



**THE SINS
OF
MRS.
EMA**

MIRELA KANINI

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Published in the United States by eBooks2go, Inc.
1827 Walden Office Square, Suite 260, Schaumburg, IL 60173

ISBN: 978-1-5457-5471-9

eISBN: 978-1-5457-5472-6

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

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Chapter 1

Present time...

The airplane landed on time at the Tirana airport. The mesmerizing, uncountable lights of the city and high-rises of America were now replaced by the half-lit, half-asleep scene of my hometown. A young, curvy, black-haired woman with a loud voice was trying to wake up her four- or five-year-old son, who seemed to be enjoying a lengthy, deep sleep. She was speaking English to him.

“Honey, wake up. Grandma is waiting for you.”

The little boy, who looked almost disturbed that his sleep—or perhaps his dream—was interrupted, was rubbing his eyes and looking around, trying to figure out what was happening. People in a hurry were pulling out their luggage, and it seemed, for a moment, that the long trip had shortened their patience. As for myself, I was trying to be calm and control my emotions and excitement—they felt like were going to explode at any moment—thinking that everyone could notice. But the fact was that no one was paying attention to me. It was simply in my subconscious; no one could tell that my heart was about to jump outside my body. I pulled my luggage down, almost tripping over it, and started dragging it through the tiny corridor of the airplane. I felt lightheaded and, for a moment, thought that I might have gotten sick from the ice-cold air that had been blowing from everywhere. Every passenger except me had kept the air conditioning on and I couldn't understand why they weren't bothered by it.

“Ema!”

“Toni, ah! I am finally here.”

Suddenly I found myself lifted a little into the air and wrapped up in Toni's muscular arms.

“I love you,” he whispered and kissed me directly on my lips. “How was your trip, love? Are you tired?”

“Not bad at all, superman,” I teased him while instinctively touching his arms.

Toni smiled, showing his white teeth and making a cute, apologetic gesture, as if to say “It’s not my fault that that I’m that handsome.” We were standing in the middle of the crowd and hadn’t taken our eyes off each other. It was like we couldn’t get enough of exploring all the details of one another’s features while everyone around us was in a hurry to get out of there.

“You are so beautiful, my love. Do you know that?”

“No. It’s the first time I’m hearing it,” I said, smiling at him. “So are you...” I continued with a lowered voice.

Toni put his hand around my shoulders and directed me toward the exit. At this moment nothing existed for me anymore. I couldn’t see the people around me; nothing mattered because, as far as I was concerned, the world had only one person in it. His body odor, mixed with the scent of whatever shampoo or cologne he used, added to the warm temperature that I was feeling being welded to him, were all extremely attractive. It had given me a feeling like I was drunk without drinking, if that’s how being drunk felt. I wouldn’t know because I had never drunk enough to get drunk in my life. Maybe it was more like I was high instead but I had never done any kind of drugs either. Somehow I now knew how it felt to be on those things. One thing I knew for sure was that I wanted this feeling to last, if not forever, for as long as possible. When we were finally in the parking lot, Toni kissed my hair and thanked me for coming. He was having a hard time believing I was there and I didn’t know why.

“Pinch me so I can believe that you’re here for real.”

“Where do you want me to start?” I asked, pinching his chest.

“I still can’t believe it,” he said, now protecting himself from me because I was about to pinch him all over.

“How about now? Do you believe it now or will you have to wait until after I turn you black and blue from pinching?”

“Oh, my sweetheart. Now I do. You made me the happiest man alive today, Ema.”

He gave me a long kiss before we finally made it into his car.

“I hope you’re not disappointed by this face,” he said, pointing toward himself. “Maybe it does not meet your expectations.”

“You just read my mind. What on earth I was thinking, for God’s sake? To make a trip from the other side of the world only to see a face like that? I must suffer the consequences now,” I said, trying to keep a straight face.

“Ha ha ha! Oh God, if you only knew how much I love you, Ema.”

We kissed again, from inside his car this time and for even longer.

“We have a long ride ahead and might hit some heavy traffic along the way. You can rest a little, or maybe take a nap if you want. That might be the only sleep you’ll get while you’re here the next few days,” Toni said, looking over at me and giving me a wry smile.

