CHAPTER FIVE

DAMIAN & ISABELLE

Black Sheep and Bad Influences

The couple seated in 2A and 2C, directly behind Harry and Mr. Wiggins, weren't actually a couple at all, but they both couldn't help but eavesdrop on the commotion in the row in front of them.

Isabelle's paperback novel, *Of Love and Shadows,* hid her face well enough, except for her well-groomed eyebrows, long lashes, and saucer-sized brown eyes peeking through a few wayward chestnut curls hanging down over her forehead. As a child, she hated what she considered her "monochromatic looks," always wishing for her sister's blonde hair and blue eyes girl-next-door vibe. Now approaching her mid-thirties—or as the media kept calling it, "middle age"—she had learned to embrace who she was, no apologies and no regrets. Although, if she were honest with herself, she still wished for that special someone to magically appear and sweep her off her feet; hence, her love of novels that told tales of passion and ecstasy especially during times of uncertainty and fear, just like the book she now held loosely in her hands. Or, apparently too loosely, as it suddenly tumbled into the lap of the man with the spiky gelled hair—black

on bottom with blonde tips up top, and in need of a color touch-up—who was seated to her right.

"Oh, I am so sorry." Isabelle absent-mindedly reached over to retrieve her fallen fiction novel as the man reacted with a little bop of his body upward from the surprise. It was then that Isabelle realized she was about to inappropriately grab her book from the stranger's crotch and quickly withdrew her hand without the book, her cheeks immediately turning red from her near faux pau.

They both watched as the book fell in between the man's legs and onto the floor, somewhere out of sight.

Isabelle scrunched up her face and shrugged her shoulders to her ears, apologetically, just as the man threw back his head and laughed out loud. The wireless Bose headphones he was wearing, one ear on and one ear off, slipped back, popped off his neck, and nearly toppled over the back of his seat and into the row behind them. He caught them with his right hand just in time, still laughing through the whole ordeal.

"Well if you wanted to get to know me, all you had to do was say, 'hello,'" he said as he rested his headphones in his lap and extended his hand to Isabelle. "I'm Damian."

Suddenly finding herself a bit unnerved, Isabelle started to give him her hand and then pulled back. "I wasn't trying to get to know you," she stammered to the man that she guessed must have been about her same age. "My book fell. That's all."

"Uh-huh," Damian dropped his hand and shifted his body over to the side to make more room between them. "I didn't mean…I mean, it was a joke. Here, let me get it."

He reached down with his right hand, fumbling for the book. In doing so, he gave Isabelle an overhead view of his coiffed crown. She found herself mesmerized by the tiny daggers atop his head and reached out her right hand to touch them.

Suddenly Damian's spikes jetted upward, poking Isabelle's palm as he flung back his head from the search-and-rescue mission below, unaware of her touch. He looked over to Isabelle. "Sorry, I can't get it. It keeps

sliding back. Maybe we can ask the pilot to slam on the brakes, so your book gets a good shove toward the front?"

Isabelle's eyes widened as her forehead wrinkled just a bit. She wondered: *Was he kidding again?* She opened her mouth to object.

"Man, I need to work on some new material. Lame joke." Damian flashed a mischievously inviting smile, or so Isabelle thought. He unbuckled his seatbelt and started to stand, tossing his headphones onto his seat.

Now, very embarrassed, Isabelle stammered, "Oh, listen, that's okay. I can get my book when we land, after everybody is up and out of their seats."

Damian tossed a wry smile at her as he slid past her. "What? You'd rather lose the very thing that stops you from talking to other people and risk it being trashed by spilled drinks, dirty footprints, or worse…being abducted by one of these misguided and literary-starved souls?" He unfolded his torso and stretched his extremely long legs as he stood in the aisle.

Isabelle unbuckled her seatbelt and rose to meet him. "Wow! I can't decide if you're funny or if you're kind of dark."

Damian looked her in the eye as if it was the first time that he actually saw her. Nervously, he said, "Maybe I'm a bit of both. Although if you asked my family, they'd definitely say I've gone rogue. My family even calls me 'The Black Sheep,' but when I was old enough to read, I learned my birth certificate didn't agree."

Suddenly stopping himself from continuing, Damian shook his head and widened his eyes. "I'll stop rambling now."

"No, no," Isabelle jumped in without really meaning to. "I like your ramblings." She extended her hand to him. "I'm Isabelle."

While she expected they would just shake on it, Damian lifted her hand to his lips and gave it a gentle kiss. "It's a pleasure to officially make your acquaintance, Isabelle. Consider me, at your service."

Stunned, it took a minute for Isabelle to find her voice. "I'm Isabelle, um, like I said. Um…Except for my sister. She calls me 'Izzy the bad influence.'"

The voices in Isabelle's head began their rapid inquisition: *Oh my God. What IS your problem? Why in the world would you say what you just said to this perfect stranger? And why aren't you taking back your hand already?*

Isabelle collected herself, averting her eyes from his, and pulling her hand out of his grasp. She suddenly found the ceiling and overhead compartments of the first-class cabin so very interesting. She heard Damian laugh, and forced herself to look back at him.

He was grinning. "Well then, we black sheep and bad influences need to stick together. Isabelle, I'm going in," he said, as if about to embark on some impossible mission.

With that, Damian exaggerated his movements, pouncing like a predator down to the floor, practically shoving his head underneath his seat. "Ah-ha, I see it." He looked up to Isabelle with an encouraging smile. Extending his right arm underneath his seat, he suddenly gave out a little yelp and pretended he was being swallowed up by a creature that lurked beneath. "Oh no! It's got me. Help me, bad influence Isabelle."

Isabelle covered her mouth with her hand, trying to suppress her giggles.

"Got it," Damian lifted up the book and sprang back to his feet. His eyes flashed a look of excitement as he connected with hers. He slowly delivered the book back to her but as she reached out to take it, he pulled it back. "*Of Love and Shadows*." He read the title out loud. "That sounds deep."

Isabelle's cheeks turned pink. She tried to pluck her book out from his grasp, but Damian kept it from her, holding it just beyond her reach. He turned slightly without really taking his eyes off the book's cover and, with the other hand, lifted his headphones up from his chair. He then seated himself before investigating the book further, using his thumb to skim the pages.

"Interesting cover. Interesting title. What's it about?"

She hadn't expected the question, but then she hadn't expected any of this. She sat back down, turned to face him, and swiftly grabbed both her book and his headphones from his hands.

Resting them both in her own lap, she retorted, "Okay, so tell me: What does a black sheep listen to in order to keep from being bothered by others while flying?"

"'In Hell I'll Be in Good Company,'" Damian matter-of-factly responded.

"Excuse me?"

"The song I was listening to," he explained, then started to softly sing its lyrics. *"…hell's bells, miss-spells, knocks me on my knees…"*

Isabelle found herself mesmerized by his voice. And his lips.

"My favorite bluegrass and classic folk band, The Dead South. *Such* a great song," Damian offered. "But not *at all* great at keeping me from being 'bothered' by others while flying."

Isabelle opened her mouth. She was about to apologize, but Damian stopped her and said with a wink, "I'm *actually* thanking my lucky stars about that."