**Chapter Seventeen**

*Innocent Voice of Reason*

“I can’t believe this.” Marie said to herself out loud. “All these years I thought Jasmine was his mother. Now to find out he’s actually Diana’s son…”

“Jasmine, does he think you and David are his actual parents?” Michael asked.
“No, baby.” I said. “He--”

“I’m talking to JASMINE!”

I cleared my throat and apologized for interrupting.

“The three of us told him when he turned four that you and Diana are his parents.” She continued. “Ever since he’s learned to speak, he’s never called David and I ‘mom and dad’. He calls me aunty and David buddy. We taught him never to call me aunty in front of Marie so he would just say ‘AJ’ whenever she was around.”

“THAT’S why he never called you two mom and dad!” Marie said. “It finally makes sense. I always wondered about that.”

“David and I raised him but Diana always played a very active part in his life.” Jasmine explained. “Since his birth, she’s paid for his health care, food, clothing, shoes, his involvement with sports and everything else. We told her she didn’t have to but she felt obligated to do it since we took him in as our own.”
“I see…” Michael said still not facing me. “Marie, what does he look like?”
“He’s adorable.” She said trying to make her idol feel better. “Now I understand why he doesn’t look like Jasmine or David. He looks like YOU, Michael.”

“When was he born?”
“February 13th 1997.” I said.

“He just turned six about three months ago…”

“Yes.”
“Diana and I weren’t speaking to each other during that time…” Michael said trying not to lose his temper. “She told me she had a meeting with Cameron and would be staying at your house for a few days. That was February 12th to the 15th. While I was here alone on Valentine’s Day crying all night missing her, she was at your house with our son…”
“Michael, please…I never wanted to hurt—“
“SHUT UP!” He yelled. “I don’t want to hear you!”

“Michael, Marie, I know you two are hurt, really angry and shocked out of your minds. Believe me when I say that Diana didn’t want to keep him a secret for this long. The way you came back into her life and swept her off her feet made her forget all about reality. Being away from you for five years, losing a child, you marrying Lisa Marie, it all took a toll on her.”

“So she thought what I didn’t know couldn’t hurt me?” Michael asked.

“In a way, yes. But we—“
“Where is David?”
“He hasn’t replied to my messages or called me back yet. I’m assuming he’s still on the road.”

“Let me know when he gets here.” Michael said standing up from his chaise. “I’m going upstairs to see Paris.”
“Michael, I’m sorry.” I said as tears filled my eyes. “I didn’t mean to—“
“I SAID SHUT UP.” He replied while leaving the room. “You had six years to talk to me. Your voice doesn’t mean a damn thing to me now.”

“Marie…please forgive me.”
“You always thought I was the stupid one.”
“I DID NOT! Why would you think that?”
“Since that day at the museum, you were never the same person.”
“Marie, you have to understand—“

“I UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING!” She yelled making Jasmine and I cover our ears. “MY SO CALLED BEST FRIENDS LIED TO ME FOR SIX YEARS! SIX WHOLE YEARS! DIANA STOLE MICHAEL FROM ME THEN SLEPT WITH HIM AFTER BARELY KNOWING HIS NAME, GETS PREGNANT AND KEEPS HIS SON A SECRET FROM ME AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, FROM HIS OWN FATHER?!”

“Marie, keep your voice down.” Jasmine said. “We don’t need all of the staff members to hear our private business.”
“I guess you want all of them to find out the hard way like we just did?” She asked getting up from the couch. “Would you have kept Paris a secret too, Diana?”
“WHAT?”

“You heard me! I bet if you visited Michael here and became pregnant again you would have kept that a secret too!”
“Marie, you know that’s not fair.” Jasmine said.

“FAIR? YOU WANT TO TALK FAIR?”

“I’m not listening to this.” I said getting up from the couch. “I’m going to talk to Michael in private. Jas, come get us when those two arrive.”

