe he has rarely extended to just anyone. And so, with trepidation and renewed confidence I willingly oblige.