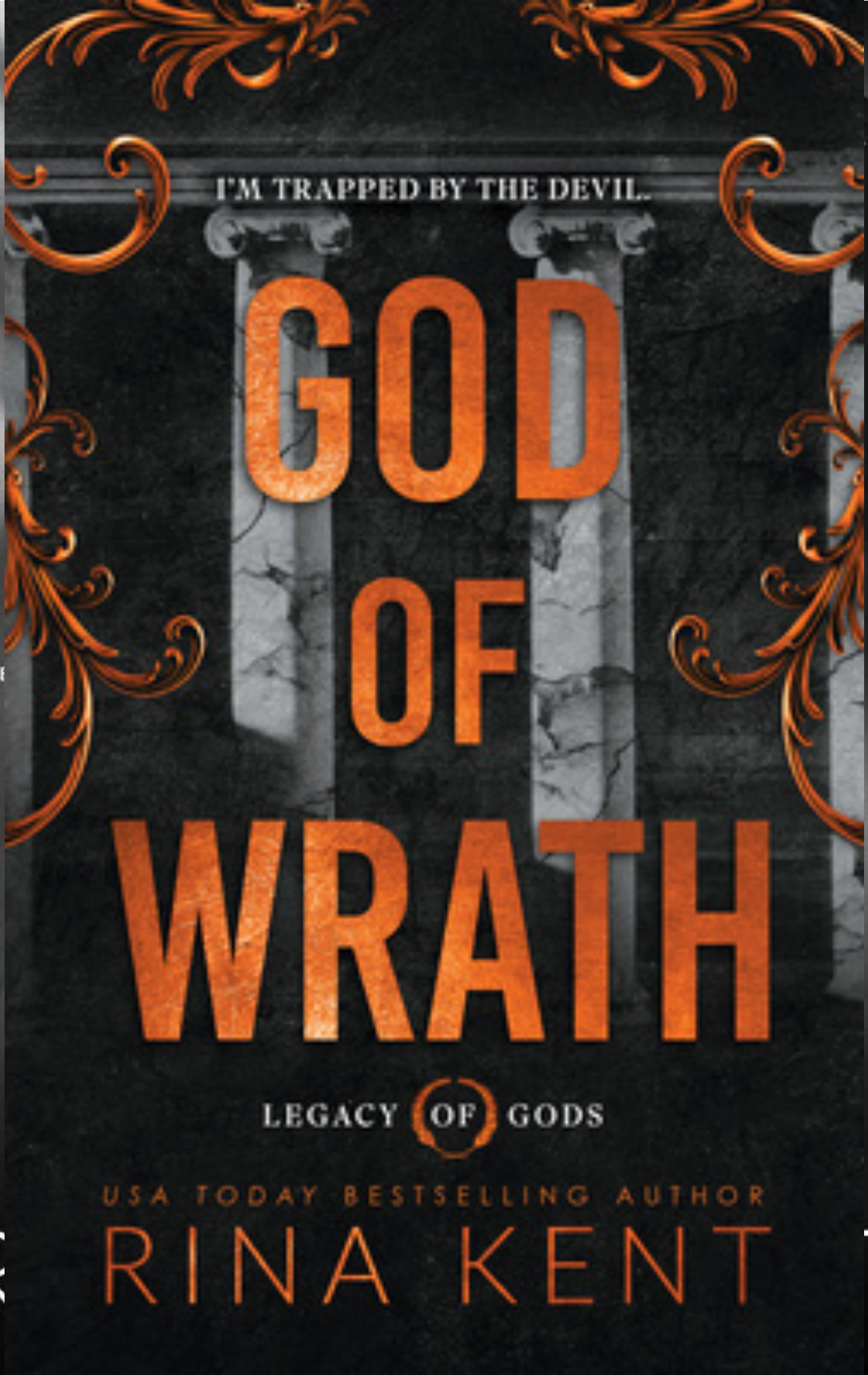

I'M TRAPPED BY THE DEVIL.
GOD OF WRATH
LEGACY OF GODS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RINA KENT

GOD OF WRATH

OceanofPDF.com

LEGACY OF GODS SERIES BOOK 3

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RINA KENT

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Tempted by Deception

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To anti-heroes and villains.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you haven’t read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters aren't for the faint of heart.

This book contains primal kink, dubcon and mentions of sexual assault. I trust you know your triggers before you proceed.

God of Wrath is a complete STANDALONE.

For more things Rina Kent, visit www.rinakent.com

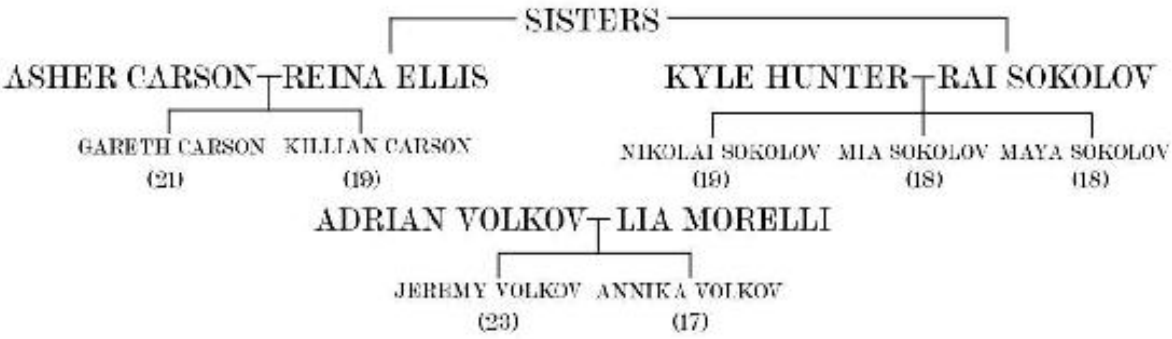
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LEGACY OF GODS TREE

ROYAL ELITE UNIVERSITY



THE KING'S U'S COLLEGE



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BLURB

I’m trapped by the devil.
What started as an innocent mistake turned into actual hell.
In my defense, I didn’t mean to get involved with a mafia prince.
But he barged through my defenses anyway.
He stalked me from the shadows and stole me from the life I know.
Jeremy Volkov might appear charming, but a true predator lurks inside.
He’s out to possess, own, and keep me.
But I have no plans to stick around in his blood-soaked world.
Or so I think.

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PLAYLIST

Love and War – Fleurie
Another Love – Tom Odell
We Have It All – Pim Stones
Save Me – Emily Brophy
Blindfold – Sleeping Wolf
Madness – Tribal Blood
Every Breath You Take – Chase Holfelder
I Want You to Want Me – Chase Holfelder
Young Beast – Wold's First Cinema
Moth To A Flame – The Weekend & Swedish House Mafia
Certain Things – James Arthur & Chasing Grace
Losing You – James Arthur
Compliance – Muse
Russian Roulette – Rihanna

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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1

CECILY

This is a mistake.

The worst of all.

The most disastrous of all.

Maybe even the deadliest.

I shift in place, sweating behind my mask. My T-shirt and jeans stick to my heated skin until it’s almost too unbearable.

I inhale sharp breaths into my starved lungs, but I might as well be consuming smoke. My fingers itch to touch the mask or readjust the wig that digs into my skull.

After careful consideration, I don’t.

This place must be filled with surveillance cameras, and the last thing I want is to catch these people’s attention.

Not when I’m not supposed to be here. Behind enemy lines.

My gaze flits sideways discreetly as I methodically alternate between breathing through my nose and mouth.

The sledgehammer of dusk starts to tilt on the horizon, splashing a hint of orange behind the gray clouds.

An eerie sensation coats the thick air and trickles into my bones. No one aside from me seems focused on the sun’s ceremonial descent or the bold silhouette of danger this place is coated with.

On either side of me stand people wearing similar white masks with black numbers written on their foreheads.

I was one of the first to be allowed inside the Chamber of Decadence and my number is twenty-three. I stand in the second row that, like the first,

has twenty people.

No, *students*.

There are four rows, and the fifth is steadily being filled by the other participants who've been directed inside the gothic-like mansion by burly men in black suits and grotesque bunny masks.

Slashes of red crack their masks at the mouth and surround the holes where their blank eyes show. But the part that made me stiffen, aside from their sharp, dirty teeth, was how the one at the entrance double-checked the invitation QR code on my phone.

I was so sure he'd figure out that I stole someone else's invitation and was trespassing where I shouldn't be.

Despite the brown wig I wore to cover my attention-grabbing silver hair, the gray contacts, and thick-framed glasses, I wasn't confident I'd go unnoticed.

Still, I didn't speak to avoid giving away my British accent.

After all, The King's U is an all-American school, and we from Royal Elite University are easily picked out from a crowd.

Especially one we're not supposed to be part of.

Like this initiation.

The bunny gave me a hard stare, definitely longer than the one he directed at the other participants, but he eventually strapped a numbered mask on my face and a tag on my wrist with the same number.

I had to leave my phone, keys, and glasses with his bunny friend before I was allowed inside.

And now, I wait, with about eighty-five others. Make that eighty-seven.

I know because I counted.

That's what I do when my nerves are about to slice open my veins and spill my blood onto the ground. I count.

I also study my surroundings—watching, observing, and searching for a way out.

That's the part that made me think I'd made a mistake.

This place isn't designed with an escape route in mind. Once you're in, you're doomed. Physically. Mentally.

Emotionally.

After all, this mansion belongs to the Heathens. One of two notorious clubs at The King's U that simmers with corrupted power, infinite wealth, and mafia ties.

In fact, the majority of its members either belong to the Russian mafia or have ties to it.

All the students who showed up today are from TKU—except for me—and are thirsting after a smidgeon of that power. A glimmer of the monstrosity.

It's a privilege to receive an invitation to the Heathens' initiation that takes place twice a year, at the beginning of every semester.

The chances of actually being accepted into the club are about one percent. Not only do these types of initiations get brutal, but the founding members are also highly selective.

Safe to say, I'm not here for any medal or a real chance to get into the club. They'll kick me out the moment they find out who I am anyway.

My sole purpose is to get information about their inner workings, their security, and to gather as much intel about their members and the property as I possibly can.

Now, the likelihood of my doing that without drawing attention to myself is probably about five percent, which is admittedly low.

But I have a superpower.

Invisibility.

If I choose to, I can slip unnoticed into any situation. All I have to do is remain silent, blend into the background, and move seamlessly.

The creaking of the gate wrenches me from my busy thoughts, announcing the end of the admittance process.

A hundred students line up in five neat rows. Some are completely silent like me, others murmur and chat among themselves. Many are even joking, elbowing, and nudging their friends.

Words like 'excited,' 'can't wait,' and 'finally' float in the gloomy air with the energy of a distorted lullaby.

Everything about this place reeks of distortion. Some of that sensation has to do with the fact that the mansion the Heathens use as their compound is vast, old, has cathedral vibes, and could be used to perform satanic rituals.

It stands tall with three stories, separate wings, and two eastern towers that I suppose are used for surveillance.

A haunting quality flows within and around its walls in correspondence with the notorious reputation the club has.

Considering the fact that the mansion is situated off-campus, and therefore has more land than dormitories, it’s huge and, most importantly, secluded.

A large forest surrounds the property, but from what I’ve heard, it’s all wired, surveilled, and no other soul aside from the Heathens, or whomever they invite, is allowed access.

The double doors with demon-like knobs barge open and countless men in bunny masks rush outside in a sea of terror.

Not a word is spoken, but the combination of quickening footsteps, deformed sights, and the number of people involved is enough to make me freeze.

They circle us in systematic order, their Halloween-esque masks serving as the only features they project onto the world. Thirty-five. That’s how many there are.

And they’re all huge, burly, and definitely guards.

Because, of course, the members of the Heathens have their own security. They’re mafia princes after all, with empires of blood to go back to.

Their parents wouldn’t allow them to go to university without security shadowing their every move.

The casual chatter comes to a halt when the double doors on the top floor swing open and five people dressed in black stroll out to the balcony.

All eyes focus on them.

Every face, every breath, and every bit of human attention is on the Heathens’ main members, who look down on us like we’re peasants.

Neon purge-style masks cover their features, each a different color. Red, white, green, yellow, and orange.

And since it’s near dusk and cloudy as usual in England, the colors pop against everything black.

A bad pop.

A spine-chilling pop.

A pop that would make anyone remember those colors and masks should they meet them in the dark.

Static fills the air before a distorted voice speaks.

“Congratulations for making it to the Heathens’ highly competitive initiation. You are the selected elite the leaders of the club think are worthy of joining their world of power and connections. The price to pay for such

privileges is higher than money, status, or name. The reason everyone wears a mask is because you are all the same in the eyes of the club's founders. The price of becoming a Heathen is handing over your life. In a literal sense of the word. If you aren't willing to pay that, please exit through the small door to your left. Once you leave, you'll lose any chance to join us again."

A door beside the big gate opens, and exactly ten participants exit with their heads bowed.

The remaining ninety don't move from their spots. After all, everyone came here with the promise of power and positions that would benefit not only their university life, but also their futures afterward.

I would've left as well, if I hadn't made a promise, but I did, and I need to keep my word.

The voice rings out around us again, definitely from overhead. "Congratulations again, ladies and gentlemen. We shall now begin our initiation."

My attention slides to the five on the balcony—unmovable, silent, and intimidating without having to move a muscle.

True power isn't shouting or issuing orders. It isn't flexing muscles or showcasing weapons. It's standing with utter confidence, like these guys, and knowing precisely that they have everyone here by the throat.

True power simmers beneath the surface, its energy almost bursting at the seams.

"Tonight's game is predator and prey. You'll be hunted down by the club's founding members. That will be five to ninety, so you have the upper hand. If you manage to reach the edge of the property before they hunt you down, you'll be a Heathen. If not, you'll be eliminated and escorted out. The founding members have the right to use any methods available to hunt you down—including violence. If their weapon of choice touches you, you'll be automatically eliminated. Bodily harm can and will happen. You are also allowed to inflict violence on the founding members—if you can. The only rule is not taking a life. Not intentionally, at least. No questions are allowed and no mercy shall be granted. We don't want any weaklings in our ranks."

Everyone's attention, including mine, zeroes in on each member's weapon.

Red Mask's fingers circle a baseball bat that's resting nonchalantly on his shoulder.

Green Mask is holding a bow and has arrows with rubber points in a quiver that's slung over his back.

White Mask strokes a huge chain that's draped around his hands like a snake.

Orange Mask's gloved hand rests on top of a metal golf club that's propped on the ground.

Yellow Mask has no weapon at all, but his fists are balled.

When they said violence, they really meant violence. I knew that, spent last night mentally preparing for it, actually, but reality is different from anything I could've imagined.

Or predicted.

"You have a ten-minute head start. I suggest you run. The initiation has officially begun."

All at once, feet shuffle around me, then everyone is running in different directions.

I stare back one final time at the Heathens in their black clothes, neon masks, and unmoving stances.

They watch the scattering of participants without a change in demeanor. No reaction. Not even a flicker of excitement.

These are people who were taught to always stay calm—to bide their time, wait for opportunities, and never show their eagerness. Even when I'm sure the hunt is nothing more than gratification for them.

It's definitely not about accepting new members or survival of the fittest. There have been countless initiations in the past, most of them ending without adding any members, and no one knows anything about the participants who did manage to pass the initiation.

I try to gauge faces from the masks or the builds, but they're all similar—muscular, and tall—except for White Mask, who's a bit leaner.

Still, it's impossible to tell who is who.

Or search for the one that I should absolutely stay away from.

Scratch that.

I should avoid all of them.

They're predators and I'm part of the prey. If I end up being caught by any of them, I'll be ripped between their teeth.

My feet falter for a second too long, a second I don't have, a second that everyone else uses to run toward the forest.

I turn around and follow after them.

My limbs shake with every move, but the promise I made beats behind my rib cage with the ferocity of a second heart.

The students run between the gigantic trees, oblivious to the gloomy air that hugs the compound and wraps around every nook and cranny.

With the lack of sun, and only so little light, the green trees appear dark, ominous, and stuffed with cult and demonic vibes.

Choosing to focus on the mission, I sprint to gain as much distance as possible. I come across trees on which small cameras and speakers have been strategically installed to cover the entire grounds, but I lower my head and run past it to avoid capturing the attention of whoever is watching these feeds. I doubt the members would use them to hunt us down, but they might.

After all, there are no rules in tonight's hunt.

I slip behind the bushes, following a group of students I overheard whispering about some sort of strategy earlier.

Usually, I'd put as much distance as possible between me and others, but I'm here to observe how these monsters function.

The only way to stop deranged people is to study them first—get under their skin and understand their workings.

Only then will you be able to inflict any sort of damage.

I'm not the one who'll cause that damage, by the way. I'm too physically weak for that. But I have perfect spying skills due to my superpower.

The group of three don't notice me following them from my place behind the bushes. My shoes are silent and any noise I make by sliding between the trees is in sync with the sounds they release.

We cut some distance in the forest while moving at a regular pace.

They're working smarter, not stronger. Instead of running and attempting to avoid the Heathens, these three seem to somehow know their way around the forest and are using that advantage to reach the finish line faster.

"Numbers seventy-four and eighteen eliminated."

I flinch at the sound of the speaker, and I force myself not to think about *how* they got eliminated.

The three I'm following, Five, Six, and Seven, don't even pause at the announcement.

This must be a redo for them. Many who failed previous initiations may be invited back to the Heathens' mansion if the members deem them worthy of another try.

One more reason why these are the perfect candidates to follow.

They push through fallen branches, and even though they're not paying attention to the cameras, they tactfully slip between them.

The voice from the speaker echoes around us once and again, announcing the elimination of more numbers, sometimes in groups, sometimes in pairs.

Every time one of them comes, I jerk and alternate between breathing through my nose and mouth to remain calm.

Five, who's at the front, comes to a halt and the others follow suit, their fists clenched at their sides.

Through the branches and leaves, I make out the dragging of a golf club on the ground before Orange Mask comes into view.

Six goes to punch him, and Orange Mask not only ducks, but he also hits him across the face with the club.

I slam my hands to my mouth to keep from shrieking as blood explodes from beneath Six's mask and he falls to the ground with a thud. My legs tremble and I crouch between the bushes, watching the scene through the small gaps.

Five and Seven run in different directions and Orange Mask throws his golf club at the back of Five's head, slamming him against the tree, then runs after Seven. His movements are sure, oozing with a frightening amount of control.

And power.

There's so much power in every motion. Every action. Every sliver of decision he makes.

He didn't even wait for his club to hit Five. He knew it would, and it did, as evidenced by the participant's motionless body on the ground.

Something tells me he chose to run after Seven for a reason, and curiosity gnaws at my insides to find out what that reason is.

But I don't.

Because that would mean following after them and surely getting myself eliminated.

Curiosity is the work of the devil and his minion demons in order to make us irrational.

The speaker says numbers six and five are eliminated, and I wait for number seven, but it doesn't come.

Maybe he managed to escape. *Go for it, random American lad*.

Point is, I'm safe for now.

Slowly, I rise to my full height, cautiously studying my surroundings.

This time, I touch my wig, pushing it in place, and ignore the tingles in my sweaty skull as I tap my mask a few times to make sure it's there.

The sound of several sets of footsteps reaches my sensitive ears and I crouch back down as four participants run across a clearing. Orange Mask heads toward them with Red Mask following. They send them flying in no time, and their unconscious bodies fall to the ground.

I cover my mouth with my hand again, nails digging into the mask's plastic material and scratching at its surface.

Blimey.

This is a lot more gruesome than I could've ever imagined. Yes, I've heard the rumors about how cutthroat the Heathens can be and how they never hold back, but witnessing them actually hitting and punching is a completely different story.

It's not only the image of exploding blood, of hard punches against faces and bodies, or that they've broken a few people along the way. It's not only the Halloween-esque visual of heartless neon masks hunting people as if they're animals.

It's also the sound of it. The thwacks, whips, punches, and thuds of bodies falling inert to the ground.

It's the muffled screams, the wails, and the begging of some of the participants.

One of them said, "I'm out. Please spare me this once—"

Before his head was shoved against a tree.

The two Heathens barely acknowledge each other with a look before each goes in a different direction.

Red Mask disappears through the trees and I contemplate the best way to do that without alerting Orange Mask.

You know what? Might as well wait until he leaves before I even move.

Despite the pain that screams at my limbs or my shaking legs, I remain in a crouching position, unmoving, scared to breathe properly.

Orange Mask leans down by Five, then grabs his club. Something liquid smudges his black leather gloves and drips on the ground in bright red.

Blood red.

How can they be so…monstrous at such a young age? But then again, they've probably been this way since they were born, considering the world they belong to.

I've never liked these types of people, those who hurt just because they have the power to.

Those who ruin entire families just because they can.

Morally corrupt people.

Machiavellians with no limits or morals.

The Heathens are at the top of that list with their skewed codes of conduct and hedonistic mindsets.

Orange Mask rises to his impressive height that nearly eats up the horizon, then slowly, too slowly, his head tilts in my direction.

The neon stitches glow in the near darkness as eerie silence stakes its claim.

My spine jerks when his rough, deep voice echoes in the air. "I know you're hiding. Come out and I promise not to hurt you. *Much*."

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2

CECILY

I stop breathing for a second.

It *can't* be.

There's no way in hell he's seen me. Not only did I not make a sound, but I'm also invisible.

Unless he has access to the surveillance cameras.

No. I don't see anything in his ears, so he can't possibly communicate with security.

So how the hell did he figure out I was here?

I cast a slow look at my surroundings to confirm he just spoke to me and not someone else near me.

A number is announced to be eliminated, echoing in the silence like doom. An involuntary jerk lifts my shoulder, but I remain in place, watching.

Or more like, I'm trapped by Orange Mask who's standing about thirty meters away nonchalantly holding the club that rests on his shoulder.

And he's still staring in my direction, the neon orange of his mask becoming creepily predatory as the night stakes its claim. Though, he's not looking directly at me, so he doesn't know where I am exactly.

"Come out while I'm giving you the chance. If I have to pull you out, the scene won't look pretty."

It won't look pretty either way, psycho.

And how can someone sound so apathetically methodical while talking? His tone is no different from that of a robot.

An evil one that's defected and is currently plotting humanity's demise.

“Your time is up.” The weight of his words hits me first before he starts toward me with long, purposeful strides.

I don’t think about it as I run in the opposite direction.

Inexplicable energy courses through me, bubbling with the sole purpose of survival. Of getting as far away from him as possible.

It’s not about being eliminated, but more about getting out of here in one piece.

I use the bushes as camouflage and shove my way through them. Fallen branches and stray thorns cut my hand and scratch the side of my neck in a symphony of minor violence.

The sound of his footsteps follows right after me, long, hard, and so damn persistent that my heart speeds up.

It’s like that feeling back in childhood when playing hide-and-seek with friends. When you felt someone at your heels and you released a squeal of both excitement and fear.

But this time is slightly different.

Only fear locks my muscles together and crowds my mind. My limbs shake and my pulse buzzes in my ears, despite my mental attempts to remain calm.

Because I know that if he catches me, I’m dead meat. I’ll be unconscious like all the other participants he pummeled to the ground.

Hell, maybe I’ll have to be admitted to the hospital and my parents will hear about this reckless decision I made and be disappointed in me.

No.

The closer he comes, the faster I run and run, and *run*.

But no matter how hard I do, I don’t lose him.

Not even close.

Hell, he’s hotter on my heels with every passing second. And for some reason, I feel he’s delaying catching me on purpose, judging by his even footsteps.

He wants me to run and see how far I can go.

Damn that sadistic twat.

If I keep going like this, I’ll be no different from a mouse that’s being played with by a suburban cat.

I search my surroundings and, in a snap decision, I hide on the side of the dirt road behind a large rock.

My harsh breathing resembles that of a trapped animal, but I force myself to remain still.

The *thud, thud, thud* against my rib cage increases in volume, in desperation and regret for what I've done.

Did I lose him?

My eyes stay glued to the path I escaped down to make sure Orange Mask has left.

I wait and wait, sweating in my T-shirt and jeans, but there's no trace of him.

It doesn't make sense.

Since he was hot on my trail, he should've caught up to me by now.

Unless…

My swallow gets stuck in my throat as I slowly look behind me. Sure enough, he's standing there, casually leaning against a tree, arms and legs crossed and the club hanging from his left hand like a threat.

"Is there a reason why you're always hiding?"

The ripple of his deep voice carries in the air and vibrates against my skin. It's less robotic now, as if he's deemed me worthy enough to be acquainted with the less apathetic version of him.

That's by no means good news, considering his real image could be the personification of a devil.

His voice makes me pause, though.

I'm sure I've heard that commanding American accent before. So he has to be either Gareth or Killian Carson, the siblings the girls and I often see at the fight club.

Or Jeremy Volkov.

Please don't let it be Jeremy.

A sane person would wish for anyone aside from the psycho Killian Carson or the crazy Nikolai Sokolov, but in my eyes, Jeremy has always been the worst of the Heathens.

Just because he doesn't announce his actions as publicly as the others do doesn't make him harmless, just much better at hiding his monstrosity.

After all, he didn't become the leader of the Heathens by acting nice.

"Being accepted into the club can only be achieved through running, not hiding," he continues in that less-robotic yet freezing-cold tone.

I open my mouth, then slam it back shut.

Blimey.

I almost spoke and completely gave my nationality and my unorthodox appearance at this initiation away.

Orange Mask pushes off the tree and I take a step back, then slightly jump when my shoes hit the rock.

“You’re still not running.” His voice lowers with a dark edge, overcrowding with promises of a worse fate than the other participants he sent flying.

I inhale as deeply as physically possible and then run.

I’m not even two steps in when my legs give out from underneath me. I shriek as I fall headfirst into the dirt and the air is knocked straight out of my lungs.

“Number twenty-three eliminated,” the speaker echoes around me.

The finality bubbles beneath my flesh and hurts.

But not more than the burning in my knee or the bruise that I already feel forming on my hipbone.

I’m lying on my stomach on the ground, my mouth kissing the dirt and my nails sinking into it.

Slowly, I raise my head to find Orange Mask inspecting his blood-red golf club.

Please don’t tell me that’s my blood.

No, it can’t be, he didn’t hit me with it. In fact, I suspect he tripped me with it, which is why I’m currently in this position.

A dejected breath spills out of my lungs and I sit up, dusting the dirt off my shirt and jeans. There’s a bleeding hole in the knee and I wince at the sight.

I’m all dirty and for what?

Well, at least I now know a bit about the structure of the Heathens’ mansion and I didn’t lose consciousness like the other participants who went against this bastard.