“He’ll never forgive you.” Marie said. “He should have chosen me instead!”
“MARIE!” Jasmine yelled. “That’s mean!”
“It’s TRUE!” She said. “I never would have hurt him as many times as Diana has. She’s nothing but a selfish bitch.”
“THAT’S ENOUGH!” Jasmine said getting up from the couch. “Apologize right now!”
“It’s ok.” I said as I made my way out of the living room. “She’s just speaking the truth – something I never did until it was too late and Michael himself said the same thing to me once. If only I could turn back the hands of time…”

I went upstairs to Paris’s nursery and noticed Michael was not there. Bev was rocking our little girl to sleep and told me her father had just left and wished to be alone in his bedroom. I thanked her as she sang a song to my little angel and tucked her inside her crib.

I then walked across the hall to Michael’s bedroom and slowly opened the door. He was standing on his balcony looking out at the snowcapped mountains and custom built flowing lakes with his back towards the white concrete wall against him. I crept up from behind and lifted my arms to touch him but he spoke before my hands reached his body.

“Don’t touch me, Diana.” He said without turning around to face me.

“Michael…” I replied lowering my hands and standing next to him on his balcony. “I know you’re angry at me and I’ve hurt you really badly. What I did was inexcusable and I don’t deserve to be forgiven but please...please talk to me.”

As I stood next to my future husband studying his shattered, unwavering face, he gave me the silent treatment. Several minutes went by before I noticed tears falling down his soft, rosy, pillow like cheeks. Not knowing what he was thinking was driving me insane.

“Michael, talk to me PLEASE!”

Silence.

“Say anything. Yell at me. Swear at me. Get angry at me. But PLEASE, PLEASE don’t be silent with me. I hate it!”
“You can’t stand me being silent for six minutes…” He continued. “Yet you kept silent about our son for six years.”

“I’m sorry…” I said trying to ease his pain. “I didn’t mean to keep him a secret from you for so long. I tried telling you for months but—“

“DIANA! I DON’T WANT TO HEAR YOUR EXCUSES!”
“Baby, please—“

Michael laughed with anger in his tone.

“How can you even call me that every day knowing you kept me in the dark about ours?”
“Michael, I call him that too.”
“So you call me the same thing just to make yourself feel better?”
“NO! I call you that because I love you. It’s my term of affection for the people I love most.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about love.” He said turning his back towards me again. “Even Lisa Marie wouldn’t have done what you did.”
“Michael, that’s cold.”
“Not nearly as cold as what you did. You really are selfish, Diana.”

“I don’t always think about myself.”

“Yes, you do. You’ve always been that way and your parents’ death has turned you into a master of your own universe. You don’t care about who you hurt as long as you look like the hero or the victim wanting everyone to feel sorry for you in the end. One day you will realize that not everything in this world is about you and when that day comes, I may or may not be around to catch you when you fall.”

He then pushed past me leaving the room.

“Where are you going?”
“Away from you.”

“Michael, I’m sorry!”
“That makes two of us.”

He left the bedroom slamming the door shut behind him. I quickly followed him down the grand staircase and noticed Jasmine was sitting alone in the living room with her head in her hands.

“Where’s Marie?” Michael asked his tea flower.

“She said she needed some air.” Jasmine said between sniffles. “I think she might be with the animals.”
“I’m going to find her.”

“Michael, please wait! There’s something else you have to know!”

He walked out of the main entrance slamming the door so loud the house shook slightly making the kitchen staff shudder. Kai and Bev came running to the foyer asking if everything was ok and all I could do was tell them that Michael and I had an argument. Jasmine said she still hadn’t heard from David and assumed he was still on the road with little man.

“He still doesn’t know about the reasons behind those forms, Jas.” I said trying not to break into tears. “He has no idea that his own son is suffering from the same conditions as him.”
“We don’t know that yet.” Jasmine said helping me to the couch. “We can’t just assume the worst.”

“He hates me and he has every reason to.”
“He loves you too much to ever hate you, Diana.”

“He won’t even look at me.”
“He’s just upset and no one can blame him. Give him and Marie some time. We dropped a pretty huge bomb on both of them today.”
“I know. I thought telling them would make me feel better but it doesn’t. I feel even worse than before.”
“Just breathe.” Jasmine said hugging me tightly. “Everything will be fine. I won’t let anything happen to you, Michael or your son. Stay positive and have faith, Diana.”