“Are you planning to torture me or something? And would you tell me where we’re going please?”

“Ah, I can’t. It’s a secret. Or to be more precise, it’s a surprise.”

“Why do I feel like a character in a sadistic horror movie?” I tried to look worried but couldn’t keep the smile from my face.

“Ha, ha, I don’t know, my love, but one thing is for sure—your imagination is wild.”

“I have to agree with that. My tendency is to be skeptical and think about the dark side that people don’t show, even while believing in their goodness and kindness.”

“For instance, you might suspect that I am a serial killer and that I might take you somewhere far away, in a remote area, but using your seductive, charming ways, you convince me to leave you alive, right? And then I let you live day after day thanks to my change of heart.”

“Yes, something like that, my sultan. How did you turn this into a story out of ‘One Thousand and One Night?’”

We started laughing, then we kissed and stayed with our lips welded together for a minute and our eyes on the road. I moved to my seat and, while lying there comfortably, I enjoyed the scenery of the villages we were leaving behind. Farms and land whose color had turned yellow and brown; lonely trees who had lost most of their leaves; unhappy cows who were chewing quietly on a few pieces of grass, which were hard to find that time of year. On the side of the road, you couldn’t miss some farmers who looked cold and who were dressed so lightly in old and faded clothes. Their faces held deep wrinkles and their dry and damaged hands were the proof of their hard life. They spent all day every day on the side of those roads, getting covered with dust and sniffing the smoke of passing cars just to make a buck selling their goods. It was the chestnut season and suddenly I

felt nostalgic for my childhood. I almost choked up in tears. Toni must have noticed because he asked me if I ever thought how my life would have been if I'd never left the country. I told him that I did think about that—quite often in fact—and, since he thought I had such a vivid imagination, I had truthfully built all those scenarios up in my mind about what I would have done with my life if I had never escaped to the far Western world.

“Do you think you would have done the same thing, professionally?”

“I think so. What I do for a living is something I passionately love doing. I feel that being a psychologist chose me more than I chose it. It suits me, and I don't know if I could do anything else better. Even though, in my early years, I wanted to be a journalist. Unfortunately, in this country I was never able to fulfill my dreams. I found everything I needed in my life in America. Maybe things have changed around here these days and it's better, but for me the memories of my homeland are bittersweet...”

It is said that things happen for a reason. I would never have guessed that one of the countries the company I worked for would choose to do business with was Albania. Since I left many years ago without returning, I was interestedly following the whole democratic progress of my country. It was obvious that it was a long, endless road with a lot being done and a lot more still to do. The company I worked for was supported by government programs and private sponsors to help abused women around the world. In some countries we would open centers with shelters for the ones who ran away from their abusers, boyfriends, or pimps. Through those programs, they would rehabilitate and earn the right to attend schools or courses in America. During that kind of mission, I met Toni. The company he was working for as an accountant and running all of their finances was one of the biggest sponsors of this country. Toni's background was as an engineer and, when I met him, he was on the road to getting promoted to a director of the company. During those two weeks of working next to him, I intensively felt something good. I didn't know what it was, but at least I felt understood. He was a true gentleman and would never say anything inappropriate or make comments and compliments like most of the other guys do on that side of the planet. Actually, I was under the impression that he was careful to hide some kind of shyness he felt while we were traveling in the company's van. He was trying to be polite and act naturally when we were stuck together like sardines inside the van, overly packed with people going to work. They didn't seem to keep their distance and stayed so close

and smashed into me while Toni was trying to respect my space. One day he got the courage to ask me out for lunch and some historic sightseeing. We felt an instant connection and an immediate attraction despite the fact that we had just met. A certain magnetism was inevitable once you noticed a similar way of thinking or viewing life. We understood each other without even saying a word, only by looking into each other's eyes. When we talked, we would finish each other's sentences. I was drawn to him; his honesty, his sincerity, his opinions, and his sense of humor were making me fall for him uncontrollably. I would continue to laugh at his jokes even when I was alone at my place. We could talk about anything together without the need to be reserved or politically correct, and it felt good to be ourselves. One time he mentioned that he felt like he'd known me his whole life, and yet there wasn't enough time in this life to get to know me. He said that everything we were experiencing felt so familiar and I was either like someone he had known before or had always been with him somehow. I mentioned that we must have met in a different life. He smiled, admitting that this theory has crossed his mind too and he asked me to give him some idea of what eras we might have been together. I told him that I felt like we had lived in Chicago during World War II, and we were filthy rich, big manufacturers.