“Let’s see the face behind the mask.” He reaches his gloved hand in my direction, black and dark and straight out of my worst nightmares. “How did someone as incompetent as you get invited to the initiation—”

I slap his hand away, cutting him off mid-sentence. The sound echoes in the air, stabbing the silence and accentuated by the pause in his entire demeanor.

My other hand clenches in the dirt and it takes everything in me not to blurt out something just so I can fill up the stillness in the air.

He already eliminated me, why would he need to see my face? There was no rule about that.

Also, why does he get to see me when I don't get to see him? That's not fair.

The world isn't fair, Cecily. That's just the way it is.

Mum's words rush in and I inhale deeply and start to get up. I'll stop thinking about my less-than-glamorous elimination and will, instead, use the time I have left to snoop around.

After all, that's the only reason I'm here.

One moment I'm standing in place, and the next, I'm wrenched back by a fistful of my hair.

No, my wig.

I yelp, following the motion just so he doesn't rip it off and expose me. My back slams against a hard chest and then the club is at my throat.

Literally.

He's placed the length of the golf club against my trachea. He's not pushing, but the threat that he can do so and choke me to death is there.

His grip on my hair is also merciless so my back is glued to the hardness of his chest. I'm not really short, but he's tall and wide and possesses the presence of a titan.

And he smells of leather and bergamot. Or maybe part of that smell is his gloves.

Through the mask, his breathing comes out raw and controlled but a little creepy, too, like in those older horror films.

My sensitive ears fill with the sound until I can no longer breathe.

"You're nothing but a fragile little thing that I could and would smash with a snap of my fingers. You know that, I know that, and your few functioning brain cells should know that, too, if they don't convince you to start telling me how the fuck you got here."

My lips tremble and purse.

I expect the familiar wave to hit me out of nowhere. I wait for the paralyzing fear, the silent tears, and the general mess that happens in situations like these.

I wait and wait.

But the only thing that shoots through my bones is shaking and more shaking.

And the need to run.

No, not only to run.

There's something a lot more nefarious beneath the surface.

Something like a craving for that fear from earlier.

A need for it.

An urge to satisfy it.

The length of his club presses harder against my neck, still letting me breathe but restricting it further. "Do you prefer to be crushed instead of answering my question?"

I shake my head, for the first time tilting it back so that I'm staring straight at his eyes.

That's my second mistake for today—the first is being here.

Orange Mask's eyes are a darker manifestation of his thirst for violence. They're as dark gray as the clouds and just as cold.

You never know if there will be a downpour or a disastrous storm with these types of somber clouds.

Though one thing's for certain. It's going to be dangerous. Better take shelter and hide until they pass.

But how does one hide from eyes such as these? Eyes so dark they're almost black.

Eyes so lifeless, one would think they're dead.

Or maybe whoever is staring at them is supposed to be dead.

My fingers wrap around the club on the bloodied end, and I pull it further against my neck.

If I try to shove it away, he'll likely take it as a challenge and do the exact opposite.

Surely, he won't kill me, so my best option is to have him lose interest and let go.

He thinks I'm not competent enough to be in the Heathens' initiation, and by asking him to do as he threatened, I just proved that I'm unhinged enough to be considered for the position.

No feelings flash through his eyes. Not even a sliver of reaction.

They're still dark gray and unattainable.

But he releases the other end of the club and covers my hand with his bigger gloved one.

It's harsh and intrusive almost breaking mine beneath it as he shoves the cold metal against my trachea.

“Is this what you want?” He strangles me with the club. “Do it properly if that’s the case.”

My breathing restricts and pressure builds in my neck, stiffening my veins and heating my face.

The urge to thrash, kick, and fight course through me, but I force myself to keep my presence of mind, to calm my breathing and my thoughts.

The best way to allow someone to win is to let them get into your head, confiscate your thoughts, and replace them with paralyzing fear or threats.

I meet his blank eyes with my determined ones.

You can’t hurt me.

Much.

The worst he can do is make me lose consciousness like he did to the other participants.

And while I prefer not to faint, that’s still a better option than being interrogated and eventually selling out the one I made a promise to.

“I see.” His gravelly voice assaults my ear. “You think I’ll stop after some breath play and a warning. That I’ll hit you, knock you out like I did the others, and continue on my path to torture some other poor soul. You feel slightly bad for them, but at the same time, you’re glad it’s not you, right?”

My lips part, both so I can breathe properly and due to his words.

How could he read so much into my plan without me having to say a word? Is he psychic?

Please don’t tell me the Heathens participate in cult activities and have actual pacts with demons.

“I would’ve done that. I *should*’ve done that.” He tugs on my hair, making me wince. “But you had the audacity to get on my nerves, so now I’m tempted to just…steal your last breath.”

My swallow is met with the metal of the club, which is like having a brick on my trachea.

I shake my head once, or as much as it is possible with his hold on my hair.

“Though we do have that rule about not killing anyone during the initiation…*intentionally*.”

I don’t miss the way he stresses the last word. He’s saying that he’s considering killing me anyway and then disguising it as if it was unintentional.

This is the part where predictions and stories are so different from reality.

I've heard a lot of rumors about how the Heathens beat up people for sport and kill without blinking an eye.

But to actually witness it firsthand or, worse, be on the receiving end, is no different than being thrown into the eye of the storm and knowing your chances of survival are slim to none.

No amount of deep breathing or rational thinking will save me. He's already in my head and he knows it.

He's my only chance of leaving this place alive and he also knows that.

What he doesn't know is that I refuse to go down without a fight.

"Fuck me first," I whisper, my voice so low that I barely hear it.

His entire being pauses, like when I slapped his hand earlier.

"Fuck you first?" he repeats slowly, almost as if he's tasting the words on his tongue.

I nod.

He releases my hair, hand snaking down the pulse point in my throat, leaving shivers in its wake before he cups a breast through my shirt. His touch is savage, almost punishing as he digs his fingers into the skin. "Why?"

It takes everything in me to remain collected despite the throbbing and the dull ache in the sensitive flesh of my breast. "I don't want to die a virgin."

For the first time since I saw the man in the orange mask, light flashes in his eyes, but it's not interest. More like sadism.

A thrill for something.

What, I don't know.

"I don't fuck virgins. They aren't a good fuck. No offense." He says it meaning every offense behind the words. Then he releases my breast, but only so he can reach beneath my shirt, shove the top of my bra down, and pinch my nipple.

The leather of the glove is so harsh that I whimper, but he takes that as an invitation and rolls it between his gloved fingers in a disturbing, calm rhythm, then squeezes brutally.

I topple over as the pressure against my neck makes the sensation worse. Or better. I honestly have no clue.

This is the first time I’ve gone through something like this after that experience I buried in the black depths of my soul.

Ever since then, I’ve been the prude Cecily, the ‘why is everyone obsessed with sex’ Cecily, the ‘nerd who’s only at university because she wants to study’ Cecily.

The only exception is *him*. The one I’m doing a favor for and because of whom I’m in this predicament.

Being groped and touched by a stranger in a mask after I brazenly told him to fuck me and freely divulged that I’m a virgin, when everyone has thought I wasn’t since secondary school.

I said it to bring his guard down so I could escape, but I might as well have done the opposite.

He wasn’t interested in me at the beginning, which is why he eliminated me like he did every other participant, but I went ahead and provoked him multiple times unknowingly, and now, he won’t let me go.

“Tell me.” He squeezes my nipple again, and the harshness of the leather against my tender skin makes me gasp. “What’s a posh kid from REU doing at the Heathens’ initiation?”

How did he catch on after I put so much effort into disguising my accent?

“I asked a question. Where’s your answer?”

I glare at him and his eyes light up again.

“Stop looking at me like that, or I might fuck you, after all, just to see those eyes fill with tears.”

Sick bastard.

I have no doubt that he’ll do all of that and more. He’s been this unpredictable ever since I first noticed him following those guys.

Just when I’m about to think of a method of escape that doesn’t land me in even deeper trouble, a commotion comes from the other side of the property.

We look in that direction and see White Mask and Yellow Mask chasing a group of people and Yellow Mask laughing maniacally.

I don’t think about it as I step on Orange Mask’s foot. The moment his grip loosens from around me, I duck and run.

I don’t look behind. I don’t wait for him to catch up. I run and run and *run*.

My heart gets stuck in my throat and the only thing I think about is how the hell did I not have a panic attack like I do whenever I’m in any sexual situation.

Most importantly, why are my thighs clenching, throbbing, and demanding I go back to that merciless stranger?

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3

CECILY

It’s a miracle that I manage to reach the dorm and sneak into the flat I share with my childhood friends without getting caught.

No lights are on and the only sound is the melancholic cello coming from Ava’s room.

If she sees me like this, covered in scratches, with a hole in my jeans and a frantic look in my eyes, she’ll definitely start a questionnaire that’s filled with drama.

Lots of drama.

I remove my shoes at the door and tiptoe across the length of the living room, wincing every time the cut on my knee and lacerations in my hand throb.

Once I’m in my room, I close the door, lean against it and then slide to the ground, hugging my legs to my chest.

My nails clink against each other as I stare at the walls entirely covered by pages from my favorite mangas. The figures appear shadowy under the dim lighting, looking as if they might become real and jump down beside me.

That’s what I take solace in—the images of fictional characters.

I’ve never been the type who asked my friends for help or told them about what I struggled with. Everyone sees me as the mother figure, the problem solver, and the listener.

Whenever I yearn to be listened to instead, nails dig into my chest, forbidding me from moving. From finding refuge in anyone but myself and

fictional characters that don’t exist and have little chance of offering practical advice.

My fingers hover over the injury to my knee and I groan in pain when I touch the ripped skin.

But that’s not the only sensation tearing through me. No. It’s something much more potent and damning.

The pain might start with my skin, but it ends in the dark corners of my psyche. In unknown nameless places that even I didn’t know existed until it slammed me in the face today.

My fingers slide from my knee to the edge of my ripped jeans, ghosting over my thigh. I shiver and clench my leg when I touch my hip.

Something a lot more intense than pain slices through me, and my fingers tremble before they move up to stroke over my breast.

The same breast Orange Mask grabbed so savagely, tortured and dug his fingers into until I was gasping for air. But it’s not the same feeling now. The flesh is tender, my nipples ache, but the electricity from earlier is gone.

I lift my other hand, wrap it around my throat, and squeeze. Like the length of the golf club that crushed my trachea. I tighten my grip and hold, but no amount of pressure from my dainty fingers is enough to recreate the same image.

There are no rough gloved fingers squeezing my nipple, no wall of muscle at my back. Nothing.

I let my hands fall on either side of me. *What the hell am I doing?*

How could I recreate the image of being trapped with that monster when I should be glad I escaped him?

Or maybe I’m not recreating the being trapped part as much as I’m trying to reach the state of mind I was in at that moment.

The blankness of it all.

The promise of freedom it held.

I internally shake my head, purging all of that out of memory.

That whole twisted scene only happened because I was in a life-threatening situation.

Survival instinct is the strongest instinct any human or animal has, and at that moment, I was ready to try anything as long as I left that place in one piece. So under normal circumstances, the entire event holds no meaning.

Still, I kept watching my surroundings long after one of the bunny masks gave me zip bag number twenty-three that held my belongings, then

escorted me off the property.

I kept watching as I ran all the way to REU's dorms and even as I put in the code for the flat.

A part of me thought Orange Mask would follow me to finish what he started. He'd trap me against the nearest wall and tell me in that deep voice of his that running away was only the beginning, not the end.

However, that was total paranoia on my part. A sick person like him who gets off on hunting and inflicting pain wouldn't have left all the potential prey just to come after me.

Once again, I'm thankful for my invisibility traits. I'm safe.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I flinch, then release a long breath before I fetch it and check the text.

Landon: You alive, love?

My heart skips a beat and butterflies erupt in my stomach.

I've always thought those sensations were clichés that only existed in shoujo mangas, but it took real-life experiences to realize just how true they were.

How one word, one text, from the person who matters, is more important than the whole world.

I straighten and reply.

Cecily: I think so. Just got back.

Landon: Meet me?

Cecily: Sure. Where?

Landon: Same place.

I smile at that. We have a place. It's not big nor special, but it's our little secret.

Cecily: On my way.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I STOP MY CAR NEAR THE DESERTED ROCKY SHORE of the beach.

Since Brighton Island, which is situated near the south coast of the United Kingdom, is surrounded by sea on all sides, there are a lot of beaches and shores.

But we from REU don’t usually hang out in places that TKU’s students frequent to avoid unwanted fights.

This part of the beach is ours, and yes, it’s a public place, so we can’t stop TKU’s students from coming here, but they know not to unless they’re ready to face our club’s wrath.

Just like TKU has Heathens and Serpents, two notorious clubs whose members are part of the mafia, our university has the Elites.

They’re not mafia or anything that shady, but they’re equally lethal in an ‘old money rules’ kind of way.

And the one I’m meeting is the leader of this club.

I step out of my MINI Cooper, do a sweep of my surroundings, then open the passenger door of the black car that’s parked facing the sea and slide inside.

My heart does that skip again when my gaze falls on the most ethereally beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen. So blue and deep, they might as well rival the ocean and swallow anything in sight.

Landon King is three years older than me, so while I’m a second-year psychology major, he’s already getting his master’s degree in arts and sculpting masterpieces that galleries all over the world snatch up before they’re even complete.

And just like his statues, he has Greek god beauty with sharp features, gorgeous dark brown hair, and a straight nose that might as well be carved from marble.

He’s the epitome of masculine beauty with his toned body and stylish clothes. Even his car is a special edition McLaren, made specifically for him and him alone.

I shift against the leather to face him, and that brings on the memory of a different type of leather.

The one that groped and touched me in places even Landon hasn’t.

“You do look alive.” His voice brings me out of my forbidden musings.

“Yeah. I managed to escape.”

“Interesting choice of words. Were you not allowed to leave for one reason or another?”

I go still.

Sometimes, I forget how much of a genius Landon actually is. He’s attuned to every single detail and nothing escapes his notice.

For some reason, I don’t want to talk about what happened back at the initiation. A part of me, a stupid, lovesick part, views it as a betrayal to Landon.

And that’s the epitome of irrationality.

Lan and I aren’t an item. Hell, he has no clue about my feelings for him and had friend-zoned me to the next planet when we were kids.

Not that I’ve liked him since then. I think I started to have a crush on him when I was maybe seventeen and we had a thought-provoking conversation about choosing lives that were independent to our godlike parents’. He said they wouldn’t shadow us if we didn’t allow them to and that if anyone could do it, I could.

There was something so sexy about a man who believed in my potential before I could reach it. Little by little, I developed a crush on him, but due to his obvious lack of interest, I backed off.

I tried to get over him, you know. I even dated, but look where that disaster got me.

Besides, there are just no other guys like Landon. None with his wit, charm, and Machiavellian view of the world.

I don’t really approve of the last part, but nobody’s perfect, right?

“The initiation was brutal,” I say in reply to his last question. “That’s what I meant by I managed to escape. Unscathed. *Mostly*.”

He watches me intently, his hand stroking the steering wheel in a slow rhythm. “No problems other than that?”

There were only problems.

“The guard did double-check me when he scanned the invitation, but he allowed me in, so I don’t think there were any issues on that front.”

Lan nods silently.

The Heathens rarely invite students from REU to their initiations, considering the whole rivalry with the Elites and whatnot. However, they did send out five invitations this time. All to students who aren’t in the Elites but are close to Landon. As in, his friends—*my* friends. Not me, the boys.

Naturally, none of them went, and Landon approached me with this crazy idea. What if we direct their weapons against them? We can use one of the invitations they sent to slip inside their compound and see what’s going on for ourselves.

He couldn’t go personally since no amount of disguise would camouflage him. And Lan has been majorly flagged by the Heathens, the Serpents, and the whole of TKU.

So I volunteered my invisibility services.

Now, I’m not sure if that was the right decision or if I could afford to be so brazen, even if it was for Landon.

It cost me things more precious than money or material stuff.

It probed the forbidden fantasies that I’d tucked in the dark corners of my consciousness, hoping they’d be forgotten.

Lan offers me his golden boy smile. “What can you tell me about the inner workings of their compound?”

“I can show you instead.” I pull out my phone and scroll to a simple demonstration I drew on my iPad back at the flat.

Landon grabs the phone from my hand. Our fingers brush, and I my breath catches, but he’s completely oblivious to the electric war he started with a simple touch.

He watches my creation with a raised brow before a smirk lifts his lips.

People call it the evil smirk, the trouble smirk. Whenever he’s wearing it, everyone either runs or hides, because Landon is always plotting one thing, manipulating another, and reaching for the horizon itself.

If he got the chance, he’d kick the planets and toy with the stars.

Everyone in our circle of friends, his twin brother and younger sister included, avoids him like the plague because he could and would make use of them for his grand schemes.

Me? I think they’re only seeing the superficial Landon. Yes, he’s methodical and has little to no moral compass, but he’s not as black as everyone suggests he is.

“This is impressive,” he says after a while. “You even drew camera locations.”

“Those are the ones I saw on the paths I took. There must be others in places I didn’t go to.”

“Don’t be humble. Not even the greatest spies would be able to get this level of detail.” He sends himself a copy, deletes the original file, then gives me my phone and strokes the top of my hair the same as he would his sister and my friend, Glyndon. “You’re such a good sport, Ces.”

I smile even if a part of me doesn’t like the compliment.

Though it’s not the compliment that bothers me—it’s everything else that comes with it.

How he touches me like he does his sister. How he looks at me with nothing of the fire that I hold for him deep in my heart.

Continuing to do him favors and merely existing in his orbit won’t allow me to get close. If I don’t do something about the broken limbo we’re in, I’ll never be anything more to him.

I tuck a stray silver strand of hair behind my ear, feeling refreshed now that I don’t have the annoying wig on. “What do you plan to do next?”

He leans forward against the wheel, wearing a charming yet sadistic smile. “What else can I plan aside from trouble?”

“Can I join?”

“No. It’s dangerous.” He grins. “Uncle Xan will chase me with his grandfather’s famous shotgun and paint a hole where my head used to be if I’m the reason his precious daughter is put in harm’s way.”

“Don’t worry about Papa.”

“Have you seen your papa lately? He’s been sending us daily reminders that if something happens to you, we’ll all pay. In blood. I kind of need that inside my body, *not* outside it.”

I wince.

I love my father to death, and some would argue that I’m Daddy’s little girl—or I was before my life took a sharp dive to hell. Before he put his trust in me and I betrayed it in the worst way possible.

At any rate, Papa is overprotective and I get that, but he doesn’t have to be this extra.

“Anyway, you did so well that the MI6 would be a good fit if you ever considered a career change.” He throws his head back against the seat, looking like he’s straight out of a painting—no, like a statue. “Now, you just sit back and watch the Heathens burn.”

I don’t care about that.

My disregard for TKU is mostly on the academic level, because I apparently disrespected a member of their American football club by telling him ‘no, thank you’ when he asked me to dance at a pub. Ever since then, he and his minions keep stealing my textbooks and being a thorn in my side.

That hasn’t happened much lately, though, so they probably lost interest. Other than that, I don’t focus on their clubs or activities.

“I can be useful,” I argue with Lan.

“You were more than useful, you were the best.” He pats my hair again. “But we both know you’re a dainty princess and would break like delicate china at the first hint of the hardcore stuff, so let me take care of this, okay, love?”

The feeling of being metaphorically slapped causes my skin to throb and tingle.

Any words I had to say get stuck at the back of my throat, refusing to be said out loud.

I’ve never been good at expressing myself—I’m a listener, not a talker. At least, when it comes to things that concern me.

I curse myself for that trait as I step out of Landon’s car and hear him rev the engine. In a super expert move, he reverses in a perfect circle before he shoots into the street like a bullet.

For a second, I remain there, hugging my arms and letting the chill of the sea seep beneath my bones. The sound of the crashing waves slams into the warring thoughts in my head.

All of them start and end with the things I should’ve said but didn’t.

With the way I’m built, I’m probably never going to be able to say them out loud.

My only choice is to show him instead.

I have to show Landon that I’m not a delicate princess and that I can and will take the hardcore stuff.

If it’s him, I can let him see this part of me.

Slipping into my car, I close the door and lock it before I open the browser on my phone.

It’s on the homepage of the kinky sex club Landon is a member of.

Not even Glyn knows this fact about her brother. I only found out through his cousin and my childhood friend, Creighton.

He told me about it, including the kinks Landon is into, so I’d see what type of defective person the guy I’m crushing on is.

Creigh was looking out for me because he believed I’d only end up getting hurt.

Thing is, Creigh has no idea that I’m equally defective.

Which is probably why I’ve been hung up on Landon since secondary school.

It’s not only because of that conversation I had with him back then; it’s also because I found out he’s into the same kink as me.

I have read through the site and its rules. There are attendance kink activities where they pair subs with Doms, but there are also other activities that can happen off-site.

One of which is a kink Landon takes part in all the time, according to Creigh.

In fact, he’s the club’s ace in this particular kink, and many new members have joined because of him.

Primal play.

Aka consensual non-consent.

It’s been on my mind ever since I first heard about it from Creighton about two weeks ago.

I’ve imagined all the ways Landon chases those women before he fucks them ruthlessly.

How he ravages them with their consent, and how elating it must be for them.

I realize how demented it sounds to consider something like that elating. But rape fantasy is a very common kink, especially with women who want to feel free in some way.

Any way.

Even if it’s in fantasy only.

It’s not about power play. It’s about giving up control and gaining the power to have the ability to stop something so monstrous with a word.

It’s a fine line, which is why this kink shouldn’t be done with a stranger or an arbitrary person.

I don’t know how the girls in this club do it, but I know I wouldn’t be able to if it wasn’t Lan.

I trust him.

Which is why I’m willing to show him this part of me.

Like earlier, every time I’ve attempted to talk, to express what’s inside me, words fail me, so action is all I have left. This means putting myself in a vulnerable position as I did during that nightmare, but it’s different now. Lan isn’t that scum.

Lan wouldn’t use my trust against me.

I type in my login with steady fingers.

So, yes, I created an account soon after I heard about this from Creighton and paid the membership fees. But I didn't attend or pick an event.

I did go there once because they had to confirm my identity and age in person, and I kind of bolted out of the club wearing a blazer and a hat once the process was done.

Are you ready to unleash your kink, Featherless03? appears as soon as I'm logged in.

I click on Yes and then I'm presented with a list of kinks and fetishes the club could arrange.

Some of them are completely new to me and I researched each and every one of them the last time I opened the app. Let's just say I'm slightly traumatized by some.

Like I'm sure others would be if they were to see me click Primal Play.

I agree with the disclaimers that say I should know this type of kink is one of the most sensitive and to read more about it in the link they've attached.

I visited that link another time, but it was nothing compared to all the reading I've been doing about the topic since I started noticing how different I am.

Thank you for your interest in 'Primal Play'. Reminder, all our members submit clean STD tests periodically, but we suggest using a condom during any act. Your sexual safety matters.

That makes sense. I did select that I'm on birth control when I signed up the first time, so they already know that. After I click on 'I understand', I'm directed to the following page.

Please take your time to answer the following questionnaire as attentively as possible so we can select the right partner for you.

Would you like to be the one performing primal play or the one to have the primal play performed on?

Performed on.

Do you want your partner to be a man, a woman, or non-binary?

Man.

Body type?

Muscular.

Blond(e), Brunet(te) or other (please specify)?

Brunet.

Do you want your partner masked or not?

I hesitate before I click on Masked.

It's true that I'm showing this part of me, but maybe we're not ready for face-to-face yet.

I click on I'll be masked, too, during the act.

Height preference? Please select from the list below. Click on 'none' if you have no preference.

I click on 1.95 m. Landon's exact height.

Clothes?

No Preference.

Tattoos?

Yes.

Lan has some, but they're hidden.

Setting?

No Preference.

Time?

After sunset and before midnight.

Day?

No preference.

Safe word. Upon saying this word, your partner would halt the act immediately.

Smoke.

Enter your limits below (please be as specific as possible).

Gagging. Drugging. Any use of an enhancement drug.

Those are the only things that make my skin crawl. They bring back memories of when I breathed wrong, existed wrong, and fought but found no way out.

After I review my selection, I click Submit.

Thank you for your selections. We'll notify you once we've paired you with a compatible partner. Please note that this process might take a while until we're confident we're able to satisfy your choices.

That makes sense.

I spend a few more minutes reviewing and rereading my answers to make sure everything is correct. I'm about to exit when a red dot appears at the top of the screen.

I click on it and freeze.

Congratulations, we have found a partner with your specific criteria. We'll temporarily share your location with your partner during the hour(s) you decide the act will happen.

Details of the meeting are below. If you wish to reschedule or cancel, click here to do so.

I scroll down to the details, my heart hammering so hard, I think I'll faint.

This is really happening.

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4

CECILY

"Where are you going?"

I come to a halt in the middle of the living room, plaster a smile that's awkward at best, and face my best friend, Ava.

She's staring at me with a hand hiked up on her waist. Ava is blonde, slender, and the cliché of a bombshell social butterfly.

No clue how someone like her became friends with someone like me. I'm a year older than her but feel like I'm a generation away. Where she's loud, I'm reserved. Where she's extroverted, I'm introverted. Where she's searching for trouble at a club, I'm all for quiet nights in.

But I guess it's our differences that have made us gravitate toward each other since we were kids.

And this is about the worst time to be caught by her.

"A night walk," I say coolly. Definitely not sounding suspicious at all.

Not.

Ava's eyes narrow to slits, barely allowing any of the blue to peek through. "You're going to do something fun without me, aren't you?"

"No." My voice is high-pitched, uneasy, and sounds absolutely terrible.

"You totally are." She headlocks me teasingly. "How can you leave me all alone? Do you have it in your heart to let me flounder in misery by myself?"

I poke her in the ribs. "Stop being needy."

That only makes her tighten her hold on me, nearly choking the living hell out of me.

The door to the flat opens and in comes a pretty doll in a beautiful purple dress with matching flats and hair clips.

Annika, our fourth roommate and a new friend, pauses at the scene, frowning slightly before she grins and speaks in an American accent, “What’s going on?”

“This bitch was going to betray us and wander out alone for fun times.”

Annika’s eyes widen. She’s the brunette version of Ava, only seventeen—going on eighteen, as she likes to remind us—and is the personification of a people person.

Always kind, smiling, never makes others feel unwanted or uncomfortable, and has the energy of a butterfly on steroids.

“Take us with you,” she says enthusiastically.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Ava agrees.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I shove her away. “It’s just a walk.”

“We can walk, too. Right, Anni?”

Our friend bobs her head up and down with excessive energy, then pauses, all the joy dropping from her face. “On a second thought, if Jer finds out I was walking at night, he’ll put me on house arrest, and I’m not a fan.”