Phone calls, faxes and emails were coming into Neverland from every corner. Michael’s security guards were patrolling every inch of his home regularly making sure no one tried to break in. His staff unplugged all of the phones in the main house and disconnected their boss’s fax machine in his office. Never ending news reports were broadcasting Michael’s ‘secret child’ to the world causing even more scandal and embarrassment to the Pop star and his already tarnished reputation.

Not wanting me to feel any worse, Kai collected and hid all of the remote controls in the house so no one could turn the TV on. Neverland was starting to feel like a place for house arrest instead of the magical estate it was built to be. After seeing several missed calls from Havenhurst, Jasmine grabbed my phone and turned it off placing it inside a desk drawer in the living room.

Michael went to his sanctuary hoping to find his teddy bear friend and to clear his mind from the nerve wracking news he just received. No matter how upset or stressed he was, the Gloved One always found solace in animals and children. He searched for Bubbles but did not find him in his cage. He then lifted the latch to his barn and saw Marie sitting with Louie, his adorable pet llama. Michael perched himself next to Marie sitting on a small stack of hay and put his arm around her as fresh tears poured down her grief stricken face.

“Bear…”

“I can’t believe they lied to us.”
“I know. But we can work through it together.”
“I’m sorry, Michael. I can’t even look at you right now.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I knew about him and you didn’t.”
“You didn’t know he was my son, Marie.” Michael said putting his friend’s head against his shoulder. “Don’t punish yourself for something you had no control over.”
“You should take your own advice.”

“You sound like his mother now.”

The two friends then laughed and consoled each other by telling jokes and talking about Michael’s upcoming project. As hurt as he was, the Pop star’s focus was entirely on his friend. Seeing his teddy bear hurt was something he simply could not handle and Michael did his best to make sure Marie was her cheerful, bubbly self again.

“Shall we go and meet your little boy?”
“Marie, I’m nervous.”
“Why?”
“Wouldn’t you be if you just found out you had a six year old son?

“Probably, but even though I’ve already seen him, this is my first time seeing him as your child and not Jasmine’s.”

“I’d like to know about him before I actually see him.”

“I can tell you a few things about him so you’re not caught off guard.”
“That would be nice.”
“What would you like to know?”
“What color is his hair?”
“Blonde.”

Michael looked puzzled.

“My son has blonde hair?”

“What’s wrong with that?”
“Are you sure this kid is MINE?”

Marie burst out laughing.

“In case you forgot, your brother in law Brad also has blonde hair, Michael.” Marie explained. “Diana’s father also had dirty blonde hair.”
“That explains a lot.” Michael said giggling. “What else?”
“He has your eyes.”
“Really?”
“Yes. You can easily get lost in them just like yours.”
“Does he sound like me?”

Marie tapped her index finger on her bottom lip deep in thought.

“A little.”
“I guess I’ll know in a matter of time.”

“Yes, you will.”
“I don’t know what to say to him.”
“You might not have to say anything.” Marie explained. “Let him talk to you first.”
“What if I say something stupid?”

“A genius like you can NEVER say anything stupid.”

“Always so supportive.” Michael said kissing his friend’s forehead. “What would I do without you?”
“Probably Moonwalk into a wall and fall over your penny loafers.”

He giggled as he helped his friend stand up from the hay stack and headed toward the barn exit with her. After opening the barn door and latching it shut, Michael turned around and heard another strange howling in his ears.

“*Be strong, Michael*.”

“Marie, did you hear that?!”

“Hear what?”
“I heard a voice.”
“I didn’t hear anything.”

“*He is your legacy…be patient and proud*.”

“GO AWAY!”

“Who are you talking to?” Marie asked confused.
“Someone is talking to me.”
“There is NO ONE here but us!”
“I swear, Marie. I can hear someone.”

Michael’s teddy bear was baffled by his strange behavior.

“Are you alright?”
“I’m fine. Let’s go.”

