

Arielle

Immortal Quickening
The Immortal Rapture Series

LILIAN
ROBERTS

Arielle Immortal Quickening

*The Immortal
Rapture Series*

Lilian Roberts



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For my daughter

*I love you with every fiber of my being. The love I have for you is as close to heaven
as I can invoke.*



Chapter 1

ARIELLE STOOD FROZEN. The hotel room lost its brightness, and the air thickened. When she tried to inhale, her lungs refused to expand. Her heartbeat pounded painfully in her chest, leaving her faint. The fear was so deeply rooted it held her like a vise. With her eyes squeezed tightly shut and her lips pressed together, she listened to the stony silence that had fallen as Sebastian gave her time to gather her thoughts. The feelings of helplessness and loss draped over her like a heavy curtain which she tried to absorb his last words...

His soft voice had been composed, tainted with a hint of wretchedness. She wasn't ready to accept bad news about any person she loved. Her head throbbed, her self-awareness was in full alert, and she literally felt sick from fear and uneasiness. Her knees buckled underneath her, and she practically collapsed on the floor, drowning in a huge range of intensity and emotional instability. Falling back on the bed, she rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. This wasn't going to be good. Sebastian's expression spoke volumes.

He sat beside her on the bed and ran his hand up and down her back with tenderness and understanding. He was quiet, waiting for her to say something.

She remained unmoved, wordless, her mind wandering aimlessly. *Is the bad news about someone I love?* she wondered anxiously. Finally she pulled herself up and sat on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest as her thoughts turned dark. She took a shuddering breath and gazed into Sebastian's eyes. An unsettled glimmer spread across his eyes, and he pinched the tip of his nose.

Arielle's mouth went dry, and her chest rose and fell anxiously as she stifled a gulp. Unless her mind was deceiving her, Sebastian only pinched the tip of his nose when he was extremely uncomfortable or worried about something or someone. She noticed a flash of anguish crossing his eyes. She was afraid to hear what he was about to tell her; she was sure that her facial expression read with dread and despair. She was trembling. Her misery didn't escape Sebastian.

He reached for her and gathered her to him as close as possible. She laid her head on his chest, looking for reassurance. His voice was soft, but she could hear a hint of distress.

"Arielle, did you hear me, baby?" he asked. She looked up to meet his gaze, unable to speak. She was afraid to ask any questions, knowing any negative information would be painful.

"Arielle, please, I don't like to see you this way. You need to hear what I have to say," Sebastian's voice was velvety soft.

She tried to analyze each and every word in his sentence but was unable to accept the thought that invaded her head. The news could not be about her parents, because she had just finished talking to her mum on the phone. *Mother said everything at home was fine.* It wasn't about their friends, either, because her mother would have phoned her. Who was all this about? Could it be one of the immortal friends? She knew that eight of their friends had been hunting down Annabel ever since they'd tried to kill her and Eva at St. Jean de Luz. But if this were about their immortal friends, why would Sebastian be so reluctant to discuss it openly with her? Nothing really made sense. Why was Sebastian so upset? Sucking in a deep breath she went for it.

"Who was involved in the accident?" she asked in a hollow whisper.

“Our best friends,” he replied in a guarded tone.

~~Her shock was evident as fright took her over and weighed down every one of her limbs. She~~ realized that the worst feelings that had invaded her mind earlier were right now becoming a reality. Her first thought was denial, but she had to push that into the back of her mind, because she needed to find out the details. Suddenly she was conscious of the tears streaming down her face and her uncontrolled trembling.

“What happened?” she murmured, keeping a blank face as she felt a lump climbing and closing her throat.

For a moment, he didn't reply, and she looked up into his eyes. His face was pale, and his expression strained. “It's Gabrielle,” he muttered. Her eyes went wide with horror, and she felt the muscles of her chest tighten. She didn't really seem to hear his answer. She thought her mind was tripping into a state of shock as bad feelings were now settling inside her very core, taking complete control over her senses. She felt his arms pulling her even closer, his fingers lifting her face up, and her eyes piercing hers. She tried to decipher his look, but she found herself unable to do that. Sebastian remained silent, as she looked on bewildered, her face soaked with tears, and her heartbeat hammering her chest uncontrollably. She shook her head in denial and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. She pressed her lips together harder. He took her hands and placed them flat on his chest and covered them with his.

“Please, Arielle, say something,” he pressed on in a soft voice.

Silence stretched and suddenly she looked up at him with horror in her eyes.

“How bloody bad was it? You are freaking me out!” Her voice was louder than she expected, but the desperation held her in a tight grip.

Sebastian visibly started at the tone of her voice. After a brief hesitation, he reached toward her and took her face between his hands. “Gabrielle is in the worst condition. Troy says she's in intensive care, and they don't know if she'll make it. Right now, she is in a coma with a fractured skull, a broken leg, several broken ribs, and fifty stitches in her left thigh.”

Arielle tried desperately to swallow the lump wedged in her throat. “Oh, My God... Oh. My God!” she whispered, slumping down onto the bed. Distantly, she felt Sebastian pull her up into his arms, holding her tightly against him. Without thought, she buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed.

He didn't interrupt, allowing her time to grasp the truth. However, her need to know more about the accident finally broke through and calmed her. Worse, a niggling feeling told her that she didn't know all of it yet. “Did Troy tell you what happened? What did the doctors say?” she asked into his shirt, desperate to hear that Gabby would be all right.

“No one knows yet, but they are hoping that she'll pull through. The surgeon told her parents that the next few days would be critical. Hopefully, she will regain consciousness without any long-term damage. He assured them that she was healthy and strong before the accident and that her body is still fighting to heal.” He hugged her tighter. “Everyone except Ian and Eva are by her side.”

Arielle curled her fingers into the fabric beneath her palms, frantically trying to calm the quick inhalations and exhalations that left black spots and the words “dead dead dead” before her eyes. “What happened to them, Sebastian? Tell me.”

“Both of them escaped with bruises, cuts, and a couple broken limbs. Overall, they are extremely lucky. Troy says they'll be released sometime tomorrow.”

“Thank God,” she praised. For a moment, she closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. Once the spots disappeared, she kissed Sebastian's cheek and continued. “How did it happen?”