“Your brother really sucks.” Ava pauses. “No offense.”

“He has his moments, I guess.” Anni’s expression continues to be caught in that disappointment limbo. “You girls go. I’ll root for you from here.”

“Nonsense.” Ava flips her hair back. “We can always have a girls' night in. Right, Cecy?”

The mention of my name brings me back from a weird state. An out-of-body experience, as if I’m seeing myself from outer lenses.

I was out of focus—here in body but completely elsewhere in mind, as if my spirit was abducted and I was left hollow.

It started after Annika mentioned her brother’s name.

We’ve known since she was admitted to REU this semester that she’s a mafia princess and her much older brother, who’s almost twenty-four, is not only a mafia prince, but also the heir to a blood-soaked empire.

I first heard his name when I got into uni last year. Anyone on Brighton Island is well aware of that name and the promise of fear it brings.

Jeremy Volkov.

Leader of the Heathens, part of the Russian mafia, and the current reigning monarch over the whole of TKU.

I've seen him around during the time I've been at uni, mostly at the fight club that Ava is obsessed with going to, because, of course, someone like him is attuned to violence.

I've only met him once, two days ago when he found out Annika was at the fight club with us and proceeded to drag her out. The controlling behavior left a bad taste in my mouth and I got in his face about it.

Something that he definitely disliked and disregarded, and then he proceeded to kick Anni out.

The whole encounter made me happy that I don't know him on a personal level. People like him, and the whole of the Heathens who get off on old patriarchal rules and only care for their gratification, deserve nothing but distaste.

I'm just glad I won't see him anymore.

You totally did last night at the initiation.

I pause at that thought. Yes, I knew Jeremy was one of the guys in the masks. He wouldn't miss the initiation, considering he's their leader, but for some reason, in the back of my mind, I refused to dwell on that option.

"Cecily Annabelle Knight!"

I startle at Ava's voice, realizing that I got lost in my head again.

I hike up a hand on my hip. "Why are you calling me by my full name?"

"Because you zoned out." Ava snaps her fingers in front of my face. "Welcome back to the world of the living. As we were saying, girls' night in?"

I nod and let them lead me back into the living room.

Although I would rather be outside, it's impossible to escape Ava's watchful gaze. If I do go out, she'll definitely tag along.

And I can't have her with me for the devilish plan I've decided to take part in.

I sit cross-legged on the sofa, replaying the message I saw on the app's screen in my mind.

The partner who fits your criteria requires that you arrive on your own after seven p.m. at the local Brighton Historical Park. Any day of the week.

Please use your safe word anytime you want to stop the act.

I wasn't able to sleep properly last night, and when I did, I dreamt of black hands suffocating my mouth as I was dragged into the night.

For a moment, I was in a daze. I fought, but I couldn’t move. I screamed, but no sound left my mouth.

I woke up drenched in sweat, with my heart hammering in my chest. The stench of smoke permeated my nostrils and I couldn’t breathe.

It was as if those hands were back on my mouth again, asphyxiating me, stealing my air, and leaving me breathless.

I’ve been telling myself that it’s different this time. It’s not the same person or the same situation.

I *chose* this.

But maybe my subconscious has been telling me that I shouldn’t have done this.

Maybe Ava finding and stopping me is a sign to end this madness and to back out before it’s too late.

Maybe Lan won’t like the side I show him. Maybe he’ll be revolted.

“Cecy!”

“Yeah?” I shake myself out of my thoughts and focus on Ava’s frowning face.

“What’s wrong with you today?”

“I’m fine.” I start to force an awkward smile, then stop at the last minute because Ava would totally see through it.

Annika joins us after changing into fluffy pajamas, and the three of us lounge on the sofa. I made tea that no one but me is drinking. Annika prefers slurping apple juice from her purple cup.

She huddles up against Ava, who strokes stray hairs away from her face, and then they get busy talking about some fashion thing they read about.

Ava has always wanted someone she can share her beauty talks with. She couldn’t find that in me or Glyn, so Anni is sort of a godsend for her.

“How did you survive the boredom at the Heathens’ mansion last night?” she asks Anni.

“By FaceTiming you and fooling around on social media.”

“That’s my girl.” Ava pulls her closer to her side, grinning. “It still sucks that your brother had you under house arrest because there was a stupid initiation.”

My heartbeat picks up as vibrant memories of being at someone’s mercy flow through me.

I quickly chase them away before Ava gets a hint of my turbulent emotions that are more frequent than usual today.

“I know.” Annika sighs, toying with a fluffy bunny ear on her pajamas. “But it was a big event for the Heathens and Jer wouldn’t trust anyone but his guards to keep an eye on me while he was out doing what he does.”

“That still sucks. But anyway, did you get a glimpse of the action?” Ava asks with hearts in her eyes. She’s so transparent about enjoying anything adrenaline-induced and is completely hopeless in that department.

“Nope. I couldn’t see anything while I was locked up in my ivory tower. Even the balcony and window had to be closed at all times.”

“Yikes.”

“I know, but I heard from some of the guards that there was a hunt, like a literal one, where the Heathens’ members hunt the participants and inflict any type of violence they see fit.”

I shiver, tightening my grip on the teacup instead of scratching at the skin of my palms and entirely giving away my reaction.

Ava, however, claps her hands together. “Sounds so fun.”

That’s because you weren’t there. “What’s so fun about hurting people for pleasure?”

“They signed up for it, though. They could’ve not.” Ava waves me away.

“That doesn’t give the Heathens the right to torture people like that.”

“Yeah, yeah, Miss All Pretty Morals and Righteous Principles.” Ava rolls her eyes. “I swear you sound like a grandma sometimes. Scratch that. Nana is more fun than you.”

I scowl and she grins. “Still love you to death.”

Nice save. It’s impossible to be mad at Ava for more than a minute.

Anni smiles at me. “If it’s any consolation, I also think it’s wrong.”

“Then why can’t you stop it?”

“Are you joking? I can’t stop anything. Hell, I can’t even control my own life. All I’m capable of is watching from afar like a perfect spectator.” Her features fall before she quickly sobers up. “On the bright side, I didn’t feel lonely, because I talked to Ava.”

“Always here to serve.” My childhood friend squeezes her in a side hug.

“Hey, Anni,” I start. “I heard the Heathens’ members wear neon Halloween-like masks. Is that true?”

“I guess so, yeah. Look.” She pulls out her phone, scrolls, then shows me a picture on killian.carson’s IG account. It has the five neon-stitch masks with the caption:

Night of mischief.

“Do you know which is which?” I ask.

“Nope. They never wear their masks around me.”

My shoulders hunch. It was too much to hope that Anni knows who is who. Anyway, it’s not like I want to know the identity of Orange Mask.

I do *not*.

“Wait a minute.” Ava snatches Anni’s phone to stare at the picture. “How come there are five masks? I thought the Heathens was composed of Jeremy, Gareth, Nikolai, and Killian. Who’s the fifth member?”

“No clue.” Anni’s brows crease. “He certainly doesn’t show up at the mansion. Only the four you just mentioned live together.”

Could it be Orange Mask?

“This is so interesting.” Ava has those heart eyes again. “I wonder who this mystery person is. Maybe we can investigate this.”

“Absolutely not,” I say in a forceful tone.

“Come on, please, Cecy. We can find out a lot of secret stuff. It’ll be so fun.”

“You won’t find it fun if your life is at risk or if one of these mystery people catches you.”

“Oh, please. Your fantasy is something like that.”

I freeze.

Heat rises over my neck and cheeks and I stare at Ava as if she’s grown three additional heads and is judging me with each one of them.

“T-that’s not true! My fantasy is a nice, normal man. That’s obviously a rare currency in this day and age.”

“That’s a no, no. When we were drunk at Remi’s last birthday party, you said something different, and I believe drunk Cecy. She’s the real version of you.”

I’m going to kill drunk me.

And Ava, too. How could she bring that up?

Just as I’m about to figure out the best murder plan, the door opens and Glyndon, my and Ava’s childhood friend and Lan’s sister, comes inside.

She’s the most petite of the three of us—but not more than Anni—has long honey-colored hair, where the brown and blonde overlap in a beautiful balayage, and loves wearing shorts, even during the spring.

In theory, since Glyn and I are more introverted, we should be the closest, but when we’re in each other’s company, we actually prefer silence

more than anything.

Sometimes, when she's stuck in her own head, she reminds me of Landon, but the similarities stop there. She's too sweet to ever be compared to Lan and his antagonizing nature.

She throws her bag down on the way inside and joins us. I stand to pick it up, then hang it in place instead of getting caught up in the subject at hand.

But as soon as I sit back down and grab my cup of tea, Ava barges into our childhood friend's personal space. "Glyn! Back me up on this."

"What are we discussing?"

"Fantasies," Annika supplies. "Cecily said her fantasy is finding a nice, normal man since that's so rare nowadays."

"It is." I let the lukewarm tea soothe my throat. "Sorry, I'm lame."

"You're lying." Ava crosses her arms over her fuzzy pajamas. "A year ago, you said your fantasy was to be ambushed in a dark place and taken against your will."

It's like someone drenches me with cold water.

My hand shakes and droplets of tea splash on my skin.

I can feel that out-of-body sensation creeping in and stealing my breath.

Just when I think I'll stumble into nothingness, Glyn slides to my side, holds me by the shoulder, and glares at Ava. "We agreed to not talk about that again."

"Don't act high and mighty. You said something similar, too. What was it? Oh, you want to fight it and be forced to take it, even when you say no. I can't be the only one who remembers that."

Glyn snuggles into my side and rubs my arm like the sweet creature she is. Like me, she's too reserved to ever express herself.

In hindsight, telling Ava anything, even during a drunk moment, was a grave mistake.

She's shit at keeping secrets, and I know she doesn't mean any harm and is only trying to make Anni feel at home with us, but still.

Even if Anni wasn't here, I'd rather we not speak of that subject ever again.

That was a weak moment.

One that I'm thinking of acting on, but still.

Their words swirl around me, something about Glyn reprimanding Ava, talk of Anni's fantasy. But I'm barely hearing anything.

It’s an uncomfortable silence, one where I’m in a world of my own making that I can’t escape.

Soon after, Ava and Anni plot to party, the latter being convinced by Ava that her brother wouldn’t do anything to her and we’ll protect her.

An hour later, we’re in the Heathens’ mansion.

No shit.

Annika used her connections with the guards so they’d allow us inside and we’ve been huddled in the corner for the past ten minutes.

The three girls are all in pretty dresses, including Glyn, who was forced into a tight red one by the two fashion divas, who then painted her face with matching makeup.

I’m the only one in my usual jeans and T-shirt that says *Sorry for the bitch face. Didn’t want to be here*. They did try to dress me up, but that wasn’t happening in this lifetime.

To say I don’t want to be here would be an understatement. My skin has been crawling ever since we drove through the huge gothic-like gate.

Memories from last night are still fresh, beating beneath my skin with the persistence of an open wound.

Still, I couldn’t just let these three go on their own. Ava would certainly get into trouble and drag them along. Glyn wouldn’t stand a chance and Anni’s courage has been deflating ever since we actually got here.

She proposed that maybe we could go to a different party instead of the one her brother and his gang are hosting.

A suggestion that was dutifully ignored by Ava, then by Remington and Creighton, who’ve joined us after having also sneaked in here.

I really don’t see the appeal of the Heathens’ parties or mansion. Is it the exclusivity part of it?

Yes, the mansion is huge, with fine architecture, luxurious furniture, and delectable food, but it’s loud, impersonal, and couldn’t shake its eerie quality to save its life.

I choose to focus on those in my company instead. Although Creighton has left, probably having had enough of Remi’s antics and decided to go to sleep.

Remi also wandered out behind a group of girls, and Anni has been unsuccessfully trying to hide behind any pillar. Ava has been stealing drinks from passing waiters and hissing after each gulp.

Glyn’s the only one who’s been making conversation and staying close to me, which is why I notice when she freezes.

I follow her field of vision and freeze, too. Coming down the stairs are two members of the Heathens.

Gareth Carson and Jeremy Volkov.

The first looks like a groomed prince with his styled hair, clean-shaven face, and elegant trousers and button-down.

The other looks no different from a monster out of hell.

It’s not about the way he’s dressed, since he’s wearing black slacks, a white T-shirt, and a leather jacket.

It’s everything else.

The messy black hair, the intense, piercing gray eyes, high cheekbones, and the sharp features that translate his insufferable character.

He’s also big in everything. Height, build, and personality. I’ve never seen anyone as muscular as he is, except for maybe Nikolai. But he moves pretty swiftly for a huge guy, silently, too, as if he’s trained to only be noticed whenever he deems it necessary.

Jeremy is considered the dark beauty type. He’s that one person you know is handsome, beyond attractive, but his actions paint him as more monstrous than beautiful.

Destructive.

Unapproachable.

And he seems absolutely content with that image.

But then again, why wouldn’t he? His infamous reputation precedes him and he seems fine with that, too.

In fact, he may actively encourage it.

Gareth nods at something they’re discussing and climbs the stairs. Jeremy, however, continues his casual walk down.

But although he appears nonchalant, there’s nothing arbitrary about him. Not even his strides.

Beneath the calm surface he reflects onto the world lurks danger and nefarious intent. It’s mysterious in nature, almost too well disguised for anyone to see.

The only reason I do is because I have my secrets, too, and I guess that gives me the superpower to recognize it in others.

Mum says I’m able to do that due to my strong connection with my empathy and that was one of the main reasons I followed psychology. I

want to help others with anything in my power.

Glyn mumbles something and then runs up the stairs.

I start to follow her, but I'm interrupted by a horde of dancing, drinking, and howling students.

Being invited to a party held by the Heathens is a privilege for TKU students. This is like the mecca of their unholy activities and an expression of deviant youth.

It's why Ava wanted to come here at all costs.

It's why Anni helped her, despite being apprehensive about her brother's wrath.

By the time I get to the stairs, there's no sign of Glyn.

Blimey.

She might be quiet and keep to herself, but Glyn has these moments where she'll disappear without notice.

I throw a glance behind me to make sure Ava isn't getting herself in trouble, but then I catch a glimpse of her hugging a bottle of tequila and sneaking outside.

Goddammit. I need two of me to keep these children in check.

I jog in the direction Ava went. Because A, she's the one who's more prone to almost drown in a pool of her own vomit—happened once—or almost drown in an actual pool while drunk—happened twice; and B, Glyn is responsible, doesn't act on impulse, and rarely gets drunk, if ever.

In theory, the decision to go after the troublemaker of our group is actually a simple one.

I slip past students as they jump and howl to some trendy song. It's a lot easier to move unnoticed than to shove past them and be delayed further.

The cold night air forms goosebumps on my skin, and I stop outside the mansion's doors.

More students keep flocking inside the mansion in waves and no one is leaving. Granted, by their standards, it's still early.

A few guards stand like statues along the entrance, and I'm sure more are hidden out of sight. These must be the same men who wore the bunny masks last night.

I go up on my tiptoes to get a better view of outside, but there's no sign of that little shit Ava.

I pull out my phone and tap the *Find My Child* app.

What? She really is a kid when drunk, and I had to install this app to be able to find her in situations like this.

The dot indicating her phone appears to the west and I follow, using the swarm of students as camouflage against the guards' watchful gazes.

And since I have an impeccable memory, I actually manage to avoid most of the cameras, despite the fact that they're barely visible at night, and only if you look very hard.

Ava, the suicidal troublemaker, has actually gone to the forest surrounding the mansion.

Please tell me she isn't drunk. Please tell me she isn't drunk.

I quicken my pace to catch up to her, going through all the trouble of using rocks and bushes to hide from the cameras.

The music from the main house dulls until I can only hear the throbbing of the bass, and the cheers and noise eventually die down.

Which means we're too far from everyone else.

Ava, come on.

Just when I'm about two hundred meters from her, she changes direction and picks up speed back toward the mansion.

The revving of a motorcycle nearly deafens me and I realize that's what she must be on.

Did a guard find her and escort her back?

Either way, at least she's not wandering around God knows where.

The silence returns, more stifling this time, and I cast a glance at my surroundings. At first, I think I hear faint footsteps, but they soon disappear.

All that remains is the dark night, the huge trees, and this cursed forest.

Oh, and my ragged breathing.

I carefully turn and march toward the mansion at a steady pace. At first. A few moments later, I'm practically jogging.

Places like this are the setting of horror films and Halloween pranks for a reason.

A hissing sound from somewhere behind me in the bushes reaches me, followed by more footsteps. I come to a halt and start to whirl around.

I'm only half turned when a hand shoots through the darkness and slams me against a tree.

The breath is knocked out of my lungs, and my whole body freezes.

I'm dwarfed by the person at my back, his hand shackled around my nape and his steady breathing licking at my skin like wildfire.

“What—”

“Shhh,” his rough voice sounds in my ear like a twisted symphony.

An invitation to the dark side.

A way out.

Something flashes in the darkness and then he shoves a phone in my face with the club’s app on the screen, where his congratulatory message is displayed.

At the top, there’s ‘Primal Kink’ and my username as his specified partner.

My choppy breathing slows to a rhythm that’s similar to his. Not as controlled, but close.

It’s Landon.

This is actually happening.

Though…wait.

I’m not wearing a mask as I said I’d be. Does this mean he knows who I am and he still wants to do this?

A feeling of complete thrill ripples through me at the thought.

His hold loosens from around my neck and then his gravelly, too-rough voice orders, “Run.”

I stumble, and the place where he touched me tingles and burns. I want to look at him, and I can feel him behind me as tall as a god and just as lethal.

One twist of my head and I would see him.

But I don’t try.

Instead, I shift and then do as he said.

I run.

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5

CECILY

If anyone were to watch this scene from the outside looking in, they'd think it was the epitome of craziness.

A foreign entity has grabbed hold of my consciousness ever since I was ambushed in the middle of the hauntingly eerie forest.

I haven't stopped running.

Adrenaline pumps in my veins with nauseating inflation until I nearly throw up with it.

If this is insane, the one chasing me is at the peak of the madness scale.

He didn't tell me to run to give me an opening, no. He did it because he probably gets off on seeing me flounder.

Gasping for air.

Getting lost on unknown grounds.

Are his muscles as stiff as mine? Is blood pumping in his veins with overwhelming power? Is his pulse skyrocketing with each passing second, refusing to be contained or calmed?

If I were to reach into my chest, the only thing I'd be able to touch is the remains of my exploding heart and the decimation of my withering morals.

However, shame is the last emotion on my mind as I keep running and running. Fallen branches and the bushes scratch against my legs and hands, but I shove them out of the way.

I trip on a stray rock, groaning in pain, but I barely pause before picking up my pace again.

My lungs burn and my muscles scream with exertion.

It's the fastest I've run in my whole life.

And yet, his footsteps remain steady behind me. I hear them now and again, coming from different directions, flashing in and out of the night like a ghost’s.

For a moment, I think my state of hyperawareness is making up things. Otherwise, how could footsteps be heard one second and disappear the next?

It’s almost as if it’s being done…on purpose.

I carry on with my escape, even if the logical part of me knows that if I keep moving at this pace, I’ll eventually collapse and be easy prey.

If I want to preserve my energy, I have to hide—

A loud thud of footsteps rushes up from behind me and I screech to a halt, then whirl around.

My sporadic breathing fills the air, but the only thing in sight is trees.

Big, tall trees with their giant trunks and branches that resemble hungry predators' fangs.

I don’t stop to ponder the sound as I continue to sprint in the darkness.

In the forest.

In the middle of the night.

Only the moon offers any sort of light, and it’s shadowed by the thick clouds, camouflaged, absolutely distorted.

It’s also stained with the sound of my erratic breathing and the ghost-like steps of the one pursuing me.

Landon.

Though I probably shouldn’t call him that in this situation. He’s supposed to be a stranger right now.

A creature of the night.

A merciless monster.

A devil who’s come to collect my life.

The distinctive sound of feet slapping against the ground fills my ears. It’s the sound I’m making. A sound so deranged and haunted that I hear every crunch against the dirt, every pebble caught beneath my shoes.

It collides with my shattered inhales and nearly chokes my swelling lungs.

But that sound is nothing compared to the steps that appear and disappear, sometimes from behind me, other times from my left, right, and even in front of me.

It injects me with an abundance of adrenaline until I’m surviving on it. I have no doubt that if my level drops, I’ll turn into a shaky mess and fall to the ground.

The threat continues looming over me, getting closer and closer, playing a fucked-up game of hide-and-seek with my mind.

There’s no more powerful tool than mind games. Physical exertion pales in comparison to mental stimuli and that’s why manipulating, gaslighting, and abusing the mind have become the ultimate weapons in modern society.

It feels as if I’m observing a lesson from my psychology classes. Only, theory and practice are worlds apart.

I know that sealing my mind off would protect me, but actually accomplishing that under the current circumstances is next to impossible.

When I study my surroundings again, I realize I’m in a part of the forest I didn’t go to yesterday.

The trees appear taller, sharper, as if they have every intention of devouring me alive. The darkness hovers, lingers, and swallows my whole being.

The worst part? This is so far from the main house that there don’t seem to be any cameras around here.

A hushed sound comes from the right and I whirl in that direction, high alertness pulsing in my veins.

But the moment my face turns to the side, something grabs me from behind. By my hair.

The silver strands nearly rip from the roots as he shoves me toward the ground.

I don’t go down peacefully.

I have no idea what’s come over me, but the moment he clutches me, an overpowering aggressiveness floods me.

Usually, I wouldn’t want to be involved in any violent situations, or at least, I would look and see before considering any physical retaliation.

Not this time.

It could be the adrenaline or my need for survival. It could be the suppressed emotions of my helplessness. Whatever it is, I hold onto it and I claw at his fingers that are forcing me forward.

I kick and buck my whole body as an animal-like growl echoes in the air.

It’s mine, I realize as he successfully knocks me to the ground. I try to fall on my hands and knees, but I fail to release his fingers at the last second and I end up flat on my stomach.

The rough dirt smashes my breasts and whooshes the breath from my lungs. I still try to buck so I can turn over and somehow knee him in the balls.

I fight so hard that I forget this scene is my doing.

I fight so hard that I believe every molecule of survival instinct in me. Perhaps it’s because he’s using savage strength to grip me.

He’s not taking it easy.

No, he probably came here without any plans to be soft or politically correct.

He came here to invade and conquer.

This is the real thing. Him, uncut and with the sole purpose of inflicting pain.

His calm, deep breathing reverberates in the air and strikes me across the skin. His merciless grip is a promise, a preview of what he has in store for me.

The more I fight, the tighter he pulls on my hair, until I think he’ll rip it from the roots.

I arch my back, using the remnants of my energy to try and twist.

Then something heavy and unmovable lands on the middle of my back.

His knee.

I catch a glimpse of his black trousers in my peripheral vision, one knee on the ground and the other pushing against my back.

It’s enough to make me pause. The pressure is so strong that I think he’ll break a bone or a few.

Maybe I should’ve said that bodily injury is a hard limit, too, but I thought that was a given.

Perhaps it’s not.

He pins my face to the ground with his crippling grip on my hair. I smell the dirt and taste the small pebbles on my tongue.

Unlike earlier, I remain still, considering the threat of his knee.

My limbs shake as the reality of the situation rushes into me.

This is a lot more intense than what I signed up for. Yes, I wanted the possible freedom this could provide, but the unknown territory, the complete helplessness, claws at my mental strings.

My breathing shatters and each of my inhales choke me with the smell of the earth and him.

Leather.

That's what he smells like.

He's a combination of leather and wood. Maybe a hint of bergamot? I've never associated these scents with Lan, but I've also never heard him speak in that gravelly voice from earlier, so maybe he has a persona for nights like these.

Nights where he sheds his slick, elegant façade and fully embraces the beast inside him.

The brash ruthlessness of his touch, scent, and whole existence flares and ripples in the air around me.

Silence shimmers in the calm. Only my shattered breaths and his deep ones linger.

It's a minute, no, possibly a second, before everything crashes down.

The sequence of his movements roughens as his free hand pulls on my jeans. He doesn't undo the buttons—he all but shoves them down, creating a violent friction against my core and thighs.

The chilling air assaults my underwear-covered arse.

Something happens then.

Aside from my gasp and open mouth.

I come to focus on my pussy that's aching, pulsing, and absolutely shivering with the need for any sort of stimulation.

Did I become turned on just now? Or maybe it started during the marathonic hunt?

I thought I could like this, but I wasn't ready to actually be so into it that being chased would bring me to this state.

No, it's not only about being chased.

I had to be caught, too.

The beast at my back must also feel it when he pulls my underwear aside and presses his fingers against my needy core.

A deep groan spills from his throat, and that sound, coupled with his callous fingers against my most intimate part, triggers a bizarre sensation.

My back arches again, but it's for a completely different reason than a fight. I'm reaching for that raw power flowing from him, but a mere shove of his knee pins me back in place.

He strokes my folds roughly, brutally, until my lower half is floundering, begging, nearly dissolving for more.

But he doesn’t give me more.

His middle finger ghosts near my opening, hovering, flickering, lingering, but never slides inside.

I can feel the warmth emanating off his skin, the reprieve from the cold air, and the promise of forming a shield against it.

The more he touches me everywhere except for where I need it the most, the messier I become.

I don’t recognize the incoherent mix of noises that spill out of me. Every time I buck my hips, he stiffens his grip on my hair, warning me without words to stay in place.

That he’s the one who’s running the show.

The one who’s in control.

The one who can both hurt me and please me if he chooses to.

A shiver goes through me at that thought, but I remember that I have the power, too.

Smoke.

The word has been hovering at the tip of my tongue ever since I made a run for it. If I say it, everything will end.

But I don’t.

Despite the torture, I choose to alternate between breathing through my nose and mouth, then focus on the moment.

On his assertive touch.

He’s a man who takes what he wants and there’s something arousing about that.

Just when I think the torment will never end, two of his fingers thrust inside me. At the same time. All the way to the knuckles.

I shriek, the sound permeating our silent surroundings.

Despite being soaking wet and needy for more, I wasn’t ready for this. My core clenches around his fingers as he drives them in and out of my heat in a long, controlled rhythm.

Each thrust picks up in speed methodically, too in tune with my body’s reaction until they’re ruthless and merciless.

My toes curl and a whole-body shudder grips me. This is so different from the tentative, almost shy way I touch myself.

There’s nothing shy about his touch.

It’s a command, a force that can’t be stopped or derailed.

A disaster of my own making.

He’s here to take, and take, and take some more.

And I can only give.

My hips slam against the ground with how much they buck.