“Ana, they’re walking back to the house now.” Jasmine said peering through the bay window in the living room.

“Where is David? It’s not like him to be this late.”
“I know. He said he was ten minutes away a half hour ago.”

“I’m worried Jas. I hope nothing bad happened to either of them.”
“I doubt that. David’s a military man with a six year old child in his car. No one would dare mess with him.”

The two friends entered the main house completely ignoring us. Michael asked Jasmine if Paris was still asleep and she told him she was. He and Marie sat next to each other on the couch not paying me any attention. As the four of us sat in the living room in complete silence, the tension was slowly starting to build stronger and stronger. Not being able to talk to Michael felt worse than sitting in an electric chair waiting for my life to come to an end.

Eventually, Bill came through the main door telling us that David had finally arrived. Michael sighed deeply and held Marie’s hand for support. He started panicking and Jasmine and Diana stood up to go to the foyer and greet their husband and son.

“Marie, I can’t do this.” Michael said trying to breathe deeply. “I’m having a panic attack.”
“You CAN do this.” She replied squeezing his hand. “I’ll be right here next to you. It’s going to be alright.”

“No, I really can’t…”

Jasmine and Diana opened the front door and waited for David’s SUV to drive up to the main house. Marie stood up to join them but Michael refused to let go of his friend’s hand and asked her to stay seated with him. She tried to calm the Pop star but he suddenly went into frenzy mode and immediately felt sick.

“I need to go upstairs now.” He said. “I’m going to regurgitate.”
“Michael, you need to relax.” Marie said rubbing his back gently.

“I can’t do this. I can’t. I can’t.” He repeated.

“Michael, it’s ok. I’m right here with—“

He quickly stood up and darted out of the living room heading up the grand staircase.

“Baby, where are you going?” I asked.

“He’s not feeling well.” Marie said. “I’m going upstairs to make sure he’s ok.”

Jasmine and Diana greeted the two guests as they entered the main house. Little man was fast asleep in David’s arms. Diana scooped her son into her own arms and placed him on Michael’s black leather couch before running upstairs to check on her fiancé.

“He’s been really tired all day.” David said as he and his wife sat on the chaise couch across from the little boy. “It took me over an hour to wake him up, get him dressed and bring him here.”
“It’s ok.” Jasmine said. “I’m just glad you two made it here safely.”
“How did he take it?”
“That’s another story.”

“How did Marie take it?”
“Another story part two.”

“Where is he now?”
“Upstairs freaking out. I want to check on him but I don’t want to leave squirt alone.”
“I’ll stay with him.” David said squeezing his beloved’s hand. “He needs you three by his side now more than ever. Go and be with him.”

“I don’t think he wants to see me right now. He’s probably just as mad at me as he is with Diana.”

“Give him time.” David said rubbing his wife’s shoulder. “He’ll come around. Someone so full of love will never hold a grudge against you forever.”
“I love you, David.”
“I love you too, Jazzy Pooh.”

Michael and Marie went to Paris’s nursery. The Pop star watched his little girl sleeping and couldn’t stop himself from crying. Marie wiped his falling tears and rubbed the small of his back doing her best to comfort him. Diana came into the room and saw the two watching her daughter and felt slightly relieved that Michael was alright.

“Leave.” He said without turning around to face his future wife standing at the doorway.

“Michael, he’s—“
“LEAVE!”

Marie scoffed under her breath as she turned her back towards me.

“I think he’s here, Michael.” Marie whispered.

“I need to be alone.”
“Take all the time you need.” I said trying to soothe his agony. “Please come and join us when you are ready.”

“I don’t want to see or hear anyone right now.” Michael said trying his hardest not to sound rude or harsh. “Please just leave me here.”
“Michael, I know you are—“
“LEAVE ME ALONE, DIANA!” He yelled making Marie and I cover our ears.

“We’ll be downstairs if you need us.” Marie said as she kissed her idol’s shoulder and left the room with her best friend.

I gestured Marie to join me in the master bedroom so that I could talk to her privately. She walked inside the room and stood near the door crossing her arms and waiting for me to speak.