Sebastian half-smiled down at her, the strain of everything weighing heavily in his expression.

“The vehicle overturned on their way back home from a dinner party at the Polo Club.” Arielle waited for him to continue. “Troy and I purchased six tickets to a fundraiser there before you and I decided to take this trip. Originally, it would have been us, Troy and Gabrielle, and Ian and Eva. Since Ita seemed more important, I suggested Troy invite Paul and Loren to use the tickets.”

“What happened to Paul and Lauren?” The panic pushed at her.

“They are fine. They went to the function in their own car, so they left separately,” he assured her.

“Good,” she murmured. “God, what happened?”

“The four of them left the dance quite late with Gabrielle driving and Troy in the passenger seat. The roads were wet from some light showers and slick. Gabrielle insisted on driving, and, as you know, Troy is happy to let her do whatever makes her happy. Gabrielle swerved to avoid hitting something in the middle of the road, and the car flipped several times before smashing against a concrete wall that stretched along the road. They didn’t have seatbelts on. Troy saw everyone being ejected out of the car.” Sebastian’s voice was despondent.

Immediately, Arielle knew that they had to get back to Brighton. Gabby and Eva were her friends, her sisters, her family! Words failed her as her mind raced. Decision made, she exhaled.

“Arielle, what’s going on in there?” Sebastian pointed at her head.

“I want to go home,” she whispered, anxiously.

“I knew you would. I’ll make the arrangements, and we’ll be on the first flight out.” She held on to Sebastian, refusing to let go as she cried silently and prayed for her friends. He took her face in his hands again and kissed her softly.

“Don’t worry, Arielle; I’m right here. Remember that I love your friends very much. They are a part of my life now, and they’ll always be,” Sebastian’s voice was comforting. He was watching her carefully, making sure that she was okay. He smiled softly. “We have to let others go through their own journey while we stay on ours. We can love them; we can be there for them, but don’t forget that we have to be here for *us*, too. You have to accept this accident and let the wallop subside in order to be strong for our friends and give them the support they will need from us.”

He gave her a pointed look, pushing her gently away and meeting her eyes. “What are you thinking?”

“I feel so shattered, and you’re so strong, so incredibly amazing. I’m thankful I have you.” Without hesitation, she pulled him close again and wrapped her arms around his neck.

His lips caressed her ear. “There is one lesson that I’ve learned while walking the long, miserable, immortal road for over five centuries. If we live our lives at its fullest, then we can’t stop the bad--good--experiences from happening.” The bitter smile he gave her didn’t fit with his beautiful profile.

And knowing that he was right didn’t disperse the hurt she felt at being so far away from the people she loved while they needed her. “I feel so helpless,” she added in a muffled voice. “I want to do something, but I am unsure what that might be.”

“All we can do is go back home and be with them. We are going to do that as soon as possible,” he reassured her, trying to calm her. “I’m here, Arielle. Please don’t wallow in the negative; you can help them if you make yourself ill.” *If I can just help her process what I’ve already told her, she’ll be able to handle the rest of the news soon.* The hurt in her eyes was tearing him apart, but nothing he could do would make her pain go away.

“Arielle, call your mother while I make the flight arrangements; she might have some more details.” He pressed his lips to her forehead and walked out of the room.

She picked up her phone, and her mum answered on the first ring.

“Mum, did you hear about Gabby and Eva? They were involved in a car accident last night.” She

desperately needed to hear something comforting.

~~“Yes, dear, I just found out a few minutes ago. Gabby’s mother called me a couple minutes ago, she and John are devastated. They spent the night in the ICU waiting room, because the doctor told them that Gabby’s condition is extremely critical. I called Eva’s mom once I hung up. Madeline said she stayed beside Eva’s bedside the whole night. Apparently, Eva and Ian were pretty lucky.”~~ Arielle heard shuffling in the background.

“Your dad and I are getting ready to go to the hospital to be with them for a bit. Unfortunately, there isn’t anything else we can do right now.”

“Was it in the news there?” she questioned, hoping more details had been released. *Like what caused Gabby to swerve.*

“Katherine told me that they splattered it all over the front page in the morning paper, and we just got through reading the details. Good Lord! Arielle, if you saw the picture of the car, you wouldn’t be able to comprehend how anyone came out of it alive!

“The accident investigators and the police officers on the scene were stunned. They couldn’t explain how Eva and Ian could escape with minor injuries. The back of the car was completely destroyed. The amazing part is that Troy was unscathed. The paper called it a miracle. If those kids didn’t have guardian angels, they’d be dead!”

“I’m glad it turned out the way it did, Mum,” Arielle said softly. “Sebastian and I are praying for Gabby. We’re coming home with the first flight out, and we should be there soon. I love you, Mum. My heart is breaking over this accident.” Thinking about it brought tears back to her eyes.

“Arielle,” she heard her mum’s voice, strong and reassuring. “I’m sure it’ll all work out. She’s under God’s care now, and I know she’ll come out of this soon. I love you, dearest, be careful!”

“I love you, too, Mum.”

Setting the phone back on the receiver, she wished she could take away the agony her friends and family were feeling. She lay across the bed, waiting for Sebastian to return.



Chapter 2

ARIELLE CLOSED HER EYES, and her mind drifted to Brighton. Mentally shaking aside the accident and the bad thoughts whirling in her head, she tried to recall happier times and better days that warmed her heart. Most of those dreams were shared with the two women who were lying in the hospital.

She accepted the thought that something good would come out of this whole thing. Inwardly, she scowled. She had a strong feeling that something had changed, but she wasn't sure yet. Pondering the possibilities, she dozed off until she heard someone enter the room.

"What did your mum say, baby?" Sebastian asked as he entered the room with a soft smile on his face.

Arielle raised her head and drew herself up onto her elbows. "She said the investigators were fascinated with the outcome of one of the worst accidents in Brighton history. They are sure something extraordinary took place last night. All of our friends should have died. At least, everyone except Troy, who can't die. The car was completely destroyed."