He drives in a third finger. Pleasure mixes with pain as I’m stretched to my full capacity.

It’s impossible to breathe properly, but I force myself to relax, to take it, even if he’s ripping me from the inside out.

His rhythm grows in intensity and I gasp with each in and out, the sound animalistic in nature.

Usually, I hide my face in the pillow or any surface to muffle the sounds of pleasure.

Now, I only have the dirt.

I don’t get to focus on that when a sharp flood rushes through me.

It’s a flicker of pleasure at first, but then it mounts, inflates, and intensifies until tremors cover my skin fully.

I’ve never experienced this type of pleasure before.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that I’d be on the edge of blacking out due to an orgasm.

Hell, I didn’t think orgasms could feel this way.

The ones I give myself are always soft, pleasurable, and make me sigh in content once I’m done.

This one?

All I can do is scream at the collision. In my attempts to mute some of the carnal pleasure, I nearly eat the dirt.

A low, gruff sound comes from the devil looming over me, watching, sporting a dark halo that I’ve never seen on Lan before.

But then again, I’ve never been introduced to this side of him before.

“So this is how good girls like you get off. Does being used in the middle of the night like a worthless fuckable hole turn you on, Lisichka?”

I choke on my inhale and everything pauses.

The air. My heart. My brain.

But not him. *He* definitely doesn’t pause.

He, as in, the guy who certainly didn’t sound like Landon.

At all.

Unless Lan picked up an American accent, a different intonation, and has decided to mess with me.

The worst part is that he sounds familiar.

Way too familiar.

“L-Lan?” I whisper in a barely audible voice.

“Try again.” His voice has roughened, sounding absolutely terrifying.

Oh, God.

Oh, no.

Please, *no*.

The only reason I went against my character, my moral code of conduct, and did this is because I thought it would be with Landon.

So why isn’t it…? I clearly picked him through the app.

No one else could match his physical traits.

The beast—literally and figuratively—curls his fingers inside me, stroking a part of me no one has touched before. “You look plain and innocent, but deep down, you’re nothing but a dirty little slut. You’re ready to do anything to get rid of this barrier, no? You asked for it last night, begged for it, even.”

My body must be going through a shock, because the moment realization rushes back to me, it’s like someone has kicked me in the stomach and crushed my rib cage.

He’s Orange Mask.

“L-let me go! S-stop it!”

An unruly chuckle stabs through my ear. “You think I give a fuck about whatever little game you had with Landon?”

I go still, my heart nearly spilling on the ground.

I’m in that position where it’s life-threatening again, where my reckless decisions and impulsive actions might lead to my demise.

He can hurt me.

No, he *will* hurt me.

“I might consider letting you go if you answer the question you ran away from last night, Cecily.” He pounds his fingers inside me, rekindling the power he holds over my arousal.

My nails sink in the dirt as bursts of the earlier pleasure pulse and throb, tighten and clench.

My body still hasn’t gotten the memo that we’re in survival mode right now.

“Why were you at the initiation?” There’s a raspy, blunt quality to his voice, an authoritativeness that bleeds out with every word.

I purse my lips.

“I could and I would fuck your virgin cunt all night long. Then, when I’m bored, I’d stuff my thick cock into your ass and use your blood as lube. I suggest you answer the question before I get to that point.”

My muscles lock as I get a glimpse of his face. It’s only a fraction of it, but it’s enough for recognition to kick in.

It is Jeremy.

I suspected that he was Orange Mask at the initiation, then ignored it, decimated that thought, and chose to delude my mind.

However, there’s no escaping the facts now.

Not only is it his face, but the tone gives him away, too. It’s that cold, emotionless, and absolutely loathsome voice.

If there’s anything I’ve learned about *the* Jeremy Volkov, it’s that you should stay out of his path. Avoid him. Change direction upon seeing him.

Do whatever it takes to not be noticed by him. Or worse, be threatened by him.

Everyone on this island knows not to cross him, which is why I have no doubt that he’ll do as he’s promised. If I don’t give in and offer what he asked, I’m in for the lesson of my life.

So I calm my breathing, despite the pleasure he’s ignited at my core, and try to speak as neutrally as possible.

“I just… I just wanted to see what it was like.”

“Is that so?” he speaks with utter ease that’s in complete opposition to the way he’s driving in and out of my core.

“It is. I swear.”

“How did you get in?”

“I… I stole the invitation you sent Creighton.”

Lan did, but I’m not going to say that.

“Such a conniving little witch.” He hits a secret spot inside me, and he must feel it, too, because he hits it again and again.

“Please stop,” I sob, humiliation and shame dripping from every part of me.

I’m half naked and being held down by someone who might as well be a stranger.

A dangerous stranger.

A stranger who shouldn’t see me like this.

“Didn’t you beg me to fuck your cunt last night? Something about not wanting to die a virgin?” He thrusts again and again until stars erupt behind my lids. “I might be in the mood to do that. Right here. I will claim you like an animal in the middle of the night and no one will see you becoming all dirty and messy.”

I whimper and tremble. “I’ll scream.”

His sadistic chuckle fills the air. “By all means, scream. No one will hear you and you’ll only get my dick hard.”

He’s right.

They won’t.

Not only is this his property, but we’ve wandered so far away from the mansion that I can’t even hear the music anymore.

He’s planned this.

From getting me in this part of the forest to impersonating Landon. He planned everything.

And I fell right into his trap.

I’m helpless with no way out except for taking the lash of his fingers. The controlled in and out. The erotic sound against my forced wetness.

All of it.

I screw my eyes shut when a stabbing pleasure hits my womb and the orgasm is about to flood me again. I wait and I wait.

And I wait…

But he’s gone.

His fingers have pulled out of me, his knee no longer pins me in place, and my hair is free of his savage hold.

My pussy clenches like it did a second ago when I was about to come. Only now, that stimulation has vanished, leaving a dull ache between my legs.

Slowly, too slowly, I lift my head and stare behind me to find Jeremy standing in the middle of the night, blending with it, becoming an eerie part of it.

He’s wearing the black trousers and white shirt I saw earlier. No jacket.

Black ink swirls and cords along his taut muscles as he crosses his arms, disappearing beneath the short sleeves of his shirt.

Due to the lack of light, I can’t tell what the tattoos are about, but they add a hint of mysterious danger.

He’s watching me, but he might as well be looking through me.

It didn’t take him long to flip my world upside down, to unlock a part of me even I was scared of, but he doesn’t look affected in the least.

His face is hard, cold, detached.

A true devil of the night.

There’s no light in his gray eyes and they could easily blend in with our somber surroundings.

Dispassionate. Unforgiving.

If I didn’t know this guy, I would say he’s mad about something. But then again, he always appears to be angry at the world and disapproving of the people in it.

“Why…?” My trembling word trails off. I don’t recognize the hoarseness in my voice and I hate the weakness in it.

“Why what?” He slides his gaze over the length of me.

I clumsily pull up my jeans and scoot my arse until my back hits a tree. His impassive expression doesn’t falter, but he doesn’t look away from me, not even for a moment.

“It shouldn’t have been you,” I whisper.

“Let me guess, it was supposed to be Landon?”

I don’t say anything, but he doesn’t need me to.

He lifts his glistening fingers under the moon and I wish I could dig a hole and die in it. “Landon isn’t the one you begged to fuck you while you soaked his fingers as you came apart, now, is he?”

“I…would’ve *never* gone along with it if I’d known it was you.” My words are an attempt to regain my dignity—or what remains of it, but I immediately think it was a mistake.

Jeremy’s eyes darken and his whole body stiffens. I’ve always seen him as cold and merciless, but this is the first time I’ve witnessed this savage part of him.

It’s like he’s on a mission to destroy anything in his path.

“And yet you didn’t use your safe word.”

My lips part. He’s right. I…didn’t.

“I…forgot about it,” I say, refusing to think it’s because of something else.

“I think you didn’t. Deep down, you didn’t want me to stop. You looked awfully disappointed when I did.”

“That’s not true!”

He reaches me in two steps and I try to crawl back, but I only end up pressed further against the tree as he stands in front of me and wraps his fingers around my jaw.

His touch is callous, untrained. He's a beast of a man, a savage who probably doesn't know how to touch anything without the ruthless energy that emanates off him in waves.

I brace myself for whatever violent threats or acts he'll commit, but he hauls me to a standing position then releases me. "Follow me."

"To where?" I stare at the stiff muscles of his back through his shirt.

"Do you know the way back to the house?"

"No."

"Then walk."

Oh.

I don't know why a part of me thought he'd leave me in the middle of nowhere to fend for myself.

Once again, I wait for the panic attack that doesn't come.

But I know I screwed up tonight.

I didn't only trespass on private property. I might have trespassed into the devil's lair.

My thoughts are confirmed when he stares at me over his shoulder, his eyes still in tune with the night, tapering and shimmering with that mystic darkness. If anything, they appear more unhinged. "Come back when you're ready to be fucked properly."

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6

JEREMY

I don’t believe in people.

They’re fickle, prone to mistakes, and have no clue what the fuck they’re doing most of the time.

They’re useless, tasteless, and shouldn’t pollute the air with their breaths.

This disdain I have for people has been inherent in me ever since I grew out of my child phase and gradually found out what the world is all about.

I also don’t believe in the strikes system. People don’t get two or three chances with me. One mistake and they’re out.

For good.

Anyone who crosses the line once will do it again if given the chance. It’s forbidden fruit, delayed gratification, and sought-after glorification. If they get one taste, they’ll be compelled to have another.

Then another.

And another.

Until they’re reduced to animals chasing their basic needs.

Giving them a chance to get close to the line, let alone cross it, is the personification of foolishness.

My zero-tolerance policy might paint me as cold-blooded and heartless, but that’s better than being labeled soft.

I’ve seen what that does to people. How caring too much can tear someone open from the inside out. I had no control over it back then—couldn’t stop it or prevent it from happening.

But I’m older now, wiser, harder, and I vowed to never let a variation of those circumstances repeat.

Ever.

The fact that I’m standing in a pool of blood—mine and someone else’s—is a manifestation of the person I’ve become to get to this stage in my life.

The guy in my grip is barely breathing, his eyes are swollen shut and his face is covered with mucus and blood from how much I’ve punched him. This fucker thought he could ambush me on my afternoon ride. He also hit me with a barb-wired baseball bat, knocking me off my Ducati Panigale, but that was the extent of it.

I grab him by the collar and shake him a few times, breathing in the stench of his bodily fluids. Under dusk’s light, he appears monstrous with his face all bloodied and unrecognizable.

“Oy! Look who I found!” Nikolai reemerges from between the trees, dragging a struggling blond guy behind him like a sack of potatoes.

The blond has some muscles on him and he claws and kicks to escape, but he might as well be an ant wrestling an elephant. Not only does he barely land any punches, but the ones he does are completely ignored by Niko.

Our evening bike ride was interrupted by these two. The one he’s currently dragging escaped earlier, but Nikolai is no different from a hunting dog. He can smell anyone, then track them down and trap them.

My friend all but sits on the guy’s back and when he struggles, Nikolai punches him in the face, causing his head to bump against the ground.

He’s shirtless, again. Like me, he was wearing a leather jacket when we went out on the ride, but he threw it down somewhere. The guy is allergic to clothes—it’s a miracle he at least has pants on. It’s also his way of displaying the extravagant tattoos that cover his chest and arms.

Some of his long black hair escapes its binding and flies in the air as he taps his pocket, punches the guy he’s using as a chair again, and retrieves a smoke. He strokes the surface twice as if petting it, then shoves the cigarette between his lips and lights it.

“How’s it going with that cockroach?” He jerks his chin at the beaten-up guy in my hold.

With his face, lips, and eyes swollen, baseball cap and shirt bloodied, all the noise he can release is muffled groans.

I shake him again by my grip on his collar. “Last chance before I bury you where no one will find you.”

He mumbles something and I lean closer to hear him better.

“Fuck…you…”

“I see.” I swing the bat he hit me with earlier and drive it straight into the side of his head.

He falls to the ground, motionless, his body sprawled out at an awkward angle.

“Hey, kid.” Nikolai, who was watching the whole scene with unabashed excitement, flicks the ashes of his cig on the other guy’s bleeding face. “Do you know what your friend did wrong? No? Let me try and simplify it for you. One does not refuse a chance Jer offers. See, he doesn’t do that a lot, so when he says it’s your last, he actually means it. I say, you should do better or your fate will be worse.”

I swing the bat that’s soaked with blood on my shoulder and stare down at the guy.

He’s younger. Probably just started at TKU or maybe he’s a sophomore. Either way, he’s new blood, which makes him scared, unsure.

Usable.

His lips purse, probably unconsciously, and his face is red, due to being crushed by Nikolai’s weight.

“I know you’re Serpents,” I say. “What I don’t know is why you think you can take us out. So how about you clarify that for me and I’ll consider letting you live to see another day.”

“We…” he strains with a hint of a Russian accent. Nikolai is completely oblivious to the struggle since he continues smoking leisurely. “We wouldn’t…know until we try.”

“My, my. What do you know?” Nikolai grins. “Serpents have a suicide squad who are out to get us with guerrilla tactics?”

“Is it worth it when we’ll catch you and kill you?” I say matter-of-factly.

“I say, you guys are not on our level, especially kids like you who haven’t had proper training.”

“It’s the only way to get accepted to the club,” the blond grunts, his voice muffled. “Into the Bratva.”

I share a look with Nikolai. Those snakes aren’t only getting bold, but they’re also spouting lies to younger guys, whispering promises in their

eager ears, and taking advantage of their youthful, adrenaline-filled energy to get to us.

That’s both smart and stupid.

It doesn’t matter how many times we’re ambushed. Not only will they never get us, but we’ll retaliate twice as hard.

I applaud the effort, though.

“You want to get into the Bratva, kid?” I shove the bat against his head. “Don't go using sleazy methods to be admitted. That might work at the beginning, but you’ll always be viewed as a cockroach who can be sacrificed at any moment. If you want to sit in the inner circle, be a man about it.”

“And don’t go interrupting people’s rides. That’s the number one rule to stay off assholes' shit lists. I’m assholes. And you’re somewhere in the middle of my list. Can I kill him, Jer?”

The kid stares at me with bulging eyes. Not at Nikolai. Me.

Fucker is smart and probably heard that I’m the only one who can keep him on a leash. If I’d left him to his own devices, Nikolai would be a death-row prisoner by now. Or just dead.

“We did promise to let him go,” I say, and the kid nods once.

“I did no such thing, *you* did.” Nikolai slides the burning end of his smoke toward the guy’s eyes. “The insolence of this motherfucker pisses me off, and I can’t let it slide. What’s your name?”

“Ilya Levitsky.”

“Russian. I like that, but I don’t like you, *Ilyusha*. Any last wishes?”

Ilya keeps his eyes open and continues staring at the burning end of the cigarette. Anyone on this island, or even back in New York, knows of Nikolai's crazy episodes. If he says he’ll burn holes where your eyes are, he’ll do it.

This kid must be aware of that, too, but even though his body shakes, he doesn’t close his eyes.

Just when the fire is about to touch the cornea, I say, “No.”

Nikolai’s attention remains on Ilya and his chosen weapon of harm. “Why the fuck not?”

“I gave him my word.”

“Your word isn’t mine. Fuck off.”

“It is. You promised, Niko.” I shove the baseball bat against his shoulder and he finally stares at me with eyes so unhinged that no amount

of violence will be able to satisfy them.

A long time ago, when we were kids and Nikolai realized how deranged he can get, he asked me to stop him when he slips out of control.

When his violence starts to mess with his head.

When blood is all I see in his eyes.

I don't right now, but he's getting there.

"Can I at least beat him up?"

"You did that already."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Nikolai stands, but not before he kicks the guy in the ribs.

He grunts, but he knows better than to retaliate or stay around. He gets up, hobbles to his bike that Nikolai made him abandon earlier, and escapes in the opposite direction of the descending sun.

"Kids these days." Nikolai shakes his head.

"You mean you, nineteen-year-old baby?"

"Oh, fuck you. I'll be twenty soon." He throws the butt of his cigarette on the ground and steps on it, then he hauls up his bike that he practically threw down and let slide into a tree earlier.

After straightening it up, he leans an elbow against it and pats his pocket for another cigarette. "What are we going to do with these cockroaches?"

"Let them fester." I hop on my bike. Riding, preferably alone, is the only thing that I like doing for myself. No duties or expectations—just me and the wind.

"Won't they become harder to deal with when they multiply?"

"On the contrary. We can take them out when they're gathered in one place."

A slow grin stretches his lips. "I knew you were my favorite. When do we start?"

"Patience, Niko."

"That word doesn't belong in my limited vocabulary."

Don't I know it.

It's why I've been deliberately keeping Nikolai as far away from strategic planning as possible. At least until the actual action starts.

We both belong to the Russian Bratva in New York. Our parents are the current leaders and we're expected to take their positions one day.

When that day comes, Nikolai and I will support each other, as we're currently doing.

I don't want to make an enemy out of him or else he'd get one of us killed in the blink of an eye. And if he festers in his bloodlust, no one will be able to pull him out of it.

"Should we report this to headquarters?" he asks.

Headquarters, as in, his parents or my father. If they find out the Serpents, whose leaders are the offspring of men who sit with them at the inner circle table, are after us, they won't let this slide.

It might even develop into an inner war. And there's no more efficient way to break a strong organization than inner conflict.

The Serpents know this as well as we do, but they apparently don't give a fuck as long as they get what they want.

And what they want is to eliminate me and Nikolai before we inherit our birthright positions.

What's better than offing another leader? Doing it before he fully comes into power.

"Why get our folks involved when we can take care of them ourselves?" I throw the helmet that has fallen beside me at Niko and he catches it with a wide grin before he straps it on.

"Wise words. Wise words."

"Just tone it down a notch."

"Fuck no. I need my dose of adrenaline."

"The initiation was a week ago. That amount of adrenaline should've lasted you at least two weeks."

"Didn't even get me through the night."

"Despite all the hunting?"

"And punching and kicking and even headbutting." He lifts his hands and stares at them under the dusk's light. "None of it is enough. That energy is pulsing in my veins like a ghost. Or a demon. And it needs to be let out. Don't you have moments like that?"

"No," I say assertively as I shove my helmet in place.

"Ehh. Is that why you didn't sleep that night? Or the night of the party?"

"I don't sleep." *Much.*

"Uh-huh."

"What the fuck is uh-huh supposed to mean?"

He tilts his head slowly, maniacally. “I say, there’s more to it than you’re letting on.”

“Are you going to ride or should I leave you behind?”

“Riding, riding. Christ. Did getting hit on the head make you lose your manners?”

I forgot about that.

Despite the dull ache on my temple and the now probably dried-up blood. It has to do with the strange tolerance to pain I’ve had since I was a kid.

It came after a lot of nightmares.

Which is also behind my lack of sleep.

The engine of my bike revs, then I hit the road. Nikolai follows right after me.

Out of the Heathens’ members, we’re the only two who like being in the wind. Since the road we’re taking is on the seaside, we breathe the salty air that seeps beneath the helmets.

Nikolai flings both his arms wide like the crazy motherfucker he is. Sometimes, it’s like he has a death wish. *Wishes*, to be more specific.

After a few moments of peace, I go at a supersonic speed, riding wide fucking open.

This is where I find calm. Where everything fades into the background and only my physical body exists.

This is where I go to clear my head and prepare for the next steps to take and the people to eliminate.

I learned early on that power isn’t handed to you. You snatch it, and if you have to bleed for it, then so be it.

Power is a wild horse that’s only tamed by the strongest.

Which is what I am. In every aspect. Aside from my family and the people who will rule by my side, everyone else is a pawn on the map of my path to the throne.

And that path is paved with thorns, betrayals, and destruction. People way older and more experienced than me have tried and failed to come out on top.

Some lost their lives for it, too.

But I have the advantage of being born into this world. Of witnessing how it breaks people and never allows them to put themselves together again.

I’ve become immune to its monstrosity, adjusted to its requirements, and gotten used to its workings.

Which is why I’m taking it one step at a time.

Patience might not be Nikolai’s favorite word, but it’s one of my principles.

Patience and the sheer power of my persistence can get me anywhere.

And knowledge. As my father taught me.

Information is sharper than any weapon, and if you have it in your arsenal, no one will be able to cross you.

This is why I have eyes and spies wherever my enemies exist.

Namely, with the Serpents and the Elites.

One would argue that the Elites have nothing to do with us. They have no criminal background, are posh kids with dull British manners, and belong to a completely different world.

But those who appear to be the least dangerous are the ones we should look out for the most.

The Elites might not belong to any mafia, but they remain a secret order of a greater game. Something nefarious happens behind the scenes of that club, and it’s only a matter of time before I find out what it is. I’ll uncover their plots and why they antagonize both the Heathens and the Serpents for sport, despite knowing our background.

They’re too cunning for their own good. Or their leader, Landon, is. Which is why I’ve been keeping him in my sights for years.

It’s been fucking *years* and I still know next to nothing about him aside from his family background and that he’s obsessed with sculpting.

From the outside looking in, he’s a respectable man with genius artistic skills and a bright future ahead of him. He’s perfected that image so well that no one dares to suspect he’s hiding a much darker version of himself.

Since I haven’t uncovered anything about him, I’ve been watching the weakest links in his life.

His siblings.

That hasn’t produced anything either since they stay as far away from his business as possible. I had to gradually back off from Glyndon since Killian is sort of obsessed with her.

His twin brother, Brandon, is useless. For now. That might change, which is why I’m not letting him out of my sight.

As a last resort, we sent invitations to the initiation to those in his closest circle in an attempt to get them into the Heathens and then use them against him.

As expected, none of them showed up.

However, I was informed by security that Creighton King's invitation was scanned.

As in, Landon's second cousin, Creighton, who's a fighter and never wanted to join the Elites.

But Creighton was nowhere to be seen. The one who used his invitation was none other than an annoying existence.

A boring existence.

An existence that shouldn't have gotten my attention.

And she didn't.

Until she thought she could get under my roof unnoticed, with her wig and attitude that doesn't fit with the scene she walked into.

The initiation isn't for little girls like her.

And yet, she ran for it, and she fought, too.

It was useless, and I put an end to it before it properly started, but then she asked me to fuck her.

I don't want to die a virgin, is what she said.

I can almost hear the tremor in her soft voice and see the quiver in her velvety pink lips when she said that. I can smell the desperation behind the words. Whether it was to stay alive or be fucked, I had no clue.

My cock chose to believe the second.

I meant it when I said I don't fuck virgins. They don't tempt me, and I don't have a broken hymen kink.

But at that moment? I was so close to tearing into her virgin cunt, just to see the dull girl with rigid morals and judgmental stare cry.

I got my chance when she made the mistake of coming to my house and wandering into my forest. Right after she gave me a glance at her deepest, darkest fantasies.

Right after she ran away from the initiation, I hacked into her phone, then saw the site she visited and the kink she signed up for.

I also saw her pictures.

The screenshots upon screenshots from Landon King's Instagram account and any other pictures of him posted by others.

She had them in a secret folder called 'My Prince.'

And surprise, surprise, her *prince* was enrolled in that club she signed up for. He's been in it for years. I know because I'm in it, too, if not for anything else, than to keep an eye on him.

Cecily put in all the right answers to get her so called prince to ravage her in an unknown place.

The proud, stern girl actually has a kink.

And not just any kink.

It's the kink of all kinks.

One that good girls like her shouldn't go anywhere near, let alone sign up for.

As soon as she hit Submit, I scrolled to my notifications and hit Accept.

She wasn't offering herself for me, but I took her anyway.

If Landon didn't want me to mess around with her, he should've put her on a leash.

I glance behind me to find that I lost Nikolai at my high speed. Either that or the motherfucker actually got himself killed.

A familiar sight at the building in front of me makes me slow to a halt beneath a large tree that camouflages me and my bike.

It's an animal shelter. The one my sister volunteers at because she's an advocate of everything pretty and small.

But it's not my sister I'm looking at.

It's the annoying existence.

Cecily Knight.

She sits on a bench outside. The rare hint of England's sun turns her eyes a liquid blue-green as she flips through a book.

Her silver hair that's nearly white like a witch's shines under the light. She rubs the side of her nose and her bottom lip pushes forward in a pout.

I stroke the clutch as images of her in more compromising positions flare in my mind.

Writhing, sobbing, wiggling, crying, and screaming.

Especially *screaming*.

She does that so well, which was a surprise. One wouldn't attribute that trait to her, considering her rigid, businesslike persona.

But then again, I've never thought someone like Cecily would be into primal play either.

The quiet people hide the best, after all.

If it had been anyone else, I would’ve left them alone, but she made the mistake of being where she wasn’t supposed to be.

Landon might have thought he could use her against me, but it’ll be the exact opposite.

That dull, maybe not so dull, existence has gotten herself the worst type of attention.

Mine.

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7

CECILY

“You need to come home.”

“Papa!” I slide my attention from my book to the phone and I’m greeted by the face of my custom-made role model.

He grins, showing deep dimples in his cheeks.

Xander Knight is my father, my first best friend—Ava came later—and the greatest dad on earth.

He has a classically handsome face with his golden blond hair, sky blue eyes, and a sharp jawline.

Mum said he used to be the most popular boy at school and attracted everyone’s attention like a magnet not only due to his looks but also thanks to his charm.

It’s safe to say, I didn’t inherit any of those easygoing traits, and it’s not due to a lack of trying on his part.

“I just miss my only daughter too much, so either you come back to London and study at a local uni—which would make everyone happy, by the way—or I find a house near you so your mother and I can see you all the time.”

“No to both.” I suppress a smile because I’m well aware he’s capable of doing that *and* this is the third time he’s suggested that option.

When we went on a school trip at thirteen, Papa kind of convinced all the other fathers to rent out a holiday house near our camp.

Papa and Ava’s father, Uncle Cole, ended up buying the thing because they’re extra like that, and then they pretended to stumble upon the place we were staying at by chance.

It was the worst lie in centuries. Ava and I kind of came to the realization that we have overprotective dads and we'd have to live with that fact instead of fighting it.

No matter how old we get, we'll always be their little girls who they wish would remain young forever.

"I mean it," Papa says from the other end of the phone, a line appearing between his brows. "I can't sleep at night thinking something has happened to you."

"You're just being paranoid. I'm healthy and well." I flash him my best smile and hope to hell he doesn't see the doubt and concern hiding behind it.

I *am* healthy, but only physically, and I certainly haven't been well. Not since that night a month ago.

Something inside me has shriveled and vanished since then, and I couldn't find it again, even if I tried.

It was wrong.

Everything was.

From my twisted tendencies to allowing myself to be in that position, even if it was for Lan.