“Marie, I know you’re angry with me and you have every right to be. I just want you to know that I never thought you were stupid or not worthy enough to know the truth. I didn’t know how to tell you and I made the mistake of dragging it along this whole time when I should have just came right out and told you and Michael from the very beginning. I was only thinking of you two and I never wanted to hurt either one of you. I don’t expect you to forgive me right away but I hope one day you will so that we can continue being best friends. I would hate to lose you over something like this. You have always been a wonderful friend and your loyalty knows no bounds. I’m sorry for hurting you.”

Marie rolled her eyes and sighed deeply.

“Are you finished?”
“Yes.”
“Is that the best you could come up with?”
“Marie, I wasn’t giving you a speech. I was telling you how I feel.”
“I don’t give a shit about how you feel anymore and I think it’s safe to assume that your fiancé doesn’t either.”
“You both have been in the dark for so long. I know there is nothing I can say—“
“DIANA, YOU ARE SO DUMB!” Marie yelled.

“I know I am! Can’t you see I am trying to make things better?”
“You only know how to make things WORSE!”

“Marie, I’m really trying here.”
“I don’t care. I want nothing to do with you.”
“Please don’t do this!”

“I can and I will.”
“I can’t lose you. I’ll be a complete wreck.”
“Don’t worry, you have your two kids and right hand friend who helped you lie for six years by your side. You don’t need me. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if Michael tells you the same thing.”

She then marched out of the room leaving me standing alone with nothing but flashbacks of what just happened between us.

David, Jasmine and Diana sat in the living room talking while their little boy was still asleep on the couch. Michael was in his daughter’s nursery and Marie went to get some fresh air and sat on a bench near the main house water fountain outside. Michael’s fun filled, bright home was starting to fade into the darkness. Confusion, betrayal, anger and sadness dripped from every wall and everyone’s aura. No one had the slightest desire to do anything and each staff member did nothing but leave everyone to wallow in their night of sorrow.

“I can’t stand this!” Jasmine said getting up from the couch. “He needs to see his son NOW!”

“He will when he’s ready.” David said gesturing his wife to sit down.

“Diana, I can’t believe how calm you’re being about this!”
“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“GO AND BE WITH HIM!”

I explained to the married couple that Michael didn’t want to see me and the two of them began lecturing me about my relationship and how I shouldn’t give up on my future husband.

“I really don’t want to hear this shit.” I said wanting them to be quiet. “My relationship is not black and white like yours. There are plenty of grey areas that people don’t see or understand.”
“Why don’t we move this conversation to another room so we don’t wake the little one up?” David suggested.

“I don’t want to leave him here alone.” I explained. “He’ll be frightened if he wakes up and sees a strange home with no one around.”
“He’ll be fine.” Jasmine said. “We can go to the kitchen. That way if he wakes up we’ll hear him call for one of us.”

Not wanting to wake the young child, I agreed and we all made our way into the kitchen. I informed all of Michael’s staff members that they could retire for the night and one of us would call if we needed them for anything. Jasmine and David sat on stools near the large square shaped breakfast bar and continued their useless pep talk about mine and Michael’s complicated union.

“Diana, Michael will come around and forgive you in time.” Jasmine explained. “He’s just in a huge state of shock and needs to adjust to having a six year old son.”
“I agree.” David said. “He’s not the kind of person to hate on people. We all know that better than anyone. He’ll be okay. Just give him some space.”

While the three adults were discussing the issue at hand, the young boy who was asleep on the couch in the living room suddenly opened his eyes and sat up rubbing them with his adorable fingers and scratched his head in confusion wondering where he was.

Seated in front of Neverland’s large, iconic floral clock, Marie sighed deeply placing her head in her hands. Thousands of questions swam through her mind and the only emotion she could actually feel was betrayal. How could her two best friends keep something so important from her and for so long? Why didn’t they just tell her and Michael the truth from the very beginning?

Being the kind natured young woman she was, Marie immediately casted her feelings aside and focused entirely on Michael. Wanting to make sure her friend and favorite singer was alright, she stood up from the bench and began walking towards the main house.

Michael opened his eyes and realized he had fallen asleep in his daughter’s nursery while sitting in the rocking chair watching his little girl in her crib. He quickly stood up and noticed the infant was still in her peaceful slumber and did not wish to disturb her. He checked the baby monitor making sure it was turned on and silently left the room closing the door behind him.

“Marie is NEVER going to forgive us for this one.” I said to Jasmine and David who were sipping on their hot tea I made for them. “She will hate me forever.”
“Don’t say that.” Jasmine said placing her porcelain blue cup on the ebony marbled lined breakfast table. “She also needs time.”
“You three have always been the best of friends.” David explained. “You’re like the three musketeers. Without one, the other two are incomplete.”
“I’m sure they will find someone to replace me.” Marie said making her way into the kitchen. “I have no interest in being friends with liars.”

“Marie, you don’t mean that.” Jasmine said watching her friend open the fridge.

“Oh, yes I do. I’m done with both of you.”
“Marie—“
“By the way, not that it matters to me but your son is missing.”
“WHAT?” The three of us yelled in unison.

“He’s not on the couch?!” David yelled.
“Nope.” Marie replied as she casually poured herself a glass of milk. “Pretty dumb idea leaving your child alone in a huge place like Neverland. What great parents you all are.”
“SHUT UP!” I yelled. “Don’t insult my parenting skills just because you were kept in the dark about it.”
“That’s no insult, Diana.” Marie said. “The insult is that kid having YOU as his mother!”

“STOP IT!” Jasmine yelled. “We need to find him NOW.”

“Good luck.” Marie said sarcastically as she sat at the breakfast bar not wanting to help look for the missing child.

The three ‘parents’ ran out of the kitchen and parted ways checking every corner of the main house looking for the lost little boy.

Michael went into his bedroom and closed the door behind him. He sat on the hardwood floor with his back against his sleigh bed sobbing quietly and uncontrollably to himself. How could the woman he loved more than anything in the world keep his own child a secret from him for so many years? Was she ashamed of having his baby? Did she want to hurt him on purpose? Did she think he would never find out even if their paths hadn’t crossed again?

He angrily pounded his fists into the ground beneath him and turned to his side with his back facing the bedroom door. He closed his eyes hoping that everything he was going through was nothing but a bad dream that would disappear when he woke up. Of course, the one thing the King of Pop knew better than anyone was that his reality was never a dream that he could simply escape or wake up from. It was something he was always forced to deal with whether he wanted to or not.

To his surprise, the balcony doors flung open and a huge gust of wind entered his room sending cold shivers down his spine. He stood up from the floor and closed the doors, locking them to make sure they didn’t fly open again. He sat back down on the floor and heard the same howling voice in his ear that he kept on hearing before:

*“Be brave, my dear friend….I shall always be with you.”*

“Who are you?” Michael asked wanting to know why he was constantly being haunted by an unknown spirit of some kind.

A thick, black smoke appeared on his ivory colored bedroom wall near the balcony door and specs of silver were displayed around it. Michael had never seen anything so beautiful but was also terrified that a supernatural force was surrounding him. The letters ‘POW’ were clearly displayed on the wall before quickly evaporating into thin air. Michael had no idea what those letters meant but feared for his life thinking he was suffering from hallucinations – a condition he once suffered from as a child and adolescent.

Michael’s mind was clearly distorted. His only focus was to sleep the night away and wake up thinking his reality was in fact, not really happening. He opened his bottom nightstand drawer and pulled out a large plastic bottle of tranquilizers. He squeezed it firmly in his hand and opened the lid wanting to swallow his misery and fall asleep in the darkness of his pain leaving him completely numb when suddenly his bedroom door slightly creaked open.

“Leave me alone, Diana.” He said without turning around.

In that moment, Michael was about to place the bottle to his mouth and ingest his secret medication when a completely new and unknown voice spoke to him making the bottle slip out of his hands and his breath scatter in his throat.

“Daddy?”