

Unforgiving Lights

I forgot what it was like to have cold hands.

Not from winter's bite or a frozen room, though those deepen the emptiness left by broken promises. The ache of being alone, watching fingers intertwine, bodies pressed close, moving as if they'd never part.

Only the air brushed against our palms. Mine chased another heartbeat, even when hers once warmed for mine. She never took another hand after me even when offered. Her eyes reflected light back at me, as if I were the only source of illumination in the room. Did that mean something? Did I?

Some guy held my waist, but my attention was behind him, fixed on where she sat on the sidelines, watching me like I was watching her. Like our eyes never wanted to break apart. Her dress sparkled, yearning silently, stirring a curiosity I'd buried long ago.

My heels faltered as I slipped away too soon, weighed down by her gaze. I swallowed hard; my mouth dried. "Hey," I said, forcing a smile. "You look nice. I always told you violet was your color."

Her lips sealed. Silence answered, heavy and suffocating. I cleared my throat; her eyes didn't waver. "So you're gonna sit here the whole time?"

My legs trembled, aching to flee, but I stayed. After three counts, she exhaled. "I don't know. Maybe I just came to look pretty."

I nudged her shoulder. "You can do that. I wouldn't mind looking at you all night."

"Weren't you just with someone else, Ciara? Why are you coming to me?"

My shoulders tightened; words tangled as I searched for the right ones. "He's not someone I could see myself with for long." I reached out, and a look of disbelief crossed her face. "So when did I become so special all of a sudden?"

"You never stopped. So why now?"

Her gaze lingered on my hand, and my hesitating fingers trembled. Not from tiredness, but from the fear of being left holding empty air again. My muscles pulled, wanting me to pretend I'd never cared enough to try again with her. It would be safer standing with him than standing still. Leaving before I'm left. Alone.

Then she took my hand. Without hesitation, I pulled her into the crowd, back to a rhythm we'd abandoned. Her fingers laced with mine. Each step felt natural, each breath lingered where I once called home, near the rose perfume I'd told myself to forget.

A small smile thawed her expression. Bits of laughter escaped her mouth, making me feel lighter.

"You know what I've noticed?" she whispered, leaning closer. "You always wear green."

"It's my favorite color. Reminds me of someone special."

She scoffed. "Oh really? Let me guess... Jade?"

"Mmm... I was thinking about Sage. Unless this is your way of telling me you had a name change."

"I never thought you, of all people, would lose your touch in flirting." Her smile stretched boldly. "Proved me wrong for the first time."

Her eyes eased, as if peace finally settled over her. A surge rushed through my fingers, finding solace in the shape of her chin, soft and familiar. But distant.

"But I didn't lose one thing," my voice softened. "I miss seeing you like this."

Her grip faltered. I searched her eyes, desperate for a sign, any sign, that I hadn't ruined everything. "Funny," she said dryly.

"What?"

"Nothing."

We swayed. The cold from her fingers seeped into mine, sharp and questioning, as if I didn't belong there anymore. A catch snagged my breath. "You okay?"

"Your hands are warm."

"Okay? Yours are freezing."

"Maybe," she muttered. "I just didn't want anybody touching them. No one came closer after you."

The music swelled, deafening. I blinked, hoping for softness in her face, but it remained still. Unyielding. "Wow," I forced lightness. "Maybe you're overthinking it. It's just a dance. I'm here now."

We stopped abruptly. She looked deep into my eyes, and a weight settled in with her exhale: "Is it always just a dance to you?"

I said nothing. Her grip loosened, slipping free.

"Sage," I whispered, reaching out. "You're just gonna leave me here?"

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She stepped back, the shadows swallowing her whole. Her rose perfume clung to me, a burning kiss on my skin. "Figure it out," she said quietly. "Before you take my hand again... before you let go again."

Maybe letting go would spare me this ache, watching her turn away, leaving me beneath the unforgiving lights. Silence pressed in, cold and sharp, like a promise half-remembered in a dream, still waiting in shadows.