I've never felt as ashamed or completely disappointed in myself as I did at that moment when I realized the one who'd chased me in the dark and brought me the most powerful release I've ever experienced was none other than Jeremy Volkov.

The resident devil of Brighton Island and the reigning Lucifer of TKU.

I couldn't look in the mirror for days after the incident, went into my head more times than I could count so that even my friends started to individually ask me if something was wrong.

For a moment, I truly considered going home and finding comfort with my parents, Uncle Kirian, and my grandfathers, but how is that any different from running?

Besides, if I'd done that, I would've appeared under the weather and worried them needlessly.

I'm glad I didn't give in to that impulse and stayed put. If Papa had sensed any hint of distress, he would've locked me up in the house and demanded to slay my demons for me.

But I'm past that age where I let him do that on my behalf. The real world without him is much scarier and full of people who wouldn't hesitate

to snuff me out, but I have to do this on my own.

Like I survived that black day on my own.

Papa shifts, allowing a hint of his home office to appear behind him. “I’m still worried. I wish you were still my little Cecy who hugged my thigh and rode my shoulders.”

Me, too, Papa.

“Unfortunately, growing up is mandatory.”

“Don’t I know it?” He shakes his head as if expelling an unpleasant thought. “Tell me all about school. Is everything okay? Is anyone bothering you? Do you have a boyfriend, and does he know that if he touches you, his parents will lose a son? Or maybe it’s a girlfriend, who still shouldn’t touch you unless her parents are ready to lose a daughter?”

“Papa!”

“What? I need to cover all the bases. You haven’t dated any guys since secondary school, so I thought maybe you’d realized you play for a different team. But you would’ve told me, right? You know I would support you no matter what, right?”

I raise a brow. “Does that mean you’ll be more lenient if I introduce you to a girl?”

“No, but I wouldn’t, say, hit her or anything.”

“You shouldn’t hit a guy either.”

“Of course I would. Boys are little wankers.”

I shake my head. “I’m straight, Papa. Annoyingly so.”

“Ah, fuck. So you really have a boyfriend? Name? Family name? Age? Address? IQ?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

He narrows his eyes. “Oh, he’s good. He’s really good if he’s already making my honeybee lie to me.”

“Papa, stop calling me that. That was for when I was five.”

“Not hearing that. I will, however, hear about this boyfriend that you’re hiding from me.”

“Who has a boyfriend?” Mum’s soft voice comes from the other end.

I pause, rub the side of my nose once, and grip my pen tighter.

Kimberly Knight is the most beautiful woman I know, with her lithe figure, her bright smile, and the green highlights in her brown hair. Even the cut marks on her wrists give her a different type of unconventional beauty.

I heard that she refused to erase those cut marks with surgery, because she was never ashamed of them.

But sometimes, during gray days, she wears long sleeves and tugs them down to cover her wrists so no one sees them.

Her beautiful floppy dress swishes with her movements as she sits beside Papa.

Something magical happens when Papa looks at her. His eyes soften before they explode in a myriad of stars.

I grew up watching them not only irrevocably in love, but also so reverent of one another that I doubt any other two people could adore, uplift, and help each other like they do.

For two decades, I had their love and support but not an ounce of their confidence, which is why I always felt lacking in some way.

“Kim!” Papa takes her hand in his. “Listen to this little brat lying through her teeth and hiding her boyfriend from us.”

“You have a boyfriend, Cecy?” she asks me with a soft smile.

“No, I don’t,” I reply more jerkily, awkwardly than I did with Papa.

Mum’s smile falters for a bit and she watches me intently. Sometimes, I swear she knows each of my dirty secrets and sees straight through me.

I don’t know if it’s because of what she told me back in the last year of secondary school or because she’s a lot harder to fool than Papa, but ever since then, I get this lump in my throat whenever I talk to her.

It’s not that I want to be this type of mess in front of my mother, it’s that I can’t control it.

Papa is easier, but then again, Papa didn’t see straight through me back then.

He wasn’t the one who told me to stop, she was. I still refused to listen.

Her smile returns and she playfully bumps her shoulder against Papa. Maybe it’s due to the fact that they were childhood friends and have known each other all their lives, but every time I talk to them, I’m in awe of their subtle teasing and the way they look at each other.

“She said she doesn’t.”

“She’s lying. Did you see the way she rubbed her nose just now?”

“I felt like I was going to sneeze,” I lie through my teeth, but really, I don’t do that when I’m lying, only when I’m embarrassed.

“Yeah, right. I raised you, honeybee.”

“Papa!”

“Stop teasing her, Xan,” Mum chastises. “And if she does have a boyfriend, she’ll tell us, right, Cecy?”

“You might have to wait a long time. I have no plans for that.”

“See, Kim? She’s *hiding* him.”

“Am not.”

“Are, too.”

“Maybe this is exactly why she doesn’t want to tell us.” Mum pinches his shoulder. “You’re too much.”

“Oh, come on. I can’t believe you’re taking the little traitor’s side, Green.”

My heart swells whenever Papa calls her that. Green. It’s a homage to how she likes everything green, from the color to pistachio ice cream to green M&M’s. It’s become a part of her personality.

“I can’t let you bully my daughter.” She snatches the phone and smiles at me. “You doing okay, Cecy?”

I lift my index finger to the side of my nose, then force it to drop back down. “Yeah, Mum. Everything’s great.”

She watches me with those imploring eyes again, and I’m surprised I don’t flounder and burn under their weight.

I’m surprised my chest doesn’t rip open and confess everything to her right this instant.

When she speaks, her voice comes out gentle. “Cecy, honey, it’s okay if everything’s not great and if some days are worse than others. You know that, right? Your papa and I are here to listen.”

I choke on the unsaid words that burn in my throat, but I nod. “I know.”

Papa snatches the phone, and that knot gradually disappears as we talk until they eventually hang up.

Leaving me alone with my thoughts.

My cancerous, damning thoughts.

I hate how much they consume me lately, how being inside my own head is torturous and how I find myself there more often than not.

Still, I force myself to get up in the morning, wash my face, eat, and go to school.

I force myself to study, to go out with the guys, and take comfort in the idea that I’m alive.

If I don’t, I’ll be caught in a loop of my own making that no one will be able to save me from.

I’ve been trying so hard to come to terms with my actions, my choices, and how low I’ve fallen—and keep failing miserably.

Maybe it’s a pride thing.

Or a morals thing.

Though I’m not hurting anyone. No one but myself, at least.

I get up from my desk and close my book. I’ve been using the small office in the shelter I volunteer at as my hiding space.

That and the library, where I can read in peace and no one can bother me.

I spend about half an hour feeding the animals, and then I call it a day.

Mostly because everyone went home and Dr. Stephanie, the doctor in charge of the shelter, basically kicks me out.

We walk out of the building together and she stops by her car and retrieves her keys. “Do you want me to give you a ride?”

“No, it’s fine. I could use the walk.” Walking to and back from the shelter is the only workout I get, which is why I don’t drive here in the first place.

A slight frown appears between her brows as she casts a quick glance at the night staking its claim behind me. “Be careful, okay? It’s dangerous for a young lady to walk on her own.”

“Will do, thanks.”

“Text me when you get home.”

I give her a thumbs-up and a smile, but the crease doesn’t disappear from her brows as she gets into her car.

It’s not the first time I’ve gone home alone after sunset. And it’s not really that late.

Anni and I volunteer here, but she never stays after four p.m., and if she does, the place is filled with her security, so she saves everyone the trouble and leaves early.

As for myself, I’m just glad to get more time away from the world. At least animals show their silent support without judging.

After throwing a mint gum in my mouth, I check my texts and pause at the ones from my friends in the girls’ group chat.

Annika: Jer is locking me up in the ivory tower again *crying emoji*

Ava: OMG want us to put on our Superwoman capes and come save you?

Annika: Not unless you’re ready to be locked up with me.

Glyndon: So sorry, Anni. Your brother is really scary.

Ava: But we can take him! @Cecily Knight let's kick his misogynistic, sexist, patriarchal arse.

My fingers shake and it takes everything in me to type.

Cecily: I have to study for a test tomorrow.

Ava: Boo. You're always studying.

Cecily: A little thing you should be doing sometimes since you're at uni and all.

Ava: Kay, Mum!

A dark shadow moves in my peripheral vision and I freeze, but I don't look behind me.

Instead, I slide the phone into my back pocket and inhale deeply before I continue on my way.

There's no change in my pace or my breathing, but I can feel the stiffness in each of my muscles.

I can smell the air that's mixed with the scent of the trees and the salt of the sea.

My heartbeat picks up, too, gradually, almost like I'm ascending stairs and exerting more energy as time goes by.

The books in my hands are heavy, and I tighten my hold on them as if these ancient, long-dead psychologists could materialize in front of me or protect me.

Though I don't need it.

Probably.

Fact is, this isn't the first time I've had this feeling, or the second.

Or the tenth.

It started a week or so after the most shameful night of my life.

I've felt eyes on me since.

Watching me, following me in the dark, utterly and completely shadowing me.

Maybe it was there long before that, but I only started noticing it about three weeks ago.

Probably after he made himself noticeable.

For instance, the discreet shadow from now is nothing more than a twisted and cruel homage to that night.

I know it's Jeremy.

Not because I've searched much, but once, he let me see him on the hill opposite the shelter, on his bike.

He was wearing a helmet, but I knew it was him and kind of pretended I didn't see him and ran back inside.

Maybe Dr. Stephanie saw him, too, which is why she's always worried about me going home alone after sunset.

But he's never gotten close, never talked to me. In fact, he's kept his distance and only allows me to see him when he thinks I'm getting too comfortable.

It's like he's intent on not letting me live in peace.

But then I realized what he was doing, or more like, I found out after a conversation with Lan as soon as I realized my movements were being watched.

Cecily: I think I'm being followed by Jeremy. No. I'm sure I am.

Landon: Oh? I wouldn't expect any less from him. Of course he'd be suspicious that you used Creighton's invitation to get into the initiation.

Cecily: What should I do? I don't want to get involved with Jeremy.

Especially not after the clusterfuck of that night. He rattles me more now that he's seen that part of me.

Landon: I'll get one of my guys to watch from afar in case he becomes a danger. In the meantime, ignore him. Pretend he's not there and he'll eventually get bored and leave you be. Didn't he say you were bland? Make him believe it again.

Cecily: How…how do you know he said that?

Landon: Glyn was talking about it to Bran. He said you're bland and Ava has a social butterfly complex, and Glyn went off like a gun at his throat. Is our little princess loyal or what? At any rate, paint that image again in his mind. Don't stand out.

Cecily: Am I bland?

Landon: I don't think so? But he does, or he did before he saw you at that initiation, a scene that he doesn't think fits your character and, therefore, made him suspicious. In order to restore that belief, you need to remove the source of his doubts and be exactly what he thinks you are. Lay low, and don't get in touch with me unless absolutely necessary. Stay safe, Cecy. I mean it.

I've been taking Lan's words to heart and have kept my distance from him.

Even I know that Jeremy is following me so that I'll either lead him to Lan or reveal what he thinks was my plan for barging into the initiation.

But it's been over three weeks. Doesn't he get bored?

Doesn't he ever give up?

Every morning, I wake up and chant in my head that I'll get used to his watchful gaze with time and that today will be better.

I don't and it isn't.

Not even a little.

If anything, my anxiety levels shoot up whenever it's time to go home or outside, but I can't stay huddled in the house if I don't want him to be suspicious.

My whole body is attuned to his presence and I can feel him even if I don't see him.

Or more like the weight of his stare.

That dispassionate, cold stare of his that's able to strip anyone bare.

I've seen him exactly three times outside of this stalker situation. Once was when he came to personally pick up Anni from REU.

The other two times were at the fight club Ava drags us to now and again. He was there to offer support for the Heathens' members as they fought.

All three times, I either hid or looked away the moment his punishing gaze fell on me.

I couldn't handle his watchful gaze or the shame that rattled my bones when I was in his presence.

If my encounter with him in that forest is of any indication, then Jeremy is the type of person I shouldn't, under any circumstances, get involved with.

Not only is he soulless, but he also doesn't let up. Not even a little.

Hell, it's been so many weeks, but he's still not giving up on watching me and trying to find any clues as to why I was at the initiation.

Even now, I can feel that savage intent radiating off him in waves. Goosebumps erupt on my skin and I shiver as if I've been drenched with cold water.

I retrieve my earbuds and put them in, then raise the volume to the max in a helpless attempt to drown out my surroundings.

It doesn't matter if my hearing is gone. I can still feel his aura flaring around me, prickling my skin, nearly suffocating me.

Something happens behind me and I pretend I haven’t sensed it and march on.

A sudden movement jolts me to a stop and I slowly turn around.

I grow still at the scene in front of me.

Two guys lie on the ground, their noses and mouths bleeding while they twist and wriggle in pain. Over them stands Jeremy, his fist bloody and his expression blank and freezing.

It’s been weeks since I’ve seen him this close and I almost forgot how absolutely huge his build is. His leather jacket stretches against the corded muscles of his biceps and the heaving of his wide chest.

I have no doubt that he’s the one who made them like that, and now, I wish I hadn’t stopped to inspect the scene.

Just when I’m thinking about the best way to escape, he strides toward me. I’m too stunned to move and he reaches me in a few steps.

I flinch when his hand shoots out at my face, but he doesn’t grab me. He yanks out my earbuds.

The loud music still reaches me even as he engulfs them in his big hand with veins extending from the back of it to his long fingers.

“Why the fuck—” he cuts himself off, then starts again with a more collected tone. “Who listens to loud music while they’re walking alone at night?”

He’s talking to me. *Blimey.* Why is he talking to me when he’s made it his mission to only watch me?

My skin heats and I think I’m hyperventilating. No, I’m sure I am.

The savage weight of his stare stabs me as he waits with growing impatience to hear my reply.

“I didn’t think—”

“You obviously didn’t think. Do you even do that?”

“Don’t insult me.” I breathe harshly. “I wouldn’t have put on the loud music if you weren’t following me like a creep.”

I pause.

Damn it. *Damn* it.

It was an unspoken rule to not admit I was aware he was stalking me, but I went ahead and divulged that I knew all along.

I expect anger, maybe a lash of his freezing coldness, but a slight smirk lifts his lips. “Like a creep, huh?”

“I didn’t mean…”

“You didn’t mean what? The creep part?”

“I’m… I’m going home.”

“No, you’re not.” He clutches my elbow. “Since I’m already a creep, might as well act on it.”

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8

CECILY

I’m stunned into long, thick silence.

And Jeremy uses the chance to drag me behind him. He doesn’t do it gently, doesn’t wait for any cues from me. He just digs his fingers into my elbow and pulls me along.

I’m wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt, but my skin tingles and burns where he’s gripping it.

The sudden, nonnegotiable motion might as well be an ambush that strips away all my defenses.

I’m not used to being treated this way—stalked, manhandled, grabbed with brutal strength.

I gradually snap out of my shocked state and try to wrench my arm free.

His powerful, much bigger hand engulfs my elbow in a merciless hold, fingers digging further in the skin until I can feel a bruise forming there.

“Where are you taking me? Let me go.” I hate the tremor in my voice, the helplessness in it.

I’ve always prided myself on being confident and having the ability to conquer anything in my path, but this is a lot different from anything I’ve experienced.

Jeremy Volkov isn’t a person who I can stand up to and hope to come out of the encounter unscathed. He’s not an entity that can be dealt with logically and hope for favorable results.

The more I see him, the deeper I’m trapped in his night-like aura. Ruthless, heartless, boundless.

“J-Jeremy…” I purse my lips at the stutter and my skin heats. It starts where he’s touching me and spreads through the rest of my body.

He doesn’t answer me, doesn’t acknowledge my existence as his sharp strides cut the distance through the night. The muscles in his back are rigid, rippling beneath his black leather jacket.

It’s a fact that Jeremy is a big man, probably the biggest I’ve seen, aside from Nikolai. But right now, he’s like a giant animal.

No, not an animal.

A *hunter*.

He’s been chasing me ever since the initiation, and I was insolent enough to run away once and stop him the second time.

And maybe that’s what led us to this predicament. Maybe that’s how I ended up being targeted by the most dangerous man I know.

The one whose name is whispered in university halls, fight clubs, and the streets. The one who comes with gruesome rumors attached to his name.

The most prominent of all is how he makes people disappear.

My body goes rigid at that reminder. Maybe it’s my turn now. Maybe he’s had fun tormenting me by following me around, and now, he’ll execute the next step that involves getting rid of me.

“Jeremy!” I call again, much louder this time.

He glances at me from the corner of his eye, looking no different than a monster in sophisticated clothes.

“So you do know my name, yet you chose to address me as a creep.”

I swallow. He’s not going to let that go, is he?

“I—”

“Don’t.”

“You didn’t even hear what I had to say.”

“I don’t need to. If you’re going to blurt it out without mulling it over in that head of yours beforehand, then it’ll only piss me off further.”

My mouth opens, but I force it closed.

So he *is* mad.

It’s hard to tell when he appears angry all the time.

He tugs me forward and I stumble, nearly dropping my books as we come to a halt in front of a huge bike.

The same bike I’ve caught glimpses of him riding a few times.

This thing is monstrous, and I resemble a stray mouse next to it. Jeremy, however, fits the vibe.

He looked to be in complete harmony the last time I saw him on it. He had one leg on the ground, helmet on, and his hands hung nonchalantly on the handlebars.

Jeremy finally releases my elbow and I resist the urge to massage the spot where his fingers assaulted my skin.

He plucks a helmet out of the saddlebag and leans toward me. It's really bad for my self-esteem whenever he's in my vicinity, because the only thing I can think about in this current situation is how to escape.

One of my legs steps behind the other and I jolt when my back hits the bike.

I jerk one hand up. "Stop it!"

He swats it away effortlessly, as if it's nothing more than a cardboard prop, then shoves the helmet on my head.

I try to resist and grab his wrist to push it away.

He pauses and glares at me silently, so silently that it's creepy.

How does he not want me to call him a creep when he scores a hundred for the vibe alone?

The moment he stops strapping the helmet in place, my struggle stops, too. Mostly due to his glare.

"If you want to touch me, all you have to do is ask. There's no need to play hard to get for it."

Heat flares in my cheeks when I realize I'm cradling his wrist, fingers stretching across his warm skin. Now that I'm not fighting him, it's like I'm trying to grab his hand or something.

I release him with a jerk and he uses my flustered state to finish strapping on the helmet.

"Can you let me go?" I ask, softly this time, imploringly even.

For someone who obviously gets off on violence, countering it with the same medicine probably wouldn't be as effective as trying the exact opposite.

"Not yet." He grabs the top of my books and I hug them further to my chest, which causes his fingers to brush against my breasts.

A zip goes through me and my hold falters around the books. Jeremy all but yanks them out of my arms.

The man doesn't have one gentle bone in his body.

He dunks them in the saddlebag. "Why are you confiscating my books?"

“You’ll get them back when we’re done.”

“Done with what?”

He casts me a glance, and I can’t help noticing the smudge of blood on his palm that he got from beating up those guys.

Then leaving them wailing and groaning in the middle of the street.

That’s the type of person Jeremy Volkov is. A man who solves problems with his fists and likes stealing other people’s identities just to teach me a lesson.

So how come I’m caught in his web?

“You’ll find out.” His tone is final, prohibiting any other questions.

He straddles his bike and revs the engine. I’m pretty sure he sees me flinching at the loud sound, and unless I’m imagining it, there’s a twitch of his lips, too.

I’ve always hated superbikes, sports cars, and anything with loud engines and crazy horsepower.

The sensory overload hurts my ears and makes me want to hide in the nearest nook.

I cast a glance at my surroundings. The lot he parked in is isolated, but there are two roads ahead. Surely, if I run, I’ll be able to find a passerby—

“Don’t even think about it.”

My wide eyes land on Jeremy, who’s casually sitting on his bike and watching my every move.

“How do you know what I’m thinking about?”

“You’re a lot more obvious than you realize.” He strokes his index finger on the clutch, back and forth, as if he’s performing some sort of a ritual. “If you want to run, go for it. But you should know that I’ll chase you, and I can’t guarantee what I’ll do to you the moment I catch you, so if that’s an option you’re willing to gamble on, by all means, go ahead and run. If not, I suggest you hop on, *peacefully*.”

A whole-body tremor goes through me, and it’s due not only to his calmly spoken threats, but also to his words.

The innuendo behind them. The deepening in his inflection when he said them.

He wants to chase me.

I can see it in his dark, ash-gray eyes that he wants me to run.

No, he’s wishing for it. He’s hoping I’ll run so he can get off on chasing me.

Like in that forest.

He'll pin me down, rip my clothes off, and have his way with me. He'll unleash the animal inside him and devour me.

My legs shake and a crazy part of me yearns to actually run and hide. Run and be chased.

I internally drive the idea out of my foggy brain. Just what the hell is wrong with me?

Head trauma.

That's the only explanation. I must've hit my head when he shoved me to the ground that night. That explains all the craziness I've been thinking about since then.

Or the last words he said to me.

Come back when you're ready to be fucked properly.

A sling of heat ripples through me and I force those thoughts away.

Jeremy doesn't break eye contact, his soulless eyes singlehandedly attempting to barge into my soul.

Looking at his face for even a few seconds is the most draining thing I've ever done.

He doesn't speak, doesn't even blink. Just stares.

I break eye contact first and climb onto the bike.

I try to, anyway.

The thing is huge and I'm not used to it. My foot slips and I grab onto his leather jacket at the last second.

Jeremy clutches my elbow, the same elbow that he held on to for dear life earlier, then jerks me behind him in one go.

"That's what I thought." He speaks with a mocking edge, as if he wouldn't expect anything less from me.

Before I can respond, his bigger hand envelops mine and then plants my palm on his lower abs. My arm is all wrapped around his hard, sculpted waist and my fingers tremble slightly over his jacket.

"Hold on."

"I can grab the back of the bike." Or his shoulders. Why the hell is he making me touch him?

A slight twitch of his lips is all the answer he offers as he revs the bike forward.

My whole body vibrates from the force of the engine and my breasts glue to his back.

His rigid, muscular back.

I wrap my other hand around his waist, feeling like I'll fall off if I don't.

The power of the bike is nothing less than that of being on a roller coaster.

My fingers dig into his jacket, his T-shirt, anywhere I'm sure he won't throw me off for fun.

The vibration of the engine shakes my whole body as he speeds down the streets. It's like he's in a competition against the wind. Due to which I might fall off on my arse.

The trees, streets, and people blur in my peripheral vision, or maybe I'm just about to black out.

These high-adrenaline activities are just not for me.

How the hell does he manage to remain calm through it? Is he a damn unfeeling robot?

I'm on the verge of a panic attack and he just navigates the streets as if they're his kingdom. It doesn't help that my body is all glued to his.

The pressure of the wind forbids me from putting any distance between us. Every time I try to pull away, I'm flung forward harder so that my breasts are crushed against his back.

I think he goes faster on purpose whenever I do that, so I stop trying. Either that or the crazy psycho will land us in an accident.

My attempts to alternate between breathing through my nose and mouth are futile, too. It's just not possible when my whole body is under attack and I have no control over the situation.

It's sensory overload, a dead end, and a bleak reality.

I'm surprised I haven't thrown up by the time he stops. My nails continue digging into his abs while I scan my surroundings.

What if the crazy bastard starts the engine again and I fall on my face?

He brings me to a hidden alley that's dimly lit. Several luxurious cars are parked to one side, and Jeremy has placed his bike near one of them.

We're away from the main street, so I can't exactly walk there unless I'm planning to run for about half an hour.

"Will you be holding on to me for long? Not that I mind, but we have somewhere to be."

I carefully release him, my cheeks probably looking red again. Just why the hell do I keep getting caught in compromising positions by him?

Jeremy hops off the bike and I remove the helmet and give it to him.

“This doesn’t look like the dorm,” I start as we walk down the street.

“I never said I was giving you a ride home.”

“Can I go home?”

“I told you, not yet.”

I open my mouth to ask why not but clamp it shut when we reach a metal door in front of which stand two burly guys with angular features and harsh eyes.

They nod upon seeing Jeremy and he nods back. No words are exchanged as one of them opens the door.

Jeremy walks in, and when I don’t follow, he grabs me by the nape. His big hand stretches across my skin as he flings me to his side, forcing me to fall in step beside him.

“I don’t want to go in there…” I try to negotiate as an elegant hall with baroque wallpaper materializes in front of us.

“And I didn’t want you at the initiation.” He sinks his fingers into my skin. “But we don’t always get what we want, now, do we?”

“Are you doing all of this because I was at the initiation?”

“Am I?”

The condescension behind his question makes my blood boil, but before I can reply, he stops in front of a door and pushes me inside.

I start to struggle. There’s no way in hell he’ll get me into his torture chamber without a fight.

My body freezes when he locks the door and I’m greeted with a table that’s set like in a luxurious restaurant.

Elegant wallpaper covers the walls and a huge painting with bold strokes of warm colors occupies half of the opposite wall.

Two red velvet chairs are on either side of the elegantly set table.

If I wasn’t suspicious, I’d be almost certain this was one of those restaurants with private dining rooms.

But then again, why would Jeremy bring me here for a meal?

The question must be written all over my face, because he settles on one of the sophisticated chairs and motions at the one across from him.

“Sit and then you can ask your question.”

My steps are rigid, forceful even, as I carefully slide into the seat.

“What is this place?”

“Somewhere to eat.” Jeremy grabs the menu and skims it with disturbing nonchalance.

Maybe he’s doing it on purpose, knowing full well how nervous I am.

“Why would you bring me here?”

“I only agreed to answer a question, not questions.” He motions at my untouched menu. “Pick something.”

“I don’t have an appetite.”

He stares at me from above the menu. “Why not?”

“Are you seriously asking me that after you stalked me, assaulted some random guys, and kidnapped me to God knows where? Food is the last thing on my mind under the circumstances.”

“Stalking, assaulting, and kidnapping. Three serious crimes, don’t you think?”

“Is this a joke to you?” I ask with a trembling voice.

“No, but you must believe it is, because you’re not taking my words seriously.” His gaze slides to my menu. “Pick something or I’ll do it for you and shove the food down your throat.”

My spine jerks upright and I reach for the menu. It’s for self-preservation and I’m only choosing my battles.

That’s it.

That’s *all*.

Names of dishes I’ve never seen before spill out in front of me in gold letters, but there are no prices listed. I’ve been to many restaurants like this, usually with my parents or grandparents, so I know that this place is either exclusive or pricey or both.

The door opens and I jerk upright in my seat when a well-groomed man with rimless glasses walks into the room.