"No. I was a banker," interrupted Toni, acting so serious, like I was altering the true facts.

"You and your husband were factory owners because you were married when I met you. But later, you left everything behind. It's a very complicated story, let's leave it at that," he continued, with that sense of humor that allowed him to get away with pretty much anything. I got the hint and pretended that it was a joke. He got very quiet for a few minutes after that and asked me if it would be possible for us to continue our friendship after I returned to America.

"I don't mean to be rude and inconsiderate, Ema, but it would mean a lot to me if we could stay in touch with each other. I must say that you are a very special woman and one of the most interesting people I know."

I wouldn't have been able to say no even if I wanted to. I was already hooked...

Chapter 2

I did take a nice nap while Toni was driving, and I'm not sure if I woke up from his sharp braking or from the cool air entering through the half-open window. For a moment it felt like I had slept for hours, only to find out that only thirty minutes had passed. I looked at Toni, who was driving quietly. It seemed like a permanent smile was stamped on his face, but that could have been my imagination. Here and there he would look at me with his green eyes that shone like two emeralds contoured with thick, dark lashes. He closed the window instinctively right after he thought I was shivering in my seat. He was always doing those little caring gestures that would melt my heart. Interestingly we had a number of these unspoken gestures flowing between us like we had lived together for years and knew what to expect. The same thing happened when we talked online. We would understand if something was bothering one another during the first sentence. It didn't matter that we were oceans away, on opposite sides of the world.

“Are you still cold, babe?”

“No, thank you.”

“Is there any reason why you have that big smile on your face, my love?” said Toni.

“Nothing important. I just like your devotion, that's all.” I said.

“Yeah, like a loyal dog, no doubt.” Toni stuck his tongue out and made that dog face in such a cute way that made me laugh. Part of that laughter came from the comparison and the way people joked around here. Then he bit his lip from the inside. That particular gesture did something to me and he knew it. I think he did it purposely in a provocative way.

We seemed to be approaching the place where we would be spending the next few days together and Toni opened the window again.

“Do you smell anything, hon?”

“Yeeess, the scent of the sea.”

“Look outside the window. Any idea where we are?”

“Vlorë?!”

“Yes, love.”

On the right side of the road, the gray sea unfolded with rough white waves smashing on the shore full of little stones. I felt the excitement rushing through me and I opened the window all the way down to allow the salty air to caress my face.

“Are we staying in Vlorë, Toni?”

“We are going to stay wherever my princess wishes to.”

After a short drive, we couldn't see the sea any longer and had entered a complex with new apartments. We stopped at building number seven.

“Don't tell me you have picked that exact building to stay in,” I said suspiciously.

“I am afraid that we are going to stay here,” said Toni with some kind of irony.

He parked the car, opened my door, and pulled our luggage out of the car. When we were on the elevator, he put his hands softly around my face and kissed me slowly until the elevator stopped and the doors were about to open. Surprisingly, we stopped on the seventh floor. *Superstitious to the bone*, I thought. He had mentioned once about lucky number seven, but I didn't think he was serious about it and truly believed those kind of things.