"I'm glad about the outcome," he contradicted, and she could sense something unusual in his behavior, but she couldn't quite grasp it. "I made the flight arrangements, and we're leaving in the morning. That is the first flight out," Sebastian said, as he pulled her in his arms and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"I love you, Arielle," he murmured. "Everything will be all right. We'll all be together shortly. Gabrielle will be fine, and we'll pick up where we left things before the accident. Please trust in me. He sounded so sure and confident that she felt more at ease, especially when he suggested that they cancel their afternoon outing and spend the time together without distractions instead.

Curled up with him on the bed, Arielle grinned as she remembered a plan that she made with her friends. "Eva, Gabby, and I had a wild idea."

"What about?" he asked.

"We want to get married on the same day. We thought that would make our wedding day a magnificent event. Don't you think it would?" She chuckled softly as tears welled up again. She gazed at his face with a bitter smile, and she noticed a brief shadow crossing his beautiful emerald eyes. "A wedding for three couples," she mumbled again, as she detected a half smile teasing the corner of his mouth.

"I'll be happy to be your husband, any day, any time, any way you choose," he said and laughed softly. He gazed deep into her eyes, and she felt as if she was sinking in the passion of his soul. Just as he set, he stated. "If I had my choice, we would be married by now."

Arielle blinked, surprised. "Oh, why?"

"Why?" Sebastian couldn't believe she was asking him that question. He seemed shocked. "Arielle, I love you," he stated. "I feel like I've known you all my life." His voice was filled with emotion.

"Sebastian, please! You have been on this earth for over five centuries, and you have known me for a little over a year," she snorted, pinning him with her gaze.

He closed his eyes, and his jaw muscles shifted. A feeling of tenderness washed over him. "My life began when I met you," he said quietly. The look he gave her was full of promise and pleasure. "I want to be your lover and your best friend for eternity." His voice was mesmerizing, soothing every part of her body and soul.

God... she thought to herself, how can he be so perfectly faultless? She heard his quiet laughter and flinched. Certain she'd thought aloud again, she glanced at him and saw his eyes filled with amusement. Suddenly bashful, she bit her bottom lip and stared down at her hands with a small smile.

"You are my lover; you're my private dream," she said sincerely. "I want to marry you, but I also want to be out of school before we get married. I thought you were okay with that," she said, gazing into his beautiful eyes.

"Yes, I know, baby, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to marry you now. I want the world to know that you're mine."

"They do!" she said, utterly surprised. "Everyone in *my* world knows that we are engaged to be married, and I mean everyone!"

Sebastian sighed, nodding in agreement. He then reached for her, and she fell into his arms, letting relief lap about them. Their eyes locked, and his lips came down on hers in a warm and passionate kiss.

"I just want you to be my wife more than anything I have ever wanted in my life," he whispered. Arielle's heart swelled at the thought of this man being her husband; sharing her life, her heart, and her dreams. This man that she considered a mere dream not long ago, a desire that might never come true. She choked back tears and reached up to press her lips against his. Arielle basked in the strength of Sebastian's mind and body, and she let out a loud sigh. Sebastian nuzzled her hair and drew her tighter in his embrace.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his brows creasing.

Arielle chuckled. "Oh, my thoughts are mostly about you," she murmured, and Sebastian grinned.

"That's what I want to hear. I want to be the center of your universe, the only man in your life," he said, and his voice cracked.

She pulled back, and their gazes met and locked. Her lips curved teasingly.

"Am I the center of your universe?"

"I'm sure I have told you that before, but in case you didn't hear me or don't remember, you are that. And much more."

"How much more? How can there be more?"

"Arielle, you're the very core of my soul. Without you, there is no me." His voice was soft and sincere, his statement mind-blowing.

She drew a deep breath and sank deeper into his embrace. Putting a finger under her chin, he lifted her face as his lips came down on hers with passion that was set to explode into something beyond rational thought, beyond anything he could comprehend. The kiss fed the fire that already sweltered in his veins and increased the confusion that swept through his thoughts. *Why does my body respond to hers, like a thirsty man at the sight of water or a hungry man at the sight of food?* he wondered and shuddered. Sebastian was at a complete loss. The same question had recurred since he first laid eyes on Arielle. The feeling grew stronger with passing time until he couldn't breathe without her by his side. That was a truly startling revelation for someone like him, a strong, unbreakable, and resilient immortal.

Realization brought his equilibrium back under control. It would be unconscionable to act on his desires for her while she was in this state of mind. She ached for her friends, so he paused and

prevented his impulse from penetrating this part of his mind.

~~The thick sweet scent of freesia filled Sebastian's nostrils, and he inhaled deeply. He nuzzled Arielle's hair again and rejoiced at the fragrance that was as familiar to his senses by now as the very air he breathed.~~

Sebastian rested on the bed and put his arms around Arielle; he pulled her to his chest and sheltered her. They lay in a calm silence for a very long time, as deep emotions coursed through them. Sebastian smiled faintly and drew in a shaky breath. Despite the muddled thoughts about the situation, Sebastian gave the appearance of a man in complete control, a man who knew exactly how to handle each and every situation. But the truth was entirely different. Sebastian was nervous about what was to come when they finally went home. How was he going to divulge the truth to Arielle and when would be the right time to do that? He cursed inwardly in frustration.

Arielle was resting in the solace of his embrace with her eyes closed, and she seemed to be calm, but for a few dry sobs that shook her body lightly here and there.

The sun went down slowly, and the light in the room faded away, shading every piece of furniture. Arielle was asleep and Sebastian didn't want to move; he didn't want to wake her up. Suddenly, a sob shook Arielle's body, and she moaned lightly. Sebastian sucked in a huge breath and tightened his embrace. She was shivering, so he held her closer and rubbed his hand up and down her back, wanting to protect her from whatever haunted her sleep. His mouth set in a straight line and his chest muscles tightened, as joy surged through his body. She was his to have and protect, and he would give his life to do just that. He placed a soft kiss on her temple and placed his face in the crook of her neck.

Arielle opened her eyes slowly and blinked several times. The room was dark now, and she tried to bring the ghostly shadows in the room into focus.

"What time is it?" she whispered.

"I don't know, Baby, but it's getting late." He breathed the words and placed a tender kiss on her temple once again. She turned and pressed a warm kiss to his lips as she pulled away from his embrace and stretched, trying to gather her thoughts.

"How long have I been asleep?" she asked.

"Oh, it has been about a couple of hours. You were exhausted."

She eased off the bed and set her feet on the floor. She stretched and smiled down at Sebastian.

"I'll be right back," she said, walking into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. When she came out, Sebastian was still lying in bed, his hands behind his head while watching her carefully. Arielle's lips curved, and he smiled back. Turning she walked to the balcony doors and pulled them wide open. It was now twilight, and the air felt warm as a light breeze brushed across her face and made her shiver lightly. She stepped outside and took in a lungful of air. She could smell the ocean, and it made her smile, reminding her of Brighton and her two best friends.

The thought of Eva and Gabrielle made her frown, and tears welled up. Her eyes scanned her surroundings and her breath hitched when she saw the magnificent sliver of the moon peaking at the end of the horizon. She watched mesmerized as the moon started to climb slowly over the ocean and spread its silvery light across the dark waters. It looked like a huge pearl suspended from the dark, unending surface of the sky.

Tuscany's beauty was mesmerizing. Several boats with their shimmering lights were moving slowly, casting streaks of bright illumination across the waves. She wrapped her arms around her body and stood utterly unmoved. She felt his warmth radiating toward her just before his arms snaked

around her waist and pulled her possessively flush against his body. He nuzzled her hair and pressed a soft kiss on her shoulder.

“What are you thinking, my love?”

Arielle bit down on her lower lip and placed her hands over his. There were so many questions and so many emotions that were whirling in her head; she couldn't differentiate which ones were more important than the other. Turning around without leaving his embrace, she looked up into his beautiful eyes. “I was thinking that school is starting in a couple of months,” she said and swallowed hard. “How is this going to work for Gabby?” A tone of despondency coded her voice. “Do you think that she will be able to come out of this well enough?”

Sebastian listened carefully, searching her eyes, but he remained silent.

“God, I love her so much, I can't imagine what she is going through,” she furthered, tears threatening to escape her eyes.

He didn't say anything again for a short period of time. Finally he pressed a soft kiss on her lips and whispered, “Everything will go back to normal before you know it.” His voice was so comforting.

There he goes again, Mr. Positive, my Darcy, and my life's miracle, she thought. She snuggled even closer to his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck, rising to her toes and pressing her lips with her tongue.

Sebastian moaned as her touch resonated through his bones. Pressing his hands to the small of her back, he pulled her even closer and their lips met. They stood there holding each other, lost in their thoughts.

Exhaustion weighed down every part of her body, and when they finally went to bed, she snuggled up to Sebastian in need of his warmth and comfort. Closing her eyes, she laid her hand flat on his chest, and he gathered her into his embrace. She took a deep breath and tried to sort through the worrisome emotions that were invading her head. Her body trembled, and Sebastian tightened his hold. “Go to sleep, baby. I'm right here,” he murmured.

Sebastian watched her uneasiness as she attempted to sleep. He pressed his lips to her cheek and pulled her even closer, as he knew she liked to sleep that way. Two hours passed before he finally felt her relaxing and drifting off to sleep. His mind was working double time as silence closed in around him. He mulled over all the details of the accident and his conversation with Troy. Troy had averted such devastation! But how were they to explain the truth to Ian and Eva? The situation would be both terrifying and difficult for them to understand.

The subject would have to be approached delicately, but that problem was for another day. More important was figuring out who the woman was that caused the accident by standing in the middle of the road. While on the phone with Troy, his mind had immediately gone to Annabel, but his friend reassured him that she looked exactly like a woman the group had encountered earlier the night of the accident at the club. She'd handled the seating arrangements.

Immortal vision was flawless. Despite the darkness and the rain, Troy had to be believed. The woman was not Annabel, as bizarre as it sounded. Of course, Annabel had always known Sebastian and Arielle's whereabouts, so why would she create this accident if Arielle hadn't been in the car?

Who was the stranger Troy had seen? What had motivated her to attempt to murder their friends? Neither he nor Troy had thought of a good reason, and rage surged through him as he gritted his teeth in frustration.

Arielle would have to be told about Ian and Eva soon. One of her many superb characteristics was

the ability to alleviate the stress of other people and temper their emotions. If only she could do it for herself. She was the most amazing person he had ever met, and he had met an immeasurable number of people in the last five centuries. She was the only woman that gave him knee-weakening intoxication, filling his existence with warmth and tenderness. She was the one and only bright star in his world, and they were perfect for each other. They fit together like hand and glove.

He chuckled at the thought and pulled her even closer. He didn't like to see her unhappy, and he absolutely hated to see her cry. However, he needed to tell her the truth. He had a little time ahead of him, and he was going to find the right moment to discuss this sensitive matter.

He watched her sleep peacefully in his arms, and she looked beautiful, relaxed, and untroubled. Watching her cry was the worst experience, leaving him powerless and shattered. All he wanted to do was turn the clock back to when they left for Italy and alleviate the hurt and the pain that was consuming her.

Sebastian's recollection of his transformation from human to immortal was the strongest memory he held of his human life. Ian and Eva's transformation would take four days; then, it would no longer be a secret. Their needs would completely change. They would become immortals and incredibly physically powerful-- beyond any human imagination. Immune to harm of any kind, there will be no need for doctors or hospitals, since every injury would simply regenerate. Their heart would stop beating, and their tear ducts would dry up. Human food would no longer be their preference as they would need the immortal drink of salve to nurse and sustain their bodies.

Glancing down at her sleeping, her head cushioned on his shoulder, he realized he had been frowning for the past hour. Ian and Eva's immortality lurked at the back of his mind, not allowing him to focus on anything else. The frown returned to his face and his lips twisted in frustration. Through the shadows of the room he gazed at the ceiling and decided not to allow his mind to dwell on tomorrow. Pressing a gentle kiss on her hair, he closed his eyes.



Chapter 3

THE FLIGHT TOOK OFF EARLY, and they touched down in Brighton a little before noon. On stopping at their house long enough to drop their luggage off and freshen up, they made it to the hospital in record time. When they arrived at the hospital, they made their way into the ICU waiting room where they met Gabrielle's parents, as well as Eva's mother. The three parents were sitting together, talking in low voices. The physical and emotional trauma of the situation was obvious in the fret lines carved into their faces and the exhaustion they wore like a mantle around their shoulders.

As they approached, Dr. Taylor stood up and greeted them warmly. He hugged her with one arm and shook Sebastian's hand with the other. Arielle hugged him back as tears welled up. She loved him just like a father, and she sobbed in his embrace. She knew perfectly well that his heart was shuddering.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured, her voice was breaking.

He patted her tenderly on the back. "I know, dear, and we're really glad that you, and Sebastian escaped this nightmare."

Sebastian hugged Katherine and Madeline. After exchanging warm regards, he walked over to sit next to Dr. Taylor. Arielle leaned down hug Gabby and Eva's mothers affectionately.

"Weren't you on vacation, dear?" Mrs. Taylor asked.

"Yes, we were in Italy. We came back as soon as we heard," Arielle apologized, downheartedly.

"Oh, honey, you didn't have to do that," Mrs. Winters assured.

"We most certainly did. Gabby and Eva are like sisters to me. I love them dearly."

"There...there...there," Mrs. Taylor said, patting her hands lovingly. "The girls will be all right. I'm sure of that."

Excusing themselves shortly after, Arielle and Sebastian went to visit Gabby. A nurse buzzed Arielle into the ICU, only allowing her to enter as someone else was already in the room. Without an argument, Sebastian pressed her hand softly and turning away he went back to sit and talk with Mrs. Taylor and wait for her. Arielle entered the ICU and the sight of her dearest friend unmoving on the hospital bed sent a wave of wretchedness through her. Gabby looked worse than Arielle had imagined. A tube that was inserted into her mouth helped her breath, and there was an intravenous line hooked into her right hand. The largest cast wrapped her left arm from shoulder to wrist, another covered her left leg from just over the knee to her ankle, and the smallest protected her right foot. An apparatus around her neck appeared to be to prevent Gabrielle from moving her body. Her head was covered in thick gauze, except for her beautiful face. Beneath the bandaids and bruises, she looked pale; her lips were dry and gray. In response, Arielle's body quivered, as if ice water ran through her veins. Her knees began to quiver at the proof that lives could be instantaneously changed.

Troy looked exhausted. He had been leaning forward, his arms bent and elbows resting on his thighs, when she entered. Hearing her, he raised his chin from where they rested on his interlocked hands. The look they exchanged was filled with nervousness over their friend's health.

A faint smile painted his lips momentarily, and he stood up, reaching for her. Her eyes filled with tears as she took his hands and saw that his beautiful face was distorted by anguish. His gaze was

deeply distressed, and she knew he was in extreme pain. If he had a heart, it would be broken, so she put her arms around him and kissed him softly on the cheek.

“She’s going to be all right,” she murmured. He shrugged his shoulders briefly and motioned for her to sit at the chair next to him without letting go of her hands. Here was this amazing immortal with a need of her touch, a simple human, and she was more than happy to accommodate him.

“I’m so glad to see you.” He glanced at the empty doorway. “Is Sebastian here?”

“Yes,” she replied. “He is talking with Mr. Taylor in the waiting room.”

He nodded as his gaze turned back to Gabrielle, and Arielle knew that if he could cry he would be crying right now. She sat still for a few moments as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut to hold in the tears. Finally unable to take it, she stood and walked around the bed. With one hand on the bed rail for support herself, she leaned in to kiss Gabrielle’s chin... the only part of her friend that didn’t have a bruise or cut.

“Gabby, I know you are listening. You need to know that I love you more than you’ll ever know. Troy and Sebastian and your parents are all here. We are waiting on you to heal and wake up.” Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she patted Gabrielle’s hand before moving to sink back into the chair beside Troy. The sobs caught her as her butt touched the seat cushion. The strain of the stress of the past few days was causing her to feel sick. Troy reached over, cupped her chin, and turned her face toward him. He held her until she met his eyes. His features were composed and serene, but she knew he felt anything except calm. “Thank you, Arielle.” His voice broke on her name. “Thank you for being here.”

“I’m so sorry, Troy,” she said sniffing and swallowed hard. “I wish this hadn’t happened.”

Troy leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Me too,” he replied, in a hoarse voice.

Arielle smiled weakly at Troy as she reached across his lap to take the tissue box from the windowsill. Pulling a tissue out, she wiped her tears away and quietly stood up. “I’ll send Sebastian in,” she whispered, and Troy inclined his head. She could feel the blood pounding in her veins as she slipped out of the room. Her legs ached painfully, and she leaned against the wall outside the ICU waiting room, sobbing uncontrollably. She wasn’t sure how long she stood there alone. She saw Sebastian approaching with his smooth walk and a magnificent calmness that covered the planes of his beautiful face. He took her face gently in his hands and wiped her tears away with his thumbs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her face in the crook of his neck.

“She looks pretty bad,” she whimpered. She tried hard to stop crying, swallowing back her tears and forcing the salty liquid down her throat.

“Arielle,” he murmured, nuzzling her hair. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I told Troy you will go in.”

“Yes, I was heading that way.” He kissed her gently on the lips, and he walked through the unit doors. She stood there waiting for a little while, and when he came out, he looked shaken. He took her hand, and they walked back into the waiting room. She took a deep breath before she reached out and hugged the Taylors and Mrs. Winters again with sincere affection. She could see the pain and the stress that they were experiencing at having their daughters in the hospital. Mrs. Taylor’s eyes were red and swollen from crying, and her face was white.

“I know it will take time, but she will be all right,” Arielle whispered. She looked over at Dr. Taylor who was now sitting in the corner by himself, lost in his thoughts. Here was this accomplished surgeon unable to do a single thing to make his little girl feel any better. She leaned closer to Mr. Taylor and asked quietly. “How is Dr. Taylor holding up?”

“He has fallen completely apart,” Mrs. Taylor cried, her voice faltering. “I’m having a horrible time consoling him. I’m so lost that I’m in no position to provide that kind of emotional support for

him," she added.

~~Arielle wished she could find the right words to ease their pain, but she couldn't. Nothing would until Gabrielle was awake. She shut her eyes and prayed that this was all just an unpleasant dream.~~

"We are so thankful Troy was there to get her help right away," Mrs. Taylor added. Her words brought Arielle back to reality. "She's not out of the woods yet, but the doctor thinks that she'll come around soon. We're hoping that there will be no permanent injuries." Her voice was breaking.

"I'm so sorry."

"We are extremely thankful, Arielle, that she didn't sustain any lasting injuries," She added with a deep sigh. Arielle hugged her warmly. Mrs. Winters approached, and she heard her shaky voice.

"Arielle, if you saw the car you wouldn't believe that anyone survived that crash. The front seat was pushed into the back seat. It was a miracle that both Eva and Ian escaped with small injuries. They could have died!" she said with a strained light in her eyes. "The amazing thing is that Troy was completely unscathed." Gabrielle's mom glanced over. "I'm really happy, Mrs. Winters, that Eva didn't get seriously hurt." Eva's mother didn't seem to hear a word Mrs. Taylor said.

"Nobody, including the police investigators, could understand this type of outcome from such a horrible accident. It was a miracle that they survived!"

"I'm so glad they survived," Arielle said pressing Mrs. Taylor's hand softly. "Now all I want to think about is their speedy recovery," she added.

"Yes, that's what we are praying for," both mothers murmured simultaneously.

"I wish I had been here," Arielle said with a shaken voice. "It was hard getting the news over the phone and not knowing the details."

Their expressions became alarmed. "We are glad you weren't here." Mrs. Winters voice was unyielding as she reached over and took Arielle's hand in hers. "What if you were in the same car? No... no... we're glad you weren't here."

"I feel awful; they are my best friends, my sisters," Arielle mumbled, and the words trembled in her throat.

"They love you, too, Arielle. You girls have been inseparable since you were little girls," Mrs. Taylor said. Arielle gave her a sweet smile. Both ladies reached out and took her in their arms, and their eyes welled up with tears once again.

Arielle glanced between the two of them, and her expression became thoughtful. "I spoke to my mum on the phone before we left Italy, and she told me that she would be coming to be with you."

"Aaa...Both your mum and dad were here yesterday. They spent several hours with us, and it was very comforting. In fact, they were here when the doctor told us that Gabrielle is very strong, and she will recover quite well with time."

"That's excellent news!" Arielle remarked. There was a long pause.

"Eva and Ian will be going home the day after tomorrow," Mrs. Winters broke the silence. Arielle smiled in obvious pleasure.

She hesitated a few more minutes, and then she glanced in Sebastian's direction, trying to get his attention. He had taken a seat next to Mr. Taylor, and they were conversing quietly. Sebastian finally looked up, and their eyes locked. His expression spoke volumes; there was warmth in his eyes, and she smiled. He stood up slowly and politely took his leave from Mr. Taylor. He crossed the room in a slow stride and came to stand right next to her.

"Sebastian," she breathed, and took his hand. "We should go and visit with Eva and Ian before we go home."

"Yes," he said, "I had the very same thought." They said their goodbyes and walked away.

“Thanks for coming, Sebastian. I’ll treasure our talk.” Mr. Taylor’s clear voice startled her. She gazed back toward him, and he was watching Sebastian with a grateful look. She was completely amazed at the extraordinary appeal Sebastian projected around him. She stared at the most striking man on this earth as he walked next to her and held her hand. Her eyes rested on his gorgeous face for more time.

“Let’s go see Eva first,” she said. He nodded in agreement. Bending down, he brushed his lips across her forehead.

Eva looked remarkably well. A wide smile spread across her badly bruised face when she saw them walking in.

“Hey, Arielle! Hey, Sebastian! I’m so happy to see you both,” Her voice was weary and extremely emotion haunted her expression as tears rolled down her face. Arielle was pleased that all she could see was a large cast on her right leg and several black-and-blue bruises on her face. She also saw bruises on the part of Eva’s body where the hospital gown left her skin exposed. Sebastian bent down and gave her a warm hug, and Eva squeezed him tightly.

“Hey, you handsome man! I missed you and your dazzling eyes.” Her remark made Sebastian chuckle as he released on her a good dose of his dazzling power. Eva immediately went numb; she tried to open her mouth, but she was unable to speak. Arielle heard her gasping for air as her head fell back on the pillow, unable to hold herself up. Sebastian broke out into soft laughter as he looked away from Eva’s eyes. It was but a few minutes later when they heard her sigh under her breath. Shaking her head, she mumbled, “That’s not fair Sebastian; that’s just not fair.” For a moment, it seemed like the accident had never happened.

“I’m so happy to see that you came out of this without major injuries,” Arielle said. Her voice was jubilant, and her heart was full of joy for Eva’s wellbeing.

“Oh, Arielle, me too. It must have been a horrible accident! I haven’t seen any pictures, and I just can’t remember a thing!”

“It was...it was a pretty bad accident,” Sebastian said.

“I saw the paper, and I’m so happy about you and Ian escaping with a few broken bones and some bruises,” Arielle added.

“Poor Gabby!” Eva murmured. “My mum said that she’s in bad shape, and my heart is breaking. Have you seen her?”

“Yes,” Arielle replied. “I just did. She’s still in ICU in a coma, so she didn’t know that I was there. Troy looked devastated.”

“We are all thankful that Troy was indestructible, because he saved our lives,” Eva whispered and let out a soft sigh. “I know that his immortal speed had everything to do with getting help quickly. I know that he saved Gabrielle’s life.”

Arielle smiled and bent down to give her a kiss. “I’m so happy that you weren’t badly hurt,” she said, palming her cheek. “Can you remember anything at all?” she asked, searching Eva’s face and struggling to read her thoughts.

Arielle ran her fingers through her hair and blew out an exasperated breath. She turned to look at Sebastian, a perplexed look spreading across her face. Her special gift of being able to read her best friend’s thoughts was not working. Sebastian’s eyebrows furrowed quizzically. Arielle flinched and fixed her gaze back on Eva.

Eva’s eyes widened. “What is it?” she asked, noticing Arielle’s odd facial expression.

“I’m really puzzled. I can’t read a single thought in your head. This is the first time in seventeen years that all I get is complete silence.”

“Really!” Eva said, seemingly relieved. “How about that? Maybe that’s a good thing. Now I can keep my thoughts to myself,” she added and chuckled. Reaching over, she took Arielle’s hand and pressed it softly. “I’m only joking, Arielle; maybe it’s temporary, and maybe it has to do with the accident. Or the medicine, the hospital, who knows?”

Arielle nodded in agreement. “Yes, maybe you’re right. Try and see if you can remember anything at all about the accident.”

Sebastian was standing right behind her, and he stiffened at her words. *Yes, I do believe this is going to be a rather ghastly blow to Arielle, Eva, and Ian*, Sebastian thought. He closed his eyes, trying to elude the painful thoughts about the upcoming encounters. Things were going to turn out terrifying, painful, chilling. All three had to be told in the next two days. Eva’s voice brought him out of his private struggle, and opening his eyes, he felt that he was moved by a profound reality. *God, how am I going to tell them?*



Chapter 4

DESPITE ARIELLE'S BURNING CURIOSITY, she remained silent, waiting for Eva to say something, and she did.

"Like I said before, I don't remember anything about the accident," Eva said, pressing her lips together. "But I do remember having a strong scary premonition about the party the night before. At first, I didn't want to go, but I finally agreed because Troy and Loren were going to be there to keep us safe if something were to happen. As it turned out, we had an incredible time. The food was delicious and we danced way past midnight." She smiled distantly. Arielle remained silent as Eva continued, "I do remember a peculiar incident at the club that bothered me a bit." Eva's blue eyes narrowed to slits.

"What was that?" Arielle asked inquisitively. Arielle was a little surprised by the amount of eagerness in the tone of her own voice. She noticed a deep crease across Eva's forehead trying to remember, but eventually she just shrugged her shoulders, giving up.

"Oh, please, try to remember, Eva; it is important!" she said. Even Sebastian appeared curious about the details.

Eva remained silent for a very long time, trying to collect her thoughts about that night. She finally gazed between Sebastian and Arielle, and began slowly, "Arielle, do you remember the feeling I had before Savanna showed up at your birthday party?" Her face twisted in disgust, and Arielle felt a strong jolt at the sound of the name.

"Yes... I do," she replied as her body went very still. Sebastian edged closer. "What are you trying to say?" Arielle asked impatiently.

Eternity passed before Eva's voice continued, a bit eerie against the silence. "I got the exact same feeling at the club when an exceptionally beautiful young woman came up to our table and introduced herself as Miss Willington. She said that she was in charge of the sitting arrangements for the night." Eva said slowly.

"What happened then?" Arielle insisted.

"Well, she said that she was trying to balance the attendance sheet she was holding with the actual people that showed up for the fundraiser. The questions that followed didn't seem so strange except that her presence was creating a feeling of pure terror for me."

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I reached under the table and touched Troy's leg, making him look at me. I was sure that he noticed the anxiety that was starting to spread across my face, because he put his hand over mine and pressed softly."

"Then what happened?" she heard Sebastian asking as he stared at Eva.

"The woman's next statement was not very strange either, but my anxiety was getting stronger."

"What was the next statement?" Arielle could hardly wait for a reply.

"She asked us to give her our names, so she could check them off the sheet. She did ask quite politely. We gave her our names, and she looked as if she was putting a checkmark next to each name."

"The tone of her voice was still very professional and very polite, but there was something repulsive about her. Her next question made me wonder why she was so persistent. She said that she

showed two more names, and she was wondering if they were going to be attending the dinner.”

“Arielle’s and mine?” Sebastian questioned, sure of her reply.

“Yes, we knew that the names on the sheet were yours, but we didn’t think it was important for her to know that you were not going to be there. We didn’t think it was important for her to know that the tickets were given to Loren and Paul instead. I guess our thought was that as long as tickets were purchased for six it would make no difference what the six names were on that sheet. Paul and Loren were about forty minutes late, and Miss Willington was back at our table asking if the other two people were going to show up. Her voice had grown agitated. Troy was composed and polite as he explained that the other two should be there shortly, as they had encountered car trouble. Strange enough, she gave us a half a smile and walked away. I still had a terrible feeling about her presence and I was very worried about her being in close proximity.”

“Ian was pretty aggravated. He wanted to know ‘what in bloody hell’ it mattered if the party was two, four, or six. The entire table was paid for, so the club shouldn’t care if a couple people didn’t show. Troy remained unruffled, and he went to see the club manager. We were all watching, and he had the strangest expression on his face as he walked back to our table.”

Eva paused, swallowing. The story was drying her mouth. Arielle spotted the glass of ice water on the dinner tray and handed it to her friend. After sipping cautiously, Eva rested her head on the pillow for a minute and closed her eyes. Though she was obviously exhausted, they desperately needed to hear if the rest of the story gave them any answers.

“Gabby wanted to know what Troy said to the manager. I remember Troy’s eyes narrowing and him pinching the tip of his nose, shaking his head in perplexity. He told us that the Club Manager was in charge of the personnel roster, and he had never hired a Miss Willington.” Eva stopped talking and gazed again between Arielle and Sebastian. Arielle looked over at Sebastian and caught a glimpse of anxiety in his eyes. He clenched his jaw for a brief moment. Eva’s voice distracted her, and she turned to look at her friend as she continued with the recollection of that night’s events.

“I remember all of us speculating about who Miss Willington was and why she created such a dramatic episode. I watched Troy’s eyes fixed straight ahead, and I was sure that his thoughts were exactly like mine. Shortly after the incident, Troy asked me to dance and we had a chance to talk. I told him that I had the same feeling about this woman as I did about Savanna at your birthday party, and he was also sure that she was an immortal that was sent by Annabel.”

Arielle gasped out loud, and her body shivered. Sebastian moved closer and put his arm around her; he held her tightly to his side.

Arielle collected her thoughts and now she wanted to know everything Eva could recall. “So what happened next?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Next thing I remember Troy was dancing with Loren, and then they were both gone for a very short time.” She smiled softly.

“What’s so funny about that?” Arielle asked.

Still smiling, Eva continued. “I knew that the short time they were gone would have been long enough for them to go to another country and back.” She laughed again while shaking her head in amazement.

“Where did they say they went?” Sebastian asked.

“When they got back, they told Ian and I that they went to look for the woman that called herself Mrs. Willington, and they checked every inch of the building, as well as the surrounding fields and structures, but she had vanished.”

“What about Paul? What did he think about all that?” Arielle asked.

“Paul and Gabrielle were dancing, so Paul never noticed that Loren was gone for that brief time. I’m sure that it would have been hard to explain why Loren would go with Troy to look for a stranger.”

Arielle hugged herself, unable to believe the lengths Annabel would go to make sure that Sebastian never had a chance for happiness. She was never going to forgive him for initiating the annulment of their marriage over 500 years ago. The immortal woman would never forgive his rejection to consummate the marriage and the revulsion she saw in his eyes every time they crossed paths. Arielle was sure that Annabel would spend every waking moment trying to make Sebastian miserable.

Sebastian felt her torment and squeezed her tighter and pressed his lips to her cheek.

“Don’t worry, baby,” he murmured, before pressing on. “Did you leave the club after that?”

“No, not after that. Shortly after Troy and Loren came back, the music and the fun expunged the incident from our minds, at least for that night. We stayed late and left around two thirty in the morning. Gabby was insisting on driving. Troy let her drive, because she was completely sober. Her choice of beverage the whole night had been water,” she added. “We had an amazing time, and we were quite animated on the ride back home. Ian and I were kissing in the back seat, and I can’t remember anything after that.”

“Eva, do you remember what the woman at the club looked like?” Sebastian asked. His voice was quiet with a hint of concern.

“Yes, she was incredibly beautiful just like all the immortal women I’ve met so far. She had long brown hair and icy blue eyes. Her voice was velvety soft at the beginning, but it turned cold and scary by the end of the conversation. I knew she was another crazy immortal, and so did Troy.”

Arielle stiffened and swallowed hard. Aggravated and sickened once again by Annabel, she tried to fight the anxious feeling in her gut. She drew in a deep breath and lifted her eyes. Searching Sebastian’s face, she wondered if it could possibly be true. “Do you think it was Annabel?” Collapsing into the chair next to Eva’s bed, she fought to keep her voice steady.

He was pinching the tip of his nose, and the crease on his forehead deepened.

“I don’t know.” His eyes now blazed with irritation.

“Why would she want to kill our friends?” Arielle kept probing.

“I don’t know, Arielle. I’ll have to talk with Troy; I need to get the details,” Sebastian said. She nodded and, despite her fear, held herself in check. Deep inside, she couldn’t let it go.

“I have a strong feeling that she was sent by Annabel.” Eva said quietly. Arielle looked up at Sebastian, trying to decipher his thoughts, but she couldn’t. Sebastian, however, was serious, weighing Eva’s words in his mind, trying to draw his own conclusion about the incident.

“Annabel seems to be able to ruin every occasion for us,” Eva continued, forcing a smile. “Don’t you think?” The question was directed to Sebastian. He closed his eyes momentarily in frustration and nodded in agreement.

“I have to agree with you,” he said bitterly.

“I’m glad that Paul and Loren came in their own car and weren’t involved in this mess.” The relief was evident in her voice.

“Yes, I’m very happy about that. Have they been here to see you?” Arielle asked.

“Yes, they were here yesterday, along with your parents.” Eva answered with a smile.

“When are you going home?”

“The doctor believes I’ll be ready the day after tomorrow, and I can’t wait. I hate being in here.”

Arielle caught a hint of anticipation in her voice. She was trying hard to read Eva’s thoughts, but

she heard only silence. In and of itself, the lack was extraordinary. In all the years the women had known one another, it had never happened. Something had happened during the accident; otherwise she couldn't understand the quietness of Eva's mind.

"I think we should go and visit Ian for a little while," Sebastian suggested thoughtfully and clasped Arielle's hand.

Eva nodded, reaching a hand toward Arielle. Arielle clasped it, moving to give her friend a long hug and a kiss on the cheek. When they reached the door, Sebastian sent a caring look at Eva.

"You take care!" His voice was calm with a hint of tenderness.

"Tell Ian that I love him," she called out as the door closed behind them.

When they reached Ian's room, Arielle stopped and took a deep breath. She sighed inaudibly and moved closer to Sebastian just before they stepped inside. She thought about the strange, beautiful woman that was now creating an unavoidable and quite troublesome concern in her head. Sebastian sensed her apprehension, and his arm encircled her body pulling her even closer. He knew that his embrace was Arielle's comfort zone.

"What's the matter, baby?" he whispered in her ear. His gaze was profound and powerful, boring right into her eyes.

"Nothing," she murmured. He lifted her face to his and pressed his lips against hers with true passion.

"I love you, Arielle... don't push me aside. I want to know what's bothering you." She smiled, grabbing hold of his shirt and pulling him softly down to her, and she kissed him back with the same passion.

"I'm sorry, baby, I love you, too, but let's talk about this when we get home." A warm smile urged him to agree, and they walked into Ian's room.

Ian looked pretty much the same way Eva did. Bruised all over with a cast on his left arm, he maintained a great mood. She hugged him with excitement as Sebastian shook his good hand.

"We're so happy you didn't get badly hurt," Arielle said. Her voice was exuberant. He seemed to be really pleased to see them.

"Have you talked to your parents? Do they know you are in the hospital?" Arielle asked softly.

"No, I didn't want to get my family all upset, since I seem to be doing well. I'll be out of the hospital in a day or so," Ian said.

"It's the best thing to do under the circumstances," Sebastian noted.

"Have you seen Gabrielle?" Ian asked, his voice dropping to a whisper. "She's not doing well, is she?" He looked wretched.

"No, not yet, but she's expected to recover," Arielle said. She made a great effort to keep her voice from trembling as she gazed at Ian, holding back her tears. She pressed her lips tightly as the vision of Gabby in ICU flashed before her eyes.

"Troy's totally devastated," Ian mumbled sadly. "He hasn't moved away from Gabrielle's side since they brought us here." Misery spread across Ian's face, and he gave a half-hearted shrug.

"I understand that," Arielle agreed, struggling to keep her voice steady. She turned to meet Sebastian's gaze, looking for his support like a thirsty person staring at a glass of water. He smiled softly and moved even closer. Arielle turned back to look at Ian.

"I'm really sad that you all had to go through such a horrifying experience," she murmured.

"It was just an accident, Arielle. Nobody can prevent accidents from happening. I don't think anyone expected things to turn out this way."

She watched Ian intently, utterly puzzled again. She didn't hear a single thought coming from

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