He places some appetizers on the table and a bottle of premium-looking vodka in front of Jeremy. He takes his order and then turns to me. I pick some soup that had the fewest weird ingredients in it.

As soon as he leaves, I wish he hadn’t.

Jeremy pours some vodka into his glass and swirls it, watching me watch it with that blank edge of his.

I force myself to meet his eyes even as my nails clink together in my lap. “What do you want from me?”

“What do you think I want?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I knew.”

He takes a sip of his drink. “Make a guess.”

“You’re getting back at me because I went to the initiation when I wasn’t personally invited?”

“Yes and no.”

“Can you explain?”

“I can, but I won’t.”

I narrow my eyes and a slight curve tilts his lips. “Are you okay? You look a little annoyed.”

“Are you enjoying this?”

“Very.” His voice drops with that single word as if taunting me further.

I want to curse him to the darkest pits of hell, but I force myself to inhale deeply and stay calm.

In. Out.

It’s not worth it.

In. Out.

He’s probably doing this on purpose to get a rise out of me and I’ll not give him the satisfaction.

“Where are your annoying, self-righteous retorts?” He continues to swirl the contents of his glass. “Cat got your tongue?”

“More like an unwanted existence has rendered me speechless.”

“Careful there. Just because I’m being tolerant doesn’t mean you should test the limits.”

“And what are those?”

“Sure you want to know? You’ll have to tell me yours in return.”

I reach for the appetizer for no other reason than to ignore the situation and stop my fingers from assaulting each other.

“Not interested,” I mutter.

“But I am. So why don’t you tell me why gagging and drugging are your only limits? Does that mean you’re fine with brutal flogging, spanking, breath and knife play, but can’t handle a simple gagging? What’s the philosophy behind that?”

My fingers tremble and I nearly spill the glass of water as I bring it to my lips.

“Can you not?” My voice is breathy, distorted.

“Can I not what?”

“Talk about that.”

“*That*? Oh, you mean your limits in primal play? How you like to be chased and used and abused like a dirty little slut?”

“Stop it.” I jerk up from my seat.

“Sit down.” His voice is nonnegotiable but calm as he slides his attention to my chair in a silent command.

“Please stop this.”

“Sit the fuck down.”

I slowly do, my heart beating loudly behind my rib cage. This is a dangerous man with dangerous actions. If I fight for the sake of fighting, he won’t hesitate to knock me into what he believes is my place.

“Now, answer my earlier question. Why are gagging and drugging a limit?”

I purse my lips.

“We can do this the amicable way or I can torture the answer out of you. I don’t have to say which option I’d like to try out more, do I?”

This sick bastard.

This bloody sick bastard.

“I had a bad experience with them,” I say so softly, I think he doesn’t hear me.

“What type of experience?”

I glare at him. “The type I don’t want to talk about.”

“Hmm. Is that also why you developed the kink?”

“No.” I had it long before that. Maybe I’m sick, too.

“Then was it because Landon is into that sort of play?”

I gulp the contents of my mouth and the door opens again as the waiter walks in with our food.

As soon as he’s out, I stuff my face with the soup, eating so he’ll stop talking and give me space.

Jeremy, however, doesn’t touch his food, and I squirm under the weight of his unwavering attention. “Are you that desperate for his attention?”

I choke on the soup and when I look at him, he mutters, “Pathetic.”

Beneath his callous edge, I detect a worse feeling. Disgust.

He’s revolted with me to an extent I didn’t think was possible for another human being to feel.

The shame I’ve been battling with since the night he touched me resurfaces again, much stronger and more potent.

But I manage to place my spoon down and preserve my composure. “If you think I’m so pathetic, why are you wasting your time with me?”

“Why do you think?”

“Can you stop answering my questions with your own questions?”

“No.”

“I’m leaving.” This time, I get up, intent on getting the hell out of here.

“No, you’re not.” He doesn’t even move from his spot.

“I’ll scream the whole place down.”

“No one will hear you.” His voice drops. “This room is soundproof.”

My gaze strays to the door.

“Only my people are out there, so don’t even try unless you’re in the mood to be manhandled.”

I take a step toward the door anyway. In a flash, Jeremy reaches me and appears like a wall at my back.

He grabs my jaw and directs my attention to the painting on the wall. “I’m going to need you to watch a live scene with me.”

Like in some sci-fi show, the painting is lifted and glass appears, revealing another room that’s similar to this one. Only the entire scene is different.

I gasp as the person on the other side materializes in front of me.

“See. Landon isn’t exclusively a member of that club. He’s a member of every club on this island and beyond. He doesn’t have one kink. He has them all as long as he can inflict pain. One of his kinks is exhibitionism, which is why he chose a room where anyone can watch him.”

Bile rises in my throat as Landon drives in and out of a bound, gagged, and blindfolded brunette at a maddening pace. The sounds mix with the graphic scene.

Groaning, slapping, gagging, moaning.

Sharp pain stabs my stomach. Then all of a sudden, I bend over and empty what I just ate on the floor.

Just like I did two years ago.

Just like back then, I can hear *his* voice over the ringing in my ears.

“You’re disgusting.”

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9

JEREMY

Cecily's not moving.

She's not breathing properly either, considering the blue hue that flares beneath her skin.

Her eyes are fixed on the scene in front of us, but they see straight through it.

The slaps of flesh against flesh overlap with the brutal fucking and the raw gagging. One of her two limits.

Yes, I could've just told her about this, but she had to witness the scene for herself.

She had to see that her so-called *prince* is nothing but a hedonistic motherfucker who fucks more women than Satan himself. He's insatiable, over the top, and most importantly, he couldn't give a fuck about her.

She's the pathetic and desperate one who's holding him in high esteem when she should've cut him loose a long time ago.

I've planned to show her this part of him ever since I found out about her fixation on him, but I resorted to following her instead. If not for anything else than to find out her exact relationship with the fucker.

If he used her to spy on me, then I'm not beneath doing the same.

But then I started noticing things about the outwardly boring Cecily Knight. Like her infuriating love for animals, her nerd tendencies, her deliberate façade, but none of those held my attention for long.

What kept me coming back for more is manifesting right at this moment.

She's zoning out—or more accurately, dissociating.

I know the technical term for it. More than anyone else, I've been exposed to this phenomenon since a young age and researched it as soon as I could understand what mental health meant.

Soon after I started following Cecily, I noticed these moments where she'd stare into space in a catatonic state, unblinking, and completely unaware of her surroundings. Her friends or her colleagues at the shelter would call her name and she'd show no sign of hearing them.

It would take them a few tries, snapping their fingers and waving their hands in front of her face to wrench her out of it.

At first, I thought it was an ill-fated coincidence. After all, what are the chances of me witnessing someone suffering from dissociation again?

But the more I watched her from the shadows, the deeper I inserted myself in her life, the surer I was that she definitely has it, and the worst part is that she probably doesn't know about it.

It's mild, barely noticeable, and unlike severe cases, she can be brought out by external intervention.

The ghost remains inside her, though.

Lurking beneath her skin, waiting for the time he'll be able to completely take over.

It's come back now, right after she threw up.

Her body has stiffened, and she's no longer staring at her beloved bastard while he's fucking another girl.

I hadn't planned to bring her here tonight. I was following her as usual, all the way to her apartment. It's become a habit to shadow every move she makes, lurk in the darkness, and wait for the ghost to return.

Don't ask me why. Even I have no fucking clue why I want to tug that part of her out and sink my knife into it.

Or *her*.

I don't know which at this point.

However, no matter how many times I follow her home, she doesn't experience that state. She only slips into it when she's with friends or sitting alone.

I planned to end the night as usual—watch from afar and gather clues, but then she stuck earbuds in her ears and some assholes thought it was a good idea to follow her.

Only *I* am allowed to do that.

When she saw me, there was no point in hiding further, and I made a last-minute decision to bring her here. She needed to realize that Landon King isn't the revered saint she makes him out to be.

He's a monster like the rest of us—if not worse—and has no business being held in high fucking regard.

But I didn't think she'd vomit and dissociate at the view.

If it were anyone else, I'd completely ignore her and get on with my day. I have zero interest in people. Especially shady ones who might or might not be getting in the way of my plans.

But something stops me.

The stiffness in her limbs, the freezing state of her face. The bulging of her eyes that nearly pop out of their sockets.

I grab her by the shoulder and shake her, gently at first, but when that doesn't work, I use more force.

Nothing.

Her gaze remains glued to Landon's erotic show that he offers to anyone willing to watch.

Motherfucker.

I tug her with me, but I might as well be moving a stone. One that's planted in place and refuses to move.

So I physically drag her behind me. But no matter what I do, her attention remains glued to the fucker.

I round the table and click the button underneath it that blacks out the scene and mutes the sounds. The painting slides back into place, but Cecily doesn't snap out of it.

Her bulging eyes that have transformed into a muted green color watch the red impressionist painting with undivided attention.

I fall on the chair and pull on her arm so that she sits on my lap. Her muscles don't unlock, remaining as stiff as granite, and she's barely sitting. Her hands are glued to her thighs as if they're an extension of them.

"Cecily," I call her name with a firm voice.

She doesn't show a hint of hearing me.

The Cecily I've come to know these past few weeks has sensitive hearing. A misophonia of sorts. She can't handle a lot of noises and uses sleeping buds to be able to go to sleep.

It's also how she knows I'm there whenever I couldn't give a fuck and become sloppy in hiding my tracks. She hears a step or the rev of my bike's

engine, and her ears twitch like a fucking cat—or rabbit.

So it's not like she didn't hear me just now.

It's that she can't.

My fist clenches before I slowly flex it and force myself to breathe deeply.

Then I tap her on the cheek once. Her pale skin immediately reddens at the impact, and I didn't even put force behind it.

Still no response.

My hand splays out on her skin, on the redness that spreads all over her cheek and neck. Then I stroke it, sliding my fingers over the tiny freckles beneath her eyes. "Cecily, can you hear me?"

No reply.

I rummage through her bag and retrieve her packet of sugar-free mint gum. I've often seen her crunch on these, even during her zoning-out states. The moment I place two pieces at her lips, she gobbles them inside and chews them. Maybe it's a sense of recognition at something familiar that makes the gum a break from the unusual. It's robotic, though. As if she's not aware of the effort.

"Cecily?"

More chewing, but no reaction.

I grab the glass of vodka and place it to her lips. Maybe some alcohol will snap her out of it.

I'd pour it over her head, but that would shock her, and shocks aren't good for getting someone out of a dissociation episode.

Her lips thin in a line and she swallows the gum. Her mouth doesn't move, doesn't allow even a droplet of alcohol inside. So I press on her cheeks in an attempt to make her open up. Her lips part slightly, but not enough.

I take a sip of the alcohol and then use that opening to seal my lips to hers and pour it in her mouth. She shudders in my hold, so I do it again; this time, my lips linger on her full, velvety ones longer than need be.

I bite her lower lip into my mouth, licking and toying with it. My tongue slips inside and latches onto hers, stroking, playing.

My cock twitches and strains against my jeans. Her taste, the flavor of her tongue, the way she slowly melts in my hold boils my blood.

Fuck her.

Finish what you started the last time and show her what it means to be fucked raw.

The beast inside me churns and writhes against its bindings, wanting to sink its teeth into her flesh, rip into her heat, and claim her.

But I force myself to focus on her reaction, on how she lets me kiss her, on how her lips turn pliant beneath mine.

The stiffness in her body slowly subsides. Her muscles loosen, slowly but surely molding into mine.

She even wiggles her ass against my cock, rubbing the tender flesh all over me. My erection grows against her skin beneath her jeans, and all attempts to keep my beast in its bindings wilt.

Cecily picks up her pace, her tongue meeting mine while her eyes remain closed. She lets me ravage her lips, kiss them, bite them, drink the alcohol I poured on her tongue from them.

Her small hands slide up my chest, feeling along the muscles, stroking, exploring as if it's the first time she's touching another person. She flat-out dry humps me, sliding her ass up and down my erection, matching the strokes of my tongue.

Her daring, albeit innocent, movements are enough to turn me into a raging animal.

I fist my hand in her silver hair and pull her back, wrenching my mouth from hers and forcing her to pause her ministrations.

"Stop that unless you're ready to be fucked."

Her eyes snap open and she freezes again, her bitten, red lips parting.

Not again.

I tighten my hold on her hair. "Don't go there."

"Go where?" she whispers as if she's afraid of the sound of her own voice.

Wherever it is she goes to.

But that doesn't seem to be the case right now since she just talked. That means she's just in shock, and not zoning out.

"I…I thought this was a dream." She avoids my eyes, stares at the ground, and rubs the side of her nose.

My lips curve, but my voice comes out husky. "Do you often dream about kissing and dry humping me, Lisichka?"

"I d-do not."

"Your stuttering and quick reply don't play in your favor."

She pushes against my chest, a futile attempt to make me let her go, but I only tighten my hold on her hair.

“And now what?” she asks with a tinge of annoyance. Which means she’s at least in her right state of mind.

“Now, I ask you questions and you answer them.”

“Can’t we do that while I’m sitting on an actual chair?”

“What’s wrong with my lap?”

“I can feel your…uh, you know.”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you name it?”

She fixates me with a deadly glare but says nothing and quits fighting.

Cecily might be infuriatingly rebellious, but she knows how and when to pick her battles. With my fist in her hair, she’s well aware this isn’t a battle that she can possibly win.

“Why are you interested in me, Jeremy?” Her voice echoes in the silence with resignation.

“What makes you think I am?”

“The fact that you were stalking me.”

“I was keeping an eye on you.”

“Why?” The molten green of her eyes fires up. “Why me?”

“Because you had the audacity to capture my attention.”

“Can I un-capture it?”

“That’s not even a word. And the answer is no. You can’t make me do anything, Cecily. All my decisions are taken inward. Your actions, or the lack thereof, have no influence whatsoever, so don’t act stupid or desperate in order to drive me away. That will only make me retaliate and you’ll be collateral damage.”

A slow fire hums beneath the surface and her temperature rises. “So I’m supposed to take everything you dish out and remain put? That’s not who I am.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Moving on to a more important topic, do you remember what just happened?” I ask with enough nonchalance that it surprises me.

Cecily’s eyes widen and they fall on where she vomited earlier, then back to the painting she watched Landon through.

“You’re sick,” she tells me, lips trembling.

“For showing you Landon’s true nature?”

“For showing me sex.” Her throat works up with a swallow, and she looks nauseated again. “I don’t like looking at it.”

“Is that why you vomited?”

She nods once. “I know. I’m a prude. Ava and Remi tell me that all the time. No need to remind me.”

“You’re not a prude if you like being chased in dark places.”

Her body freezes and that red hue covers her cheeks again. Like the spilling of blood on the ground, her skin flares and heats at an enthralling speed. And then she strokes the side of her nose. “Can you not bring that up?”

“Why not? Are you ashamed of it?”

Her lips part before she seals them shut again and stares sideways.

Hmm. Interesting.

She *is* ashamed of it.

Cecily doesn’t like having that kink. It probably took her a long time to admit it to herself, and signing up on the app was the first time she’s tried to act on it.

She probably thought the not-so-prince Landon would be able to satisfy her kink and they would ride off into the sunset on his black horse.

“You weren’t so embarrassed when you all but threw yourself at Landon.”

“Lan is different,” she whispers.

“*Different*.” My voice must convey the dark demons swirling around in my head, because her wide gaze flits back to me. “Different how?”

“Just…different.” Careful apprehension coats her tone. No attempts to soften it or hide a lie.

“You just saw him fucking another girl and you still think he’s different?”

“I knew about that.” She lifts a shoulder. “I know a lot of things about him, and his darkness. I know his preferred methods to purge and his twisted relationship with art and his family. I don’t like him because I have rosy misconceptions about him. I like him because he’s different.”

Different.

Again.

I tug on her hair and throw her off me.

She stumbles but catches herself before she falls to the ground.

“W-what’s wrong with you now?” She watches me with that caution again. As she should.

I’m two seconds away from bashing her head in, and I have to remind myself that I can’t do that.

Unless I’m in the mood to see her brain.

Which isn’t a bad idea, after all. I should see what the fuck is going on in her dysfunctional mind to cause her to harbor thoughts like that.

With one last glare in her direction, I stand up. “We’re leaving.”

She wants different?

I’ll show her what different actually means.

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CECILY

Jeremy disappeared.

Not completely. Just from my life.

It’s been two weeks since he took me to the club and kissed me with an insatiable hunger. Two weeks and my lips still tingle in remembrance of his forceful hands and punishing mouth.

After he dropped me home that night, he hasn’t shown himself around me.

There’s no more stalking, no more unsolicited sliding into my peripheral vision and following me back to the flat.

Nothing.

At first, I thought it was because of all the events happening on both campuses, especially the rivalry between the Heathens and the Serpents.

He’s the leader, after all, and these types of events would be on the forefront of his mind.

However, that didn’t stop him before. No matter what type of fuckery was going on, Jeremy managed to continuously transform into my shadow and haunt my days and nights.

Especially my nights.

I stare out my window at the gloomy darkness outside, rolling my pen between my fingers.

My attention has long since become scattered, blown by the wind and shattered by the edge of daydreaming. My academics have suffered the most, no matter how much I push myself into my ‘nerd’ zone, as my friends call it.

Straightening in my rotating chair, I slap my cheeks and return my focus to the project I'm supposed to be making.

Five minutes is all it takes before the words on the screen of my laptop blur into intelligible chaos.

Images of that day rush back into my mind. Punishing lips, merciless hands, unforgiving eyes.

I thought it was a dream, but I obviously zoned out and it was for longer than usual since my brain had the capacity to turn the event into a dream.

Not a nightmare. A *dream.*

My fingers ghost over my lips and touch them tentatively. A zap slashes through my body, and usually, I'd drop my hand as if I'd been caught stealing from a biscuit jar.

Now, I don't.

This time, I close my eyes and picture his lips, unapologetic and controlling. I had no choice but to let him ravage, suck, lick.

It was a stolen moment that I couldn't have put an end to.

I hate myself for reliving it over and over again. For picturing his big hand around my waist and the other trapping my cheek.

For still having the distinctive feeling of his erection rubbing against my backside.

But what I hate the most is wondering about why he left and never came back.

It's not that I want him back.

I was relieved the first few days he wasn't around to keep an eye on me.

Jeremy is a dangerous man, the worst enigma, and a devil with distorted morals and a cutthroat personality. He's absolutely not someone I want to mingle with, so, yeah, I was glad he got over whatever stalker kink he had.

But that relief soon morphed into something more nefarious.

Unsettling curiosity.

I keep replaying what happened after he kissed me, poured vodka down my throat, then drank it off me.

He looked mad before he abruptly announced we were leaving. No, not mad. Possibly annoyed?

I really can't be sure, considering his never-changing angry expression, so I have no clue if he looked that way by default or due to something I did.

I open my eyes, groan softly, then fish out my phone and open Instagram. I realize I'm letting him get under my skin, but I can't help it.

Jeremy has an account, but he seldom posts on it, and most of his pictures are blurred and unintelligible. A mass of black and white and mysterious.

A day ago, I scrolled through all of his posts twice. This is the third time.

What? I need to know the enemy.

Though is he really an enemy if he's actually left you alone?

I ignore that voice and start at the top.

Jeremyvolkov. That's what his account is called. He doesn't have a bio or anything.

His profile picture is a black and white side shot of him on his bike, wearing a leather jacket. From this angle, his hair flopped by the wind, his square jaw appears ready to cut someone in half.

In most of the pictures, he's on the bike, with Nikolai, who's usually half naked on his own bike, or with the other guys. There are no family pictures. Not even any with Annika.

She, however, posts religiously, and some of them do include Jeremy. He's an unwilling participant in all of them since she usually catches him in the background.

My favorite picture of them is one she posted a few weeks back. It's from when she was young, maybe about four years old while Jeremy is no older than ten. She was laughing through her tears while he wiped them. Her caption was even more heartwarming.

*Do I have the best brother ever? Yes, yes, I totally do. Thank you for being my anchor, Jer *purple hearts**

But even Annika doesn't have a full family picture. The closest one to a family photo is one of her hugging her mum, with Jeremy standing behind them.

She captioned it: *My favorite people.*

There's no trace of their father and I guess that makes sense, considering his leadership position in the mafia.

After scrolling through Jeremy's profile for longer than needed, I groan and hit the home screen.

What the hell am I doing?

The first post that appears is of Landon kissing a statue on the mouth.

landon-king: *If you know what agalmatophilia means, be mine?*

I know Lan has been a highly sexualized person since we were teens. He's had weird sexual adventures, which is different from, say, his twin, Bran.

He's on the same level as Remi, but not really. Remington genuinely loves chasing after skirt, a playboy through and through.

Lan only wants the bizarre experiences, the things that are frowned upon by society, the kinks that most people are afraid to try.

It's like he's challenging himself to go further and further.

Until he's out of reach.

It's downright paraphilia at times. Sexual deviation and attraction to atypical individuals, situations, objects, and behaviors.

The type most serial killers have.

It's funny how these types of posts used to tug at my heart, but now, I just smile and like his picture. I guess it means I'm emotionally mature enough to understand him better.

I don't even mind the thousands of thirsty comments from girls—and boys—volunteering to be his object of perversion.

They probably wouldn't feel the same if he actually acted on his kinks. Plural. I know I wouldn't let him tie me up me in a room and let random strangers watch.

I always thought we were sexually compatible, but maybe that was just vain hope.

I scroll through to read the comments from the friends we have in common.

lord-remington-astor: *Picture was taken by yours truly. No need to thank me, ladies.*

eli-king: *No tongue?*

ariella-jailbait-nash: **heart eyes**

the-ava-nash: *What the hell are you doing here, Ari? You're only 16. Get out of 18+ space!*

ariella-jailbait-nash: *No.*

annika-volkov: *So beautiful.*

glyndon-king: *The statue *heart eyes**

brandon-king: *Poor statue.*

I comment beneath them.

cecily-knight: **hearts emoji**

I’m about to scroll some more, but a commotion in the flat steals my attention.

Since I’m not studying anyway, I roll out of my chair, do some stretches, and then smooth my fluffy pajamas.

Definitely not something I’d buy myself. Although I’m all for anything comfy and casual. This was a gift from Ava, and I wear them because the shirt has the quote *Nerd? I prefer intellectually superior.*

As soon as I open my door, I’m slammed with endless noise and chatter.

No surprise, Remi has decided to invade our space just because he’s bored and probably has no shags scheduled for tonight. As usual, Creighton and Bran are with him.

He waltzes into our living room carrying bottles of beer and starts to kick, push, and rearrange our furniture.

“Stop doing that!” Ava runs toward him and effortlessly tries to put an end to his chaos. “This is our space!”

“I’m not hearing you over my lordship’s creative ideas.” He tells Creighton to help him, which he does without a word.

When he reaches the sofa on which Annika sits like a doll, slurping from her purple cup and glittery straw, he fixates her with a stare.

That’s enough to have her stand up and head to Ava’s side.

Remi, who’s having his way as usual, grins, opens a bottle of beer, and gives one to Bran. “Cheers, mate!”

Bran clicks Remi’s bottle with his and sits on the floor cross-legged. Even though he’s Lan’s identical twin brother, the similarities stop there. Bran is more silent, nicer, kinder, and definitely isn’t up to trouble all the time. He’s a bit like me, but I think he runs deeper than any of us know.

He’s hanging out with us mainly because Remi dragged him along.

Remi always bugs him and Creigh to join his endeavours, part because he’s annoying and part because he knows we wouldn’t actually kick them out.

“The house is so silent,” the prick muses, running his gaze over the place.

“I’m right here, dick.” Ava glares down her nose at him but still snatches a bottle of beer.

“Not you, peasant.” He sniffs the air. “I can smell that other crazy cougar, so she must be around here. Unless she actually died in one of her books and her ghost is doing stretches to haunt us.”

“The only one I’ll haunt is you, Remi.” I stroll from my room and join them.

The other guys nod at me and I nod back. Ava, however, side-hugs me. “Rems invaded our flat and ruined our pretty decorations.”

He gives an evil laugh. “You don’t stand a chance in front of my genius plans.”

“More like foolish,” I mutter.

“Don’t be jealous, Ces.”

“Of what exactly?”

“My dashing looks, for one.” He forms an *L* at his chin and touches his nose to show just how straight it is. “I’m open to giving you lessons in charisma if you get on your knees and call me your master.”

“In your dreams.”

“In my dreams, you’re not a prude slash nerd.”

“Now, who’s the jealous one?”

“Of your nonexistent sex life.” He pretends to yawn. “Wake me up when this one starts to say the word cock. Sorry, I mean *penis*.”

“You little—” I pause when I feel Ava’s body vibrating against mine. “Are you laughing?”

“No, I swear.” She does a shit job at hiding her laughter. “I’m done.”

“Something Cecy will never say in this lifetime,” Remi muses.

Ava snorts and bursts out laughing.

“I’m going to kill you,” I tell him, then glare at Ava. “And you just lost bestie privileges.”

“No, Cecy.” She hugs me tighter. “Don’t leave me. And shut up, Rems, seriously. Leave her alone. We need a prude in our ranks like we need a manwhore, aka you.”

Remi laughs. “Joke’s on you because that’s a compliment!”

“Was that supposed to make me feel better?” I ask Ava while wearing my poker face.

She merely grins and hugs me again. “You can die celibate and we’ll still love you.”

Rolling my eyes, I push her away and head toward Anni, who’s not so subtly watching Creighton while toying with her straw.

When I sit beside her, she smiles and offers me some snacks.

Remi chooses to put Ava under fire, obviously bored with the old rehearsed topic of my alleged prudeness.

You’re not a prude if you like primal play.

I slowly close my eyes to chase away Jeremy’s voice. Just why on earth do I keep thinking of him when I’m supposed to be focusing that energy on starting anew with Lan?

Though is that what I truly want?

“I missed being here with you guys.” Anni sighs.

Right. She was often forced to stay in her brother’s mansion upon his order and there was nothing she could do about it.

“Can’t you tell him no?” I swallow. “Jeremy, I mean.”

“Tell Jer no?” She laughs awkwardly. “Have you *seen* him?”

I have.

Countless times.

And I hate it.

Because even when he’s not there, I find myself searching for his shadow in the darkness, behind the trees.

Everywhere.

“I did get some of my freedom back, so silver lining!” She smiles.

“Has he…always been controlling like this?” I realize that I’m digging where I’m not supposed to, but I can’t help it.

Maybe if I continue painting him as the devil, I’ll find the will to move past him.

Anni releases the straw and stares up. “For as long as I’ve been alive? He’s six years older than me, so ever since I was born, it’s felt as if I’ve had a guard from hell. No, a guardian angel.”