The hallway was empty and quiet. With one hand Toni was trying to open the door while his other hand was on my hair and I was pulled close to him. Without waiting for the door to open, he started kissing me, first on my lower lip and then on the upper one in a rhythm that was getting more and more intense. Our breathing got heavier and we couldn't wait to be inside of that apartment. I was so into the moment that I barely noticed what a nice place it was. Our hands were all over each other's bodies, trying to take off our clothes as quickly as possible. Naked finally, with adjacent bodies, whispering lovely words, unleashing whimpering and lustful cries, we made love passionately. It started out slow with sweet, light kisses, our lips making noises from the ecstasy. The things we did I'd never even had the guts to think about before, let alone perform them. I never thought I belonged to that category of women who could make love like that. But I felt relieved, I felt fulfilled, I felt free. I knew that I felt something that I had never felt before, not ever in my life. I felt something so wonderful but frightening at the same time. It was one of those feelings that you're afraid you'll get addicted to instantly. What I could compare to an African safari

where all the powerful screams and noises of the different animals are harmonized like a big beautiful choir that gives you chills. This was my jungle, my safari, where I entered fearlessly. One thing was for sure: this place was pulling me in magically, and I was about to experience true love for the first time in my life. If I only knew that the kind of love I was about to experience was the crazy kind. The kind over which wars were started and enemies were made. I felt it deep in my soul that something big was about to happen and my life was going to change forever. I was ready for the mystery and magic to unfold. But did I meet my true love at the wrong time?

I was lying lazily on top of Toni, and at that moment I got up and noticed the neatness of his apartment.

“Oh, how pleasant it is here,” I said, looking around at the details now.

Toni got up as well and fixed my hair. The apartment was cottage style, painted a light gray, almost white color and furnished so tastefully. The light color was dominant with some turquoise or blue accessories breaking it up perfectly. Through the open, long, also-white curtains, you could see the balcony with the sea view. Toni was following me around and, once he noticed my curiosity, opened the curtains all the way so I could see the sunset. The sun was already disappearing, leaving behind only some reddish orange stripes mixed with other purple, black, and gray ones.

“Oh, that view is breathtaking!” *Just like the one I have in Miami* almost slipped from my tongue but I decided not to mention it. I had moved there to escape the harsh winters of Chicago. Toni’s apartment was exactly how he’d mentioned it in our hourly, long-distance conversations and how I’d pictured it. When I used to describe how I imagined our apartment if we moved in together someday, I was describing exactly the one he already had. He had gone out and rented this one with the hope that I would like it so much I’d never want to leave his place. I felt spoiled, no denying that; I was touched by it all and it teared me up. What good had I done to deserve someone like that? I felt like I was the luckiest woman alive. Thank you, universe! Thank you, God! Thank you, Aphrodite, you love goddess! Thank you, angels, who are helping me in my happiness!

Those short days spent at Toni’s place were absolutely the best days of my life. They were simply wonderful and not because we were doing anything spectacular. Just being there in each other’s arms—most of the time with no clothes on—was priceless. All we did was drink some good

wine, have some long, deep conversations, laugh until our ribs were hurting over crazy, stupid little things. That must have been what they called happiness.

While I would take a short nap, Toni would finish his paperwork that had piled up on his computer. Even after waking up, I would stay lying down while admiring him entirely. I adored him. To me, he was perfection, the man of my dreams, the one I had been waiting for all my life and hadn't met until now. One time when I was lying on my back over Toni's body, while he played with my hair, he whispered me a question.

"How is all this going to go, love?"

I didn't answer right away. I didn't even have an answer for him.

"I don't want to spend a minute away from you, my love. I am not sure if you truly understand how I feel about you," Toni said.

"I do understand, Toni, I do. But what do you want from me? Everything is so complicated and it's almost impossible for us to be with one another..." I couldn't finish my sentence, I felt nauseous. "We don't have a future, Toni, do you understand? We only have the present."

"Stay here with me. Don't go back anymore." He said those words so seriously and I knew he meant them.

I laughed.

"Ah, if only it was that simple, I would have done it in a heartbeat, with no hesitation. We both know how that goes. Once I leave, you will forget about me. Far from the eyes, far from the heart. You will meet other girls. I see how they look at you here. Soon after I will just be somebody that you used to know."

"My heart is held hostage, Ema. That alone makes it impossible for a man to forget the woman that he once loved. By the way, the girls have always been here, last time I checked, but it doesn't matter. My eyes see only you. My heart beats only for you, my love, my everything..."

If I knew at that moment the turn things were going to take in my life, I would have never left that apartment, ever. Even if my life depended on it...

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