

The Enchanted Night by LEIGH COBBETT Chapter 4

The darkness fell upon the city in soft waves, as if mirroring the soft ebb and flow of the sea that surrounded its borders. The scent of salt, sand, and sea breeze, wafted into the open windows of citizens retiring for the day, and G city was lulled by the calming sound of water lapping the shore.

In the midst of the seemingly unbreakable calmness, a white car was driving leisurely to the center of the city. A young woman in dark sun glasses, a loose, casual shirt and light blue jeans was sitting at the passenger seat, watching the line of the horizon from the window. She closed her eyes, and breathed in, her long hair cascading down her shoulders.

She spent the daytime with her mother, and now it was time for Cassandra to go back to the Tang family. From time to time, she still felt as if she was living inside a dream. The fact that she was now back to the country where she used to live floated like the sound of distant music in her head.

Gone was Rome and its basilicas and cobbled streets that shone under the blazing streetlamps. Now, she was in G City, a place that was both familiar and foreign at the same time.

Cassandra was pulled out of her musing when the car made a sharp turn and entered her destination. A wide lawn greeted her as the vehicle drove into one of the best villas in the city. The whole place was designed in the Gothic style. The red iron gate opened to welcome her visit. Flowers of all kinds bloomed in the garden, lending a warm and cozy atmosphere to the area.

The owner, the Tang family had undeniable prominence. Many considered them to be the most powerful in the city.

The mansion rose like an impenetrable fortress – inspiring awe to anyone else who stood in its midst. The walls gleamed against the sunset, and bright lights flowed from the glass windows. Cassandra felt her stomach churn despite the magnificent view that unfolded in front of her. The Tang family, despite their coveted status, had brought her not a single tinge of happiness. She steeled herself as she felt the car roll to a halt. Once again, she was back to this wretched place.

“Mrs. Tang, we have arrived,” the driver called to her quietly.

After parking his car, he ceremoniously stepped out to open the door for the lady.

Cassandra gave the gentleman a polite smile and alighted. Taking off her sun glasses, she stared at the castle-like house, with a hint of a cold smile barely visible on her lips.

‘Mrs. Tang, ‘ she scoffed inwardly. ‘It seems as if they are still keeping up with the fa ?ade.’

“Cassandra’s back,” a voice announced the middle of the room.

Standing in front of her was none other than Horace Tang, the head of the family. Age had left its telltale trace on the old man’s face – deep lines stretching on his forehead and crinkling the corner of his eyes, but rather than the old look, it gave him a mellow charm, akin to aged wine. A gentle smile was on his lips as he welcomed her.

“Cassandra, you’re finally back!” he exclaimed upon seeing her, opening his arms, but before he could put them around her, a sharp exclamation echoed from the back. “Oh my goodness, what are you wearing right now ?”

Dressed in a soft flowing dress that usually characterized women of class, Jill Xie walked towards Horace's side, raising a perfectly arched brow at Cassandra's clothes. She did not even bother to conceal her distaste as she gave her a once-over.

Jill Xie was Horace's wife, a lady of very high esteem. It was unthinkable for her to appear dressed as such. She trailed an appalled eye over Cassandra, lingering on the cotton shirt and denim, as if their very existence was an unthinkable offense. It was absolutely uncharacteristic for a lady of her position to dress herself in rags.

"Father, Mother,"

Cassandra greeted her father-in-law and mother-in-law courteously, speaking as if Jill Xie had said nothing just now.

It was Horace who spoke up. "You must be tired from traveling. Take a seat first. Lionel will be back any moment now," he said.

Cassandra nodded her head. Unlike his wife, Horace was much more laid-back. His calmness was a stark contrast to Jill Xie's rough and stern words, but as of the moment, her mind was fixated on the name that Horace had just uttered. How long had it been since she heard the name? She felt her heart skip a beat as she thought about the man who the name belonged to.

It had been so long. She had almost forgotten how the man on her marriage certificate looked like.