“Those are entirely different.”

“I hate when he confiscates my freedom, but I know he’s doing it because he cares about my safety. We…were born into a cruel world, and Jeremy suffered in it more than I did, so I guess he takes security very seriously and I love him as a brother. I just don’t like him as Papa’s heir sometimes.”

I rub the side of my nose.

Of course.

Jeremy is meant to be a mafia leader one day. That’s his destiny that he can’t escape even if he wants to. Considering all the violence he takes part in, I suspect he doesn’t.

That should be enough to make me forget about him.

Move on.

Even if my body refuses to erase his touch.

I grab a bottle of beer and chug half of it down.

“OMG.” Ava leaves Remi alone and wipes the side of my face. “Why are you drinking?”

“Last I checked, you’re not the only one who can.”

“You’re a lightweight, remember?”

“Leave me alone.” I swat her away as if she’s a fly.

“Yeah, leave her alone. Drunk Ces is much less uptight than sober Ces, and we love that beautiful bitch.” Remi clinks his bottle against mine. “Cheers to a truce!”

I drink the other half the bottle in one go and wince at the burn. They’re right. I don’t usually do this, but I’m safe here with them. If I somehow pass out, Ava will tuck me in.

While I avoid drink as to not repeat that black night, I don’t mind if it’s with people I trust.

It takes exactly three beers for my muscles to loosen, and I start grinning like an idiot.

Truth is, Remi is actually a clown and he’s funny. I’m just much harder on him when I’m sober, because he keeps calling me names.

We start singing karaoke, and I stand up to jump along to the music while hugging Ava and Anni, but immediately, the room starts swaying. Or I do.

Ava grabs me by the arm and snatches the beer from my hand. “No more drinks for you, lady.”

“Nooo, let me be.”

“Yeah, let her be.” Remi appears like a devil on my left. “Drunk Cecy is fun Cecy!”

I narrow my eyes on him. “I’m not a prude.”

He grins. “Wanna be in my next orgy?”

“Hmph. I’m into something way better than that.” I pull on his ear. “Wanna know what?”

“Fuck yeah. I’m all for kinks.”

“Forget it.” My shoulders slump. “I’m too cowardly to try it again.”

“You can just un-coward yourself.” He waggles his brows. “I can help.”

I grab him by the face, watching him intently before I tut. “Not the right one.”

“Hey, what the actual fuck? I’m always the right one. It’s on my birth certificate right next to the aristocratic title.”

I wave him off and stumble, then hit a fallen pillow. Creighton catches me with a slight frown. “You good?”

I pat his arm, nodding, and pull his ear to whisper, “Perrrfect.”

He merely raises a brow, seeming to call my bullshit, but he doesn’t push it.

“I love you, Creigh.”

“Thanks?”

“Want me to help with Anni?”

“If you mean help to keep her away, sure.”

“Oh, please.” I snort and push him away. “Liar. Liar. Hey, Ava! Is there any vodka around here?”

“None of us drink that. What the fuck?” Ava snatches me from Creigh’s hold, drags me to my room, and dumps me on the bed like I’m a sack of potatoes. “Mind telling me what’s going on?”

I stand up, sway, and fall back down with a grunt. “I’m gonna go to the store and get some vodka.”

“Like fuck you are. You can’t even walk.” She sits beside me and checks my temperature. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you don’t willingly drink or entertain Remi, and you’ve certainly never even tried vodka before.”

“I did.” I grin, my voice lowering. “It was sexy.”

“Huh?”

“Shh,” I murmur. “He could be watching. He’s everywhere and nowhere all at once.”

“Why are we whispering?” She matches my tone. “And who is *he*?”

“The devil,” I say in a hoarse voice, then gasp. “He disappeared and I hate it.”

“Is this about Lan?” She frowns. “He’s seriously bad news, Cecy. I thought you were over him by now.”

“Are *you* over Eli?”

She purses her lips. “In this house, we don’t speak of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.”

I release a long breath and lie down. “I wish it was about Lan. The devil you know is better, right?”

“What the fuck type of drug did you inhale today?”

“Devilish?”

“I swear, you’ll be the death of me.” She makes me drink water, then tucks me in bed and even kisses my forehead like I do to her when she’s drunk out of her mind.

Ava and I only allow ourselves to be vulnerable in each other’s company.

Because that’s what best friends are for.

She remains by my side until she thinks I’ve fallen asleep.

As soon as she leaves, I open my eyes and stare at the mangas covering the ceiling.

After a few minutes, I pull out my phone.

I’m so going to regret this in the morning, but if I wait until I’m sober, I’ll never stop being a coward and will never do what I want.

To take risks.

To step out of my comfort zone.

I want that feeling of freedom again. I need to overflow with being both wrong and right at the same time.

After clicking on Lan’s profile, I pause, then type a DM.

I want to be chased and ambushed. In the dark. Where you can use me and no one knows.

He reads it. But no dots appear.

I stare at my screen for what seems like hours, but no reply comes.

So I flip my phone and groan when it falls on my face.

That’s why tears come out—because the hit hurts.

It’s not because of anything else.

I hide my eyes with my arms and this time force myself to fall asleep.

I dream of dark eyes following my every move, watching every step, and counting every breath.

They’re intense and ruthless and I don’t stand a chance in front of them.

It’s half a dream, half reality, because I know I’m lying in bed and drunk out of my mind with tears in my eyes.

But I still feel him.

He fills the room with his otherworldly presence as he watches me from the corner with enough tension to spike the heat in my veins.

I kick the blanket away and moan when it rubs against my soft flesh. I slide my hand beneath my shorts, under my knickers, then tease my swollen

folds.

Soft moans slip out of me and I hide my face in the pillow to muffle them. The more I feel his eyes on me, the harder I tease my clit and the stronger I sense the pleasure building in my core.

When I’m getting close, I writhe in bed, my heart beating so loud, I’m surprised no one outside can hear.

A low tutting sound fills the room and I freeze, slowly opening my eyes.

They clash with gray ones. The devil’s eyes.

Who’s watching my every move from the corner.

“No wonder you like to be chased when you touch yourself this gently. How about I show you how it’s properly done, Lisichka?”

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CECILY

My ears ring until I can't hear my own breathing.

For a moment, I'm hanging in space, unable to concentrate on anything but these intense gray eyes that appeared in more nightmares than I can count.

And dreams.

Lots of filthy dreams that would make Remi the prude if he ever saw them.

Jeremy advances toward me with sure, long steps. He looks the same as when he used to stalk me.

A leather jacket, black jeans, and a scowl so deep, it could make a person confess to crimes they didn't commit.

His sharp features are shadowed by the lack of light, making him look like a reaper, a devil in his natural habitat.

A devil whose whole punishing attention zeroes in on me.

A zipping sensation slashes through my trembling limbs, mirroring the one from when I ran through that forest and he caught me.

Slammed me down.

Ravaged me.

Made me scream.

My hand pauses on my folds, and I swear he can see it through the thin material of my underwear and shorts, because his attention slides to them.

He probably sees how my fingers tremble, giving away what I'm doing.

If I were doused with gasoline, I'd probably catch fire from his stare alone. Or glare. Or something in between.

There’s a mystic quality to the way he looks at me. It rushes through my aching insides and rips out parts of me I thought were long dead.

He stops by my bedside, arms crossed, and his thumb strokes his jacket in a controlled rhythm. Back. Forth.

Back and forth.

“Is this a dream?” I ask in a sluggish, and definitely drunk, voice.

“I don’t know. Do you think it is?” His low timbre reverberates in the room and stabs my ears.

I focus on our surroundings, on my ‘nerdy’ room, as Remi calls it, with books and manga posters covering the walls and the ceiling.

The chatter, laughter, and karaoke-singing reach me from outside, and I realize the semi-party is still going.

Or this is in fact a dream and I conjured him.

“You… Why are you here?” I start to remove my hand from beneath my shorts, but he shakes his head.

“Hide again and I’ll leave.”

I swallow, flattening my palm on my folds. Jeremy’s expression doesn’t change, whether in approval or displeasure, as he reaches for the elastic of my sleeping shorts.

My free hand grabs his, my nails digging into the veins on the back of it.

“Let go,” he orders with easy authoritativeness. The type that gets past the confinements of my ears and flows into my blood instead.

My fingers tremble and it’s my turn to shake my head. I’m sluggish and can barely think straight, but I can still remember those horrendous images.

Those…loss-of-control pictures.

But then Jeremy comes into focus, with his mean demeanor and not-classically handsome face.

It’s savage beauty as merciless as its owner’s.

“I said. Let. Go.” The punch behind his words strikes me in my shriveling chest.

My fingers slowly pull away. They’re not completely free when he yanks down my shorts.

The motion is so sudden and violent that I gasp, or I think I do, but not actually, because my reactions are delayed.

He throws the shorts aside and hooks his fingers in the waistline of my underwear.

I go to catch his hand again, but this time, a single look is enough to make me pause.

“You need to quit the habit of disobeying me as your knee-jerk reaction.” He removes the underwear, slightly ripping them before he throws them toward the shorts. “If I want you naked, I’ll have you naked.”

My pulse spikes and I can’t help the mixture of vulnerability and thrill that courses inside me.

Of fear and anticipation.

Uncertainty and resolution.

I’ve never been as conflicted as when I’m in Jeremy’s presence.

It’s like he’s able to unlock a part of me I didn’t realize existed. Or I did but still tried everything under the sun to shackle it.

His rough gaze openly watches, studies, and slides over my most intimate part that I’m barely covering with my hand.

Then he glides his attention to my face. “Go on. Show me how you touch yourself. Show me what you do when your little cunt is horny and you’re unable to take it any longer.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks at his crass words. No one has ever spoken to me like this and the novelty of it makes me tremble.

“Play with yourself,” he orders again. “Unless you want me to do it for you?”

I shake my head, more out of habit than anything else, and slowly circle my fingers along my soaking folds. Ever since he barged into my dream, they’ve become wetter, dripping, making a mess out of my fingers.

Slow pleasure starts to hum beneath the surface and I turn my head, hiding my face in the pillow.

“Eyes on me.” His voice jerks me back into position and I hate how my eyes instantly fly to his. How I get lost in them in a matter of seconds.

“Thrust a finger inside you,” he tells me. “Let me watch you fuck yourself.”

“I…I don’t do that.”

The only way I get orgasms is through clit play.

“I wasn’t asking.” He snatches my hand and lifts it to his face.

I think I’m going to explode.

Jeremy slides my fingers into his mouth. The same fingers that were playing with my pussy and are all soaked with my arousal are between his lips.

His tongue swirls between them, licking, sucking, making them wetter. Then, without notice, he thrusts my middle and ring fingers into my pussy.

A soundless shriek is all I can release as his bigger hand engulfs mine and he drives my fingers in and out of my core.

This is the first time I've ever fingered myself, and it feels foreign and rhythmic, yet sensually pleasurable.

I start to hide my face in the pillow again, but a single stern look from him makes me abandon the idea.

"You're soaking wet for someone who doesn't finger themselves." *Thrust.* "Your cunt is drenching my hand." *Thrust.* "So messy, Lisichka."

My whole body trembles, his words adding to the intensity of his touch. Because, no, it's not my fingers that are eliciting this sharp pleasure. It's all him.

And his filthy mouth, controlling touch, and spellbinding presence.

"I think your soaking cunt is inviting me to have a taste."

I'm still waiting for my delayed apprehension to kick in when he kneels by the bed and pries my legs open.

I gasp, but I don't fight him.

I can't.

I don't want to.

Jeremy places a finger to his mouth. "Shh. Unless you want your friends to see you eaten for dinner."

He pulls my hand from my pussy and grabs each of my thighs in a strong palm as he dives in.

My back arches off the bed when he licks all the way from my opening to my clit.

The intensity of the act beats and ripples inside me, and I attempt to escape, even temporarily.

I'm not ready for what he does next.

Jeremy physically jerks me upward so that my back is bent and I'm half hanging in the air as he eats me out.

The position is awkward at best, and I slam my palms on the headboard and the wall to get some semblance of balance.

But I think that's his purpose behind all of this. He doesn't want me to move, doesn't want me to stop or try to intervene.

This way, I'm completely his to do with whatever he pleases.

Not that I can fight and push him away when I'm drunk out of my mind.

Hell, I can’t even do that when I’m sober.

What I can do, however, is feel every zip of pleasure, every lick, bite, and controlled display of command.

Jeremy thrusts his tongue inside my opening, tongue-fucking me with brutal strokes. He alternates between that and biting and nibbling on my clit and teasing my folds.

The change of pace and action turns me delirious. It’s impossible to keep up, impossible to remain in this mindset.

Where pleasure is so intense that I’m unable to see anything past it. My hips jerk involuntarily, chasing the release that I’m sure will detonate me from the inside out.

Jeremy goes harder, faster, stronger.

And I’m done.

My heart nearly stops as I moan, then slap a hand over my mouth. I’d die of shame if anyone walked in on this scene and saw me being eaten out as if I’m being possessed.

The orgasm rocks through me with a power that leaves me panting, the sounds echoing around me as I’m forced to breathe the smell of my arousal.

And *him*.

The man who’s bringing me this pleasure—or more like yanking it out of me kicking and screaming.

He lets my body fall on the bed and I’m a shaking mess from the aftereffects of the orgasm.

How come it feels this overwhelming? How come I can’t sense my body, yet I sense it too much at the same time?

“I knew you’d taste like my new favorite meal.” He darts his tongue out and licks the glistening wetness on his lips.

I think I’ll come from the sight alone.

“Do you have any idea how sensitive and responsive you are? Your tiny moans and muffled groans made my cock want to take my tongue’s place.” His fingers latch onto his jeans’ buttons, undoing them one at a time, slowly, unhurriedly, as if he knows the exact effect he has on me and is deepening it.

Toying with me to his heart’s content.

When he frees his shaft, I jerk backward slightly, shaking my head. It’s big in both length and girth and is so hard that I physically recoil.

“You…you’re not putting that thing inside me.”

“Oh, I will. And *thing*? Seriously? Is that what you call a cock in your head?” He straddles me and jerks his shaft up and down in a fierce motion.

If he handles himself that roughly, he’ll undo me in no time.

“Please don’t.” Tears gather in my eyes.

“Shh.” He leans over and presses his tongue to my lid, licking my tears before they even escape, then whispers against my skin, “Don’t cry when we haven’t started yet.”

A sob escapes my lungs, and I place two trembling hands on his chest. “I-I’m drunk. I won’t be able to fight you.”

“You wouldn’t be able to fight me even if you weren’t drunk.”

“J-Jeremy…please.”

“Would you have begged Landon, too, if he were here? No, you wouldn’t. You would’ve opened your legs and offered him your ass if he’d so much as looked at it.”

“Lan wouldn’t do this to me,” I murmur. “He’s not a monster.”

He lifts his fist in the air and I close my eyes, expecting him to punch me or something, but only a thud reaches my ears.

On the mattress.

That’s what I realize when I peek through my lids. He drove his fist into the mattress.

And his eyes have become so dark, they damn near swallow me whole.

“A monster, huh?” His calm voice contradicts his expression as he grabs my jaw with raw power that chills me to the bone. “If that’s what you think of me, might as well go for it, no?”

My nails claw into his shirt with a desperation I’ve never felt before.

Not only to stop him, but also because I don’t want to lose whatever feeling that’s been slowly but surely developing in my chest.

“Kiss me,” I whisper in a desperate attempt to distract him.

He pauses, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say he was caught off guard. “Why?”

“Please kiss me.” I try to lift my head, but his grip on my jaw forbids it.

“You want to kiss a monster?”

“I never said I was normal.”

“You’re an annoying fucking existence.”

“Still, you’re here.”

“That I am.”

“Kiss me, then, Jeremy. Just—”

My words are cut off when his lips slam against mine. They're violent and absolutely claiming.

He kisses me like he already owns me, has the deeds to prove it, and is marking me for the world to see.

It's much more animalistic than the kiss at that club. That one was consuming but slow and passionate.

Safe.

It felt safe back then, which is why I asked him to kiss me now. It was an attempt to recreate that atmosphere, but this one is by no means like that time.

He's punishing me. Jeremy bites my tongue so hard that I groan and buck. More tears escape my eyes as I bite back, harder, until a metallic taste explodes in my mouth.

Jeremy drinks the blood off my tongue, then makes me swallow it. He tightens his hold on my jaw and pushes my head back so he can get deeper, closer, to a part of me that I can't reach.

It's like he's punishing me for even asking to kiss him.

For everything else I said, too.

And illogically, it doesn't feel threatening. It's safe like back at the club but in a completely different way.

It's safe and threatening and gray.

All at the same time.

When he wrenches his mouth from mine, I gasp, inhaling sharp intakes of air.

Jeremy watches me with that raw power in his gaze, the hurricane in his gray eyes, as his thumb wipes the blood from the corner of his lower lip.

There's a nip there, and I realize that I actually drew his blood.

"Aren't you an adorable little fighter?" He slides up, nearly crushing me with his weight as he straddles my head so that his knees are on either side, then grabs his shaft again, placing it at my battered lips. "Open."

I purse them shut and stare at him.

"Either open your mouth or I'll use another hole."

My lips tremble.

"Are you scared of me, Cecily?"

"No." I lie through my teeth. Because, yes, I thought I was courageous enough to not be intimidated by the notorious Jeremy Volkov, but that was way before I actually got to meet the real him.

The decadent, lawless beast.

“You should be.” He slaps my mouth with his weighty shaft. “I don’t make idle threats.”

It dawns on me then.

As I stare into his light-devoid eyes, I realize just how different Jeremy is. He really wouldn’t care if he broke me, or fucked me when I was drunk.

Knowing full well that I’m a virgin.

It’s about what he wants, and if I don’t give him that, he’ll just take it.

And a part of me is tempted to do that, to provoke him to take it.

But not when I’m drunk. I really wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I woke up tomorrow knowing full well that I didn’t allow the real me to make the decision.

So I open my mouth slowly.

Jeremy doesn’t wait or make introductions. He drives all the way inside, hitting the back of my throat. I gag and I think I’ll throw up all over myself, but he pulls away.

His hand fists in my hair and he tugs me up by it. “Suck and make it good or I’ll switch to your other available holes and in no particular order.”

My sluggish movements pick up in speed, but not immediately. There was a moment, one single foolish moment where my eyes widened for a completely different reason than fear.

Or being appalled.

For a second, I wanted to see if he’ll make good on his threat.

There’s definitely something wrong with me. I blame my drunk brain’s delayed response. That’s the only reason.

There couldn’t possibly be anything else.

My licks and sucks are tentative at best, but I try to go faster, thinking maybe that will do the trick.

The problem is that he’s really big; I haven’t even gotten all of him in, and my jaw aches.

“You’ve never sucked cock before, have you?” His voice is dark with lust.

My cheeks heat, and I hope he thinks it’s because of my lack of air and not actually shame.

“Such an innocent little virgin with a dangerous kink.” He mobilizes me with my hair. “I’ll show you how you please me, how you open your mouth

for me when I tell you to. You'll offer me this hole and any other hole I want to stick my cock into."

He drives in with a raw power that robs me of air.

"Open your mouth wider and stick out your tongue."

The moment I do, it's like I've unleashed a beast. Using my tongue for friction, he hits the back of my throat, over and over, but when I'm about to gag, he pulls out, giving me some air before he thrusts back in again.

He uses my mouth like it's his custom-made hole, pressing me into the mattress, holding me in place with his merciless grip on my hair.

"Your mouth is made for fucking." He slides all the way out again. "So hot and wet and pliant." *Thrust.* "I think you have an oral fixation. Not only do you like kissing, but you also take my cock so well at the back of your throat. You'll let me stuff this mouth with my cum and then swallow every drop, won't you?"

My only reply is grabbing him by the jacket, nails digging into the leather.

"Do you want more, my greedy little virgin?" He pounds in and out of my mouth. "I want more, too. I want to corrupt, tarnish, and ruin you so deeply, no one will recognize you when I'm done with you. Not even your fucking prince."

And then he thrusts so wildly, I think I'll black out.

I've never experienced this level of intensity. Of savage claim.

It's like he can't touch me hard enough, or engrave himself inside me deep enough.

Jeremy is a man who takes unapologetically, destroys ruthlessly, then walks away silently.

He's a true monster who knows exactly what he wants. And apparently, right now, what he wants is to ruin me.

For some reason, I like that unapologetic part of him, the assertiveness in his actions. The take-it-or-leave-it attitude.

Maybe because I lack it when it matters the most—when I have to make decisions about myself.

Jeremy fucks my mouth like he has a grudge against it and me. He rams in and out at a speed I can't keep up with.

Then he pulls out and I blink when hot spurts of his cum cover my face, sprinkling on my eyes, my cheeks, nose, lips, and neck.

Everywhere.

He reaches out a thumb, gathers his cum, and slides it inside my mouth with his middle and ring finger.

The motion is erotic and makes my legs clench, or maybe it's the attentive way he watches me swallow every drop. Sucking his fingers clean.

The more appreciation he shows, the more diligent I become.

A gruff sound leaves his throat as he taps my lips one final time. "I knew you had an oral fixation."

He leans over and brushes his lips against mine.

It's a small kiss, way too soft compared to everything he's done. Actually, the softest thing he's done.

But then he bites my lower lip and I gasp when a metallic taste explodes in my mouth.

Jeremy licks it, then taps his own bite that I gave him. "Next time, I'll draw your virgin blood."

"There will be a next time?" I ask, a little scared, a little excited.

"Oh, there will be a next time." He strokes my hair back. "You'll be mine to do with as I please."

"What if I don't want to?"

"I wasn't asking."

"Are you going to have sex with me?"

"I won't have sex with you, Cecily. I will fuck you."

I slowly close my eyes, letting a tear loose. I'm not sure what type of tear it is.

A resignation tear probably.

I don't wait for him to leave as I let my body relax, wishing the dream would end.

Wishing the dream would never end.

Wishing this wasn't a dream.

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JEREMY

I don’t know how long I stand at the side of Cecily’s bed.

All I’m sure of is that I remain here, unmoving, watching, observing, long after she falls back asleep with tears rimming her eyes.

I reach out a thumb and wipe away those tears, smear them on the tiny freckles, then crush them between my fingers.

She’s probably sad that it’s not her fucker of a prince who came to claim her in the middle of the night.

Now that she’s asleep, she looks like the personification of inward innocence mixed with a poor relationship with her sensory world.

The *worst* relationship.

She’s awkward at expressing herself, being spontaneous, and letting go, even when her friends do. I know because I’ve been watching her.

Not up close and personal like following her home from the shelter or the library, but I’ve been around enough to know her schedule, where she goes and with whom.

I took a step back to give her room and see if she’d use the opening to throw herself at Landon again. Color me surprised when they only met within their group of friends and only rarely.

She wasn’t texting him back and forth, vying for his attention like a fangirl either.

What she does, however, is like and comment on each of his pretentious Instagram posts.

I stroke her white hair away from her face. Petite, soft, and with remnants of my dried cum.

The view thickens my erection, lulling me, inviting me to jerk off all over her again—this time, I'd mark her tits and cunt.

Scratch that. This time, I'd *claim* her cunt.

And I would break her.

I'd stretch her tiny pussy and split it in half.

These tears would turn into a tsunami if I have my way with her. Which is why I'm not.

For now.

My forefinger slides back and forth against my thigh as I caress her hair, sinking between the abnormal color that she had to wear a wig to hide during the initiation. I know because I nearly tore it off.

I know because that's when I first figured out her identity.

Her lips part and she lets out a small moan, leaning into my touch, almost fucking purring like a cat.

I remove my hand with a jerk.

The fuck is wrong with this girl and her being so out there? And it's ten times weirder considering her poor relations with the outside world.

It's why I knew she was drunk when she sent me that DM in which she said she wanted to be chased and taken down.

A message that I'm sure was meant for Landon.

Considering her cowardly tendencies, she wouldn't have sent that to me or him if she'd been sober.

I was plotting the raid of the Serpents' local compound with the guys when I got that DM.

At first, I threw the phone in my pocket and ignored it, like I've been ignoring her for the past couple of weeks.

But like all those days, I fished my phone back out and glared at it. The same way I glared at her from afar.

While I watched her.

Followed her.

Hacked into her phone and computer.

Murdered every shred of her privacy.

Read her fucking journal that's full of psychological bullshit and Landon.

When I checked my phone again, I found out she'd followed me on Instagram, too. Probably another drunken mistake.

But maybe the DM was meant for me, after all. Not Landon. Me.

That’s all the logic my brain needed to storm out of the meeting and come here.

In the middle of the fucking night.

It’s also what made me climb her balcony, creep inside, and touch her like she was already mine, partially forgetting that my little sister was on the other side of the door.

I should probably leave before one of her gazillion friends comes to check on her, but I don’t move.

Instead, I take time to look around her room, the walls covered in manga pages like some edgy teenager. I move closer and study the names at the top of each, committing them to memory so that I can search what she likes to read.

Then I do a whole sweep of the space.

Cecily’s room is simple—despite the manga wallpaper. Her wardrobe is casual and is full of T-shirts with sarcastic quotes. She owns no dresses or skirts or anything girly.

Her makeup table barely has anything on it aside from different brands of sunscreen. And perfume. Water lilies. I can’t help spraying it into the air and inhaling it.

Smells like Cecily. But not quite. It’s missing the scent of her skin.

I put back the bottle exactly where I found it, like a perfect creep, but then I place it on its side. I don’t give a fuck if she knows I went through her things. In fact, I want her to.

Let her be on the edge as payment for all the annoyance she’s brought into my life by merely existing.

I tilt my head in her direction. “Why the fuck did you come to that initiation, Cecily?”

If she hadn’t, I wouldn’t be acting completely out of character by inserting myself into her life and learning things about her I’m not supposed to.

Once I’m done going through the small space, I sit at her desk.

Psychology, philosophy, and nonfiction books line her small library.

And mangas.

Slice of life. Shounen, and… I grab one and my brows lift.

Boys’ love.

Well, well. Would you look at that?

I slide that manga back in place and open her laptop. I already hacked it once, so I know it's as boring and meticulous as the image she projects onto the outer world.

All filled with school projects and pictures from family holidays.

Still, I open her browser and look at her history.

Considering that seeing sex made her physically ill the other day, I doubt she watches any. Or she could be using a private browser.

I find no trace of porn. However, I land on an interesting burst of similar searches, usually conducted late at night.

The psychology of rape fantasy.

Why do many women have rape fantasies?

The sociology of judging women who seek out or enjoy sex rougher than most men.

The sociology of rewarding men and punishing women for enjoying sex.