The three of them crossed from the hallway to the living room. Cassandra sat on a single sofa alone while the older couple sat across from her.

They waited in silence for the man who connected them all together to arrive. Jill Xie's displeasure had not left her face and she looked to the

side, as if seeing Cassandra would be an eyesore. Horace sank into the soft leather, leaning his back. As far as Cassandra could remember, Horace was the kindest to her among the whole of the Tang family. She sat down and kept silent. She would behave herself accordingly, if only for him.

Shortly after they sat down, the unmistakable sound of a car pierced the wordless space among the three of them. Cassandra started to feel uneasy, as if there was a premonition of something unpleasant.

“Mr. Tang is back,”

the servant duly reported. At his words, the old woman abruptly stood up and walked towards the door, leaving Horace and Cassandra sitting in the living room.

Cassandra felt her chest hammering as her mind raced with all sorts of thoughts. Uncertainty gripped her as she counted the seconds until the inevitable. It had been four years since she had last seen Lionel, her husband, the man who was supposed to be the closest person to her in the world. However, there was no excitement or joy in this meeting for her. She felt the sour bite of rejection and bitterness, emotions she thought she had buried with time.

As Cassandra was still buried in the agony of her thoughts, a tall figure showed up at the door. He strode with lithe, graceful steps, with impatience clearly written on his handsome features. Right after he entered the house, his hands pulled at his tie and he threw it down on the sofa. The black pools of his eyes shone with a cruelty that was only amplified by the coldness of his smile.

The younger couple's eyes met, and Cassandra felt as if her body would be thrown back by the force of her heartbeat. She recognized this feeling,

and her hands clenched involuntarily, waiting for the emotion she knew would undoubtedly make its presence known. The pain came slowly, reluctantly, like water slowly eroding the surface of a stone, and then it forced its way to her. She felt as if she was submerged in ice even as she felt her inside burn.

For reasons she couldn't fathom, she was nervous. She broke the gaze quickly, and turned her eyes elsewhere. She could feel her hands moisten with sweat and she swallowed to relieve the dryness in her throat.

"Lionel, Cassandra is back," Horace said nonchalantly.

The tension was palpable and the pressure rose in the room, but it was as if his calm exterior was impenetrable. The seconds trembled like a ticking bomb in the strained silence, as if the slightest disturbance would cause an explosion.

Lionel walked slowly, taking small, graceful steps towards Cassandra, as if taking his time to observe a stranger's face. Then he took off his coat in seeming disinterest.

It had been four years. He had known nothing about the wife who only existed as a name on the marriage certificate, and he had not changed his mind. He had not the slightest interest to have anything to do with her.

Still, he was taken aback to see her dressing in such a crude manner. He observed her, and their eyes averted from each other's. She had pale skin, and her lines of her face curved from a smooth forehead to her cheekbones and sloped down to the gentle point of her chin. He had to admit, reluctantly, that even in her unmade-up state, she had a pure loveliness about her.

But her presence brought no tender feelings as such that would have been sprung from their meeting. Instead, there was a venomous burn at the pit

of his stomach. He hated her, and four years time did nothing to make him forget.

“I’ll go up to shower first,” Lionel said coolly.

He didn’t even greet his wife on paper, and completely ignored her as if she was no different than a parcel of air. Without so much as a second glance at his wife, Lionel took his leave and strode towards the staircase, leaving Cassandra embarrassed.

“Lionel!”

Horace called after his son. He was about to reprimand his discourtesy when Cassandra pulled at his hand, and spoke to him in her gentle voice, “Father, I have brought you and mother some souvenirs from Rome. Would you like to take a look?”

She spoke softly, but Lionel was able to capture the warm timbre of her voice. ‘Is she trying to save me from my father’s scolding?’ he wondered. He refused to be affected, despite the possibility. Then, another cruel thought formed at the back of his mind. ‘Or maybe this is an attempt to win my favor?’ It seemed that he had an answer. With the belief about her intentions cemented in his mind, a cold, scornful smile found its way to his lips.