Is there an underlying mental disorder associated with rape fantasies?

Paraphilias listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Is primal kink a sexual deviation?

Serial killers' kinks.

That one puts a smile on my face.

Jesus.

I can almost imagine the deer-in-the-headlights expression she had while reading all of this stuff.

My gaze slides to her sleeping form. "You need to stop forcing labels on yourself."

I skim through the articles written by some hotshot psychologists who try not to be judgy but sometimes let their true colors show.

Cecily must've been in a position where she had to see her preferences through a professional lens and wondered if something was wrong with her.

She's shackled in some way.

And something tells me it's not only due to her rigid codes of honor, stiff personality, or altruistic little heart.

Something deeper lurks beneath the surface, and I'll find it if it's the last thing I do.

My plans to only watch from afar just to catch Landon through her lie are forgotten as I dig, probe, and search.

Words and websites start to blur together, but I don't stop.

People like Cecily carry their wounds so deep that even those in their closest circle have no clue about them.

I'm positive she's kept it a secret from her parents and grandparents, with whom she's close to, so as not to burden them. Ava, too.

But no matter how much she hides it, I'll figure out her secret and drag it out of her kicking and screaming.

The commotion starts to die down outside her door, and that's my cue to leave.

I quietly close her laptop and make a mental note to hack into it again later to dig deeper into her search history.

Then I take a few pictures of the books and mangas she reads. I'm about to leave from the balcony when her phone vibrates on the bedside table.

I stalk to her side and pause when I see the name on the text.

The motherfucking non-prince.

I unlock it using her passcode. She uses the same one for everything—her parents' marriage date.

Landon: Hi, stranger.

My fingers tighten on the phone, but I type back.

Cecily: Hi :)

I tut at the smiley face. But if I want to make him believe it's her, I have to mimic her style.

Landon: Everything okay? Is Jeremy still bothering you?

Bothering.

That's what she told him? That I was *bothering* her?

Granted, stalking could be called bothering in certain circumstances.

But I wouldn't have resorted to that method if I'd known what this motherfucker told her to do.

Cecily: Everything's great. He's not following me anymore.

Or that's what she believes, anyway.

Landon: For how long?

Cecily: About two weeks.

Landon: That's not long enough. He's a dog who doesn't give up on the bone he found, so he could and would come back at any time.

This fucker is too smart for his own good. I've always plotted his demise, but right now? I'm downright scheming for his murder and the best burial site to erase his existence from life.

Cecily: I'll be careful.

Landon: That’s my Ces. Stay safe. I mean it.

My Ces.

My. Ces.

It takes everything in me not to smash the phone to pieces. I delete the conversation and return it to her bedside table instead.

I was going to leave quietly, but now, I’m pissed off.

Pushing her hair away from her neck, I lean over and bite down so hard, I’m surprised I don’t draw blood.

But I will.

Soon.

And when I do, it’ll be much more brutal than this.

Cecily groans, then moans and hides her face in the pillow.

I cover her neck with her hair, take one of her mangas, and jump out the window.

INSTEAD OF GOING HOME, I CHOOSE TO SPEND TIME BLOWING OFF STEAM.

On my bike.

I’ve already toured the whole island, but the subtle feeling of intoxication, asphyxiation, and complete irritation hasn’t disappeared.

By sunrise, I stop at the top of a hill, leaning against my bike.

But I don’t look at the view.

I don’t give a fuck about anything beautiful. In fact, I find nothing beautiful.

Everything pretty is destined to wither and die. To shrivel and vanish.

So why find anything beautiful in the first place? That’s setting oneself up for disappointment without even trying.

I fish out my phone to find a long conversation in the Heathens’ chat group.

Nikolai: Did that motherfucker just leave us hanging?

Gareth: He must’ve had something urgent to do. Jeremy isn’t the type to leave without a reason.

Nikolai: I say we vote him down. The audacity of that motherfucker. How dare he wake me up for nothing?

Killian: And who should we put in his place? You?

Nikolai: You shut it, Satan's heir. And what's wrong with me becoming a leader?

Killian: The same thing that's wrong with putting a clown as the head of the CIA.

Nikolai: Did you just call me a clown?

Killian: I didn't. You did.

Nikolai: I'm sorry, Gaz, but I'm killing your brother tonight. Please prepare the funeral and don't tell Aunt Reina that I'm behind the hit. We'll say the enemies got him.

Gareth: He's your cousin. Do as you like.

Killian: Hilarious, big bro. Not. @Nikolai Sokolov if you're going to lie, pick something believable. No one would bite at the fact that I have enemies.

Nikolai: Bullshit. You're a devil in disguise.

Killian: Keyword being in disguise. Everyone loves me. The only one with enough enemies to make the Queen of England kick us off UK soil is you.

Nikolai: I don't go out of my way to make enemies, but if they come knocking, I'll be serving.

Gareth: Is that why you sent two people to the ER last week?

Nikolai: Not my fault they were flexing muscles they didn't have. I did visit them and gave them fruit baskets and shit.

Killian: You sure you were in the hospital for them and not that erectile dysfunction you had?

Nikolai: The only erectile dysfunction is you. I told you it was a lack of fucking interest and showed you proof, motherfucker.

Killian: Must've forgotten. Didn't happen. Feeling in the mood to tell others about it.

Nikolai: That's it. You and me, outside. Now.

Gareth: Kill is messing with you because you might have talked to Glyn for more than five minutes and he hates that. And stop it, Kill, otherwise, he'll flood the group chat with dick pics to prove he doesn't have ED.

Nikolai: Taking one as we speak.

Killian left the group chat

Gareth left the group chat

Nikolai: Hey! Where did everyone go? Whatever. Here's one in your honor when you come back, Jer. You know I don't have ED, right?

I leave the group chat before I'm bombarded with his 'proof.'

He's extra like that.

Now, I need to figure out an excuse for why I left them during a strategy meeting that doesn't include 'I was a raging volcano because Cecily sent me a DM that was probably supposed to be for Landon.'

Fuck.

They'd have a field day if they found out I was interested in a girl. If I said it was only to keep her under surveillance, they would call bullshit.

They've known me all their lives and they know I don't put forth effort to get my dick wet. I don't spend weeks stalking and following and being the creep she labeled me to be.

That's just not my modus operandi.

And for that reason, they'll remain in the dark about my endeavors with the little fox. These strong feelings of interest will eventually wane.

My phone vibrates and I straighten before I answer. "Dad."

"Son." My father's voice with a slight Russian accent fills my ear.

It's past midnight in New York, but Dad doesn't sleep much. A trait I inherited.

"You need anything?" he asks.

That's what Dad's always been. Efficient. Our relationship wasn't built on affection or care like Mom and Annika's.

We're just two efficient beings who are interested in the bigger picture.

But he cares in his own way. My father's love languages are protecting us, slaughtering our demons for us, and making sure no one bothers us.

But since I grew into my role as his heir, the slaughtering demons part is exclusive to Annika. In fact, I've joined him in that endeavor.

We're Mom's and Annika's guardian angels.

Though, realistically, we're fallen angels who are campaigning for Lucifer's throne in Hell.

I let my gaze get lost in the horizon as I speak in a businesslike manner. "Nothing is amiss."

"I heard you're taking on a new guard who used to be with the Serpents, is that true?"

By *heard*, he means his guards that he sent with me both to protect me and report back told him.

Asking me if it’s true is a mere courtesy.

“Yeah. His name is Ilya Levitsky. I’ve done my background check on him and he’s a good kid.”

“We don’t need good kids in our line of work, Jeremy. Besides, how do you know he’s not a spy?”

“I tested him. Gave conflicting information and waited for him to fall into the trap, but he didn’t. He’s a good kid, Dad. As in, a loyal one. He had the chance to betray the Serpents to join us, but he didn’t. He took the punishment, got flogged and left.”

“Which could all be a masquerade to fool you.”

“I’m considering that option, but it isn’t viable. He…wants to follow a leader he respects.”

One of the things that surprised me in the speech Ilya gave when he started working for me a couple of weeks ago. I knew people feared me, but it was the first time someone said they respected me.

“Or he plans to stab you in the back.”

Dad’s most authentic, but sometimes over-the-top trait, is being utterly distrustful.

It’s something I inherited, too, but not to the extent he exhibits. Instead of completely cutting out others from the start, I give them a chance. Once they betray it, they’re out.

Killian says that’s risky, but nothing good in life comes from hibernating and cutting off the outside world.

“Dad.” I speak firmly. “You had the chance to choose Kolya as your right-hand. I’m asking for the same.”

“Kolya was planted by your grandfather to spy on me when we were kids. I converted him.”

“I’ll convert Ilya, too. Aren’t you the one who told me loyal men are hard to find and if I stumble upon one, I should keep him?”

“That’s true. Well played, son.” A note of pride slips into his tone.

“All thanks to you.”

A small pause of silence hangs between us before he says, “Be careful.”

“I will.”

“Your mother is worried about you and is concerned you’re slipping away. Call her sometime.”

“Will do.”

I click the End button and stare at the soft glow of the sun in the distance.

It’s a mixture of yellow and orange, but appears gray.

Black, even.

Despite my best efforts, none of this suffocation is disappearing. If anything, it’s thickening and growing in density.

I should blow off steam in a different way.

This time, with the person behind this fucking mess.

I send Cecily a location, then follow with a text.

Be here tonight. Seven p.m. Don’t be late.

She might become a coward again, erase that text, pretend she didn’t admit to her tendencies out loud, and kill the animal inside her.

But something tells me she’s been approaching the boiling point for a while now and she might have reached it last night.

I sensed the trapped emotions inside her and saw the way her eyes shone with dark lust when I was using her mouth.

Cecily might be finally ready to act on her fantasy.

And when she does, I’ll show her who the actual monster is in this equation.

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CECILY

What the hell have I done?

I've been asking myself that question ever since I woke up this morning with an epic headache, an ache between my legs, and a huge bite mark on my neck.

No kidding. It's so big and angry red that no amount of makeup could erase it, so I had to wear a scarf to hide it.

During class, I've been on autopilot, zoned out, unable to concentrate for more than ten minutes.

My head swims and I give up on one of my favorite lectures, human behavior, halfway through. The professor's words rise and fall in intonation, but none of them get past my ears.

Slumping in my seat, I pull out my phone and stare at the text sitting at the top.

My index finger rubs the side of my nose once, twice, and then I push up my black-framed glasses as I read and reread the text.

Be here tonight. Seven p.m. Don't be late.

It's Jeremy. I don't have to guess since it has his name. I didn't have his number, but apparently, it was saved on my phone last night.

I was drunk, but that doesn't mean I don't remember. The moment I woke up, memories flashed in my consciousness and bombarded every principle I thought I had.

Such as not getting involved with someone like Jeremy.

Sexually or not.

But last night, I was totally out of it—I refuse to believe sober me would've enjoyed being eaten out and having his thing in my mouth.

Sober me would've fought…right?

Sober me would've never sent that text that served as his invitation. Not that he needed one—if he wanted to jump through my window, he could and would do it.

He's a force of nature.

An impossible dilemma.

And he took from me more than I was willing to give. Unapologetically. Without waiting to see if I agreed to it.

Because that's what Jeremy Volkov does. He's a man with no boundaries, ethics, or limits. And if last night is any indication, then I've only witnessed the tip of his intensity.

I have no doubt that if I let my guard down, he'll drag me into his dark cave and swallow me whole.

But is that so wrong?

A tiny, crazy, stupid voice chants in the back of my head, mulling over and entertaining an option I shouldn't be considering.

Besides the self-loathing, there's been this primal yearning for the feelings I experienced when he straddled my face and used me.

I can't stop thinking about the raw look in his eyes, the way he desired me so much that he behaved like an animal.

After studying either side of me, making sure the other students are focused on the professor or sleeping, I lower my phone to my lap and type a reply.

Cecily: Why? What will happen there at seven?

A strange sensation flows through me when he reads the text almost immediately. My leg bounces as I wait for the dots to appear. The movements are so jerky that the guy sitting close to me gives me a fleeting glance and I force myself to calm down.

Blimey.

Why am I so affected by this?

By him?

Because you know he's probably the only one who'll incinerate the limits you're so scared to cross.

My screen lights up with a text, and I stop breathing for a second.

Jeremy: How's the hangover?

My fingers tremble. Why is he asking that? It can’t be because he’s worried about me like the way Ava left me some pharmaceutical remedies and painkillers on the side table. Those definitely helped.

Cecily: My head hurts a little, but I’m fine.

Jeremy: I suppose you’re a lightweight, Lisichka?

Cecily: What does that mean? Lisichka?

Jeremy: Little fox. You looked like one that day at the initiation. You still feel like one with all the cunning.

Cecily: I’m not that cunning.

Really. I’m not. I’m just good at the invisibility game. Sometimes, I’m not sure if helping Lan out that one time was worth it since it presented me with this nightmare.

Jeremy: I suggest you don’t drink again.

Cecily: Why not?

Jeremy: Do as you’re told.

Cecily: I thought it was only a suggestion.

Jeremy: My suggestions are your orders.

Cecily: Yes, sir. Not.

Jeremy: The fucking attitude.

My spine tingles as if I can hear the gruff timbre of his voice and see the displeasure in his ash eyes.

Focus.

Cecily: You didn’t answer my question. What will happen at seven at the location you sent?

Jeremy: What do you think will happen?

Cecily: Would you stop answering with questions?

Jeremy: Would you stop being so standoffish?

He did it again. He’s such a wanker, I swear.

Cecily: I’m not standoffish.

Jeremy: You’re always walking with your nose in the air or in a book, as if the world doesn’t deserve your time or energy. You also have this habit of pulling away from crowds and spending as much time indoors as possible. Standoffish is me putting it nicely. To be more accurate, you’re an asocial snob with trust issues.

My leg bounces again, and this time, I don’t care about my classmates’ stares as I glare at the phone.

This bastard is able to rile me up with a few words, and I'm not even the type who's easily provoked. I'm the most levelheaded of my friends. Hell, I'm the one they come to, to end fights, but right now?

I'm seething. Volcano-like steam explodes from my pores and it takes everything in me not to curse.

Cecily: And you're an arrogant, monstrous, absolutely appalling existence with antisocial tendencies. Oh, and a stalker. But you don't see me talking about that :)

I sent the last smiley face for extra effect.

Jeremy: By all means. If psychoanalyzing and slapping labels on me gives you peace of mind, do it all you like.

Cecily: You're a break-and-entry criminal. Also, a creep who goes into places he wasn't invited to.

Jeremy: No breaking was involved. And am I really considered a creep if your cunt drenched my face while you were coming apart on my mouth? I can still taste you on my tongue. Ten-star meal. Would try again.

I'm surprised no one besides me sees the fire consuming me from the inside out. My face is so heated that I grab my bottle of water with an unsteady hand and nearly finish it in one go.

But that does nothing to quench the thirst.

When the hell did it become so hot in here?

Jeremy: You still there? Get it together and breathe. Don't vomit just because I was reminiscing about your sweet taste or else it'll be embarrassing in class. We really need to work on your prude tendencies.

My gaze strays sideways, studying, searching, and coming up empty. Is he here somewhere?

No, he couldn't be. One, he's not an REU student, and while that can't stop him, his presence would give him away. There's no way I would've missed his beast-like physique and harsh stares.

Cecily: How did you know I was in class?

Jeremy: I know everything about you.

Cecily: Are you still…stalking me?

Jeremy: Are you still looking behind your back to search for me?

I touch the side of my nose and then let my hand fall to my lap.

Cecily: I'm not searching for you. I just want to see you so I can avoid you.

As soon as I send the text, I contemplate unsending it. No idea why.

It’s true. All I ever wanted was to avoid Jeremy, so why am I plagued with these types of thoughts?

The moment he reads it, a stupid sensation of regret courses through me.

He doesn’t reply right away, and when he does, my spine jerks upright.

Jeremy: You still search for me.

Cecily: Did you miss the part where I want to avoid you?

Jeremy: I only read the part where you want to see me.

Cecily: I don’t want to see you.

Jeremy: Does that mean the DM from last night wasn’t meant for me?

I pause and clench my fingers around the phone. That’s a good question. Was that message meant for him? I was so sure I clicked on Landon’s IG profile, but I didn’t.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out Lan wasn’t the one I wanted. Messaging Jeremy wasn’t a drunken mistake. It was what I was secretly yearning for since that night at the Heathens’ mansion.

I just needed liquid courage so I could act on it.

Cecily: Can you forget about that?

He takes a few moments to reply, and when he does, the tone reads final. Clipped.

Jeremy: Be there tonight, and remember the word that can end it all. Smoke, was it? That’s the only courtesy I will give you. If you hide, we’ll do it my way.

My fingers shake so badly that I nearly drop the phone.

There’s no need for him to voice it so I’ll understand what will happen tonight.

Jeremy will pick up where he left off that night in the forest.

He’s going to chase me.

My heartbeat escalates at the prospect, and I drop the bottle of water in my attempt to grab it.

I reach down for it, but a masculine hand picks it up and offers it to me. “Here.”

My gaze meets with that of one of my classmates, Zayn. He’s quiet, like me, definitely studious, and has a peaceful aura like a Buddhist monk’s.

He dresses in designer jeans and shoes and has a prim hairstyle.

We’ve been in the same classes for the past four years, since secondary school, and we’ve barely spoken to each other. But I’ve always appreciated

his low-key presence.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

He beams. “The professor has been looking at you, so you might want to hide your phone for a bit.”

“Oh.” I tuck it on my lap. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

“My pleasure. I’m Zayn.”

“I know. Cecily.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Cecily.” He grins and I manage an awkward smile back.

It’s not really about him. I’m shit at meeting new people and often give off the wrong vibes.

There’s a reason the only friends I have are my childhood ones—and recently, Anni because she picks up on social cues fast and eradicates any type of awkwardness.

I lean my chin on my palm and contemplate the pending decision I have to make.

Stay.

Or finally let go.

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CECILY

At seven p.m. sharp, I'm at the location Jeremy sent me.

I must have some sort of a death wish or a loose screw, because I came here despite the million and one wrong reasons my brain came up with to dissuade me from doing this.

But if I followed logic, I wouldn't be able to fully live. I wouldn't be able to come out of my shell and try what I signed up for on that app.

I promised myself that if I had a tinge of the crippling panic attack and nausea that comes with anything related to sex, I'd leave immediately.

On the drive here, I waited for that familiar anxiety, the sweating, and the metaphorical paralysis of my mind.

None of them came.

The only thing that's been bubbling in my veins is unbounded excitement.

The type that flows through your blood and confiscates your thoughts.

The type that simmers beneath the surface, unable to find refuge anywhere except inward.

From my car, I stare at the property surrounded by barbed wire. It's not a house, a mansion, or even a building.

It's more like…a cottage in the middle of a large piece of land. It's like the one Papa and his friends meet at and brought us along to when we were kids.

Only, this one appears unruly, unkempt, like a gothic cathedral that has been abandoned for years.

The darkness doesn’t do it any favors; shadows extend over the length of the cottage that appears small in the distance.

Large trees appear like demons with horns, and the wild bushes and grass give it an eerie vibe.

If it weren’t for the metal gate, one would think this is an abandoned property.

I search both ways down the road in case this isn’t the place Jeremy sent me to, but the maps app clearly said, ‘You’ve arrived.’ Besides, there’s only unkempt land on either side and across the street.

The road leading here wasn’t as smooth as the rest on the island. Hell, I didn’t know this place existed. It’s far away, secluded, and might as well be unknown. Definitely not somewhere I want to be during the night when predators come out to play.

A haunting screech assaults my ears and I flinch as the gate slowly opens.

I glance to the side again, then I drive through.

By the time I reach the cottage, the gate has closed and I’m trapped inside.

Unless I just drive back out.

No.

I’m simply not allowing those second thoughts to dictate my life anymore.

After a deep inhale, I step out of the car, throw a fleeting glimpse at my surroundings, then shiver at the demon-like trees.

After a thorough inspection of the place, I raise my hand to knock on the old wooden door of the cottage.

Or cathedral. I think this was really a cathedral once upon a time and was renovated to something else.

A creak announces that the door is being opened and I step inside, my legs shaking despite the pep talk I gave myself on the way here.

“Jeremy?” My voice is haunting in the otherworldly silence, interrupted by the occasional haunting owl’s cries in the distance.

My feet come to a stop right past the entrance upon seeing the vintage fireplace.

It’s on the opposite wall, lighting what looks to be an antique living room. Old sofas, a washed-out rug, and wood flooring.

A gust of wind coming from the door disturbs the fire and a slight shudder creeps up my spine.

My gaze strays to the dark stairs on my right. I swear some creatures of the night are lurking up there, waiting for my demise.

Maybe ghosts, too.

“Jeremy, are you there?” My quivering voice has decided it’s going to give away my fear and there’s simply nothing I can do about it.

I take a step forward and stop when the fire dances again and then goes out, turning everything black.

My heart hammers and a chill covers my unsteady limbs. I don’t have to see it, to feel the sudden change of atmosphere.

There’s a presence behind me.

Tall, harsh, and darker than the night.

But before I can move, something cold is placed at my throat.

A knife.

He’s holding a freaking knife to my neck. This isn’t what I signed up for—there was no mention of knives.

“Je—”

“Shh.” His voice has lowered, deepened, and is tugging on a secret part of me. “You don’t say my name.”

I swallow, my throat working against the metal blade.

Right.

We’re anonymous now.

It’s not about us as people, but more about how we’re both tools for pleasure. In this setting, I don’t have to think about repercussions or feel shame for wanting this type of barbarity.

That knowledge fills me with unbounded peace.

I let my body relax and even the freezing weight of the knife doesn’t scare me.

It’s one second in time, a second of silence, of mutual understanding.

But then he’s on me.

His muscular chest pushes into me from behind, firm and unyielding. I don’t have to see it, but I feel his height dwarfing my frame.

He’s tall and intimidating.

Dark and alluring.

He’s every fucked-up fantasy and more.

I crane my head back a little and all the breath is knocked out of my lungs when I’m met by the neon orange mask.

The same mask he wore that first time he chased me.

His dark eyes lack a sliver of light as they rip through the confinement of my flesh and peek into my soul.

It hits me then.

With the mask on, he has free rein to be deranged, with not one human bone in his body.

Not that he isn’t usually, but at least he doesn’t normally hold a knife.

“I’ll give you a head start.” He tilts my head back further using his knife. “You can either run or hide, it’s your choice. But if I find you, I fuck you. You’ll bleed and scream, and beg, but nothing will stop me from claiming you, breaking you, and tearing you apart. Either put an end to it now and leave or agree to my terms and run.”

His knife slides swiftly from my throat, but it’s replaced by the weight of his words.

My heart thunders and the safe word hangs on the tip of my tongue. It’s the responsible thing to do, and I am responsible.

I’m the good girl Cecily.

The mediator.

Daddy’s little girl.

But all of those titles vanish into thin air as I dart past him and run outside.

Superhuman energy buzzes through my veins and flares beneath the surface. I round the cottage, my shoes slapping against the wood and creating a haunting sound.

The noise mixes with the owl’s cries, the night’s silence, and my heart’s thundering beats.

Slow, sure footsteps materialize behind me, spooky.

Thrilling.

I know he’s on my tail. I can feel him, smell his leather and wood scent with my fear.

But I don’t stop.

Don’t look behind me.

I have no clue what I’m doing or where I’m going. The moment I spot the small set of stairs at the back of the cottage, I fly down them but pause when I find a lake.

The surface shines under the moonlight, murky, dark, and frightening. Two boats are tied to a deck and a few branches float in the water.

As I'm studying my new finding, black creatures fly in the night, releasing squeaky voices.

I damn near have a heart attack, thinking they're actual crows, and then I realize they're either crows or ravens.

Or bats.

I do a quick calculation of the distance to the forest to the side of me and come to the realization that the boats are way closer.

One problem, though. Where the hell will I go on the lake? Actually, two problems. I don't even know how to drive one, and that's only if the engine works.

But if I choose the forest…

I shudder at the thought of what could be lurking in the darkness.

Steps come up behind me and I yelp, then run to the deck. Screw it. How hard can it be to drive a boat?

I'm frantic, my movements unsteady as I fumble with the rope of the newest-looking boat.

My feet shake and I know I'm losing time with each passing second I'm not undoing the knots.

Come on, come on.

Sweat trickles down my temple and glues my hoodie to my back. One of my nails breaks on the rough rope, but instead of focusing on that, I cast a fleeting glance behind me and freeze.

I'm pretty sure I heard him on my heels just now, exerting a minimal amount of effort while I was giving it my all.

So how come there's no one there?

Another flock of ravens or crows or whatever in the Batman fly into the night and I jerk, then breathe in a choppy rhythm.

My gaze continues studying my surroundings as I keep trying to undo the knots.

A dark shadow flashes beside me and I flinch and start to whirl around, but I don't get the chance to.

My foot slips and I tumble off the edge of the deck.

Or I think I do.

A strong hand grips me by the wrist and pulls me back, then releases me as fast as it caught me.

I fall on my stomach on the coarse wood and a hard body flattens mine to the surface.

Overpowering, overwhelming, and knocks the breath out of me.

He crushes me with his weight, crowding my space, until only my gasps echo in the gloomy air surrounding us.

The rush of energy from earlier surges through my bones and I flail my legs, trying to kick him, to reach any part of him, but I might as well be hitting a wall.

He grabs my wrists and slams them behind my back as he eases off me. Or more like, his knees fall on either side of me and he straddles my arse.

“Caught you.” His voice, gruff and gravelly, echoes with frightening finality.

I try to wiggle, to set myself free, but it’s impossible. He’s gripping me with utter ease while I’m exerting, panting, and completely at my wit's end.

He pins my wrists down with an elbow and grabs the waist of my jeans, and then a long slicing sound fills my ears before cold air forms goosebumps on my skin.

The knife.

He cut my jeans and underwear with his knife.

A foreign sensation flares through me.

The thought that the sharp blade could nip at my skin keeps me still as he slashes my hoodie and my bra from behind like he’s cutting through butter.

The cold knife touches my back and I shudder. With my clothes falling off me in shreds, I’m fully exposed to him, his callous touch, and his merciless knife.

If I don’t do something, he might act on whatever murderous thoughts are in his cold-blooded brain.

The need to fight and run pulses through me and I use his loosened hold on my wrists to do so.

He releases me, but the moment I’m crawling away, something tears at my skull.

A tight fist grips my hair and drags me back onto the hard wood. I scream, and it’s heightened by the looming silence.

And yet I don’t stop fighting, flailing, scattering the remaining pieces of my jeans and hoodie.

I’ve never experienced this sort of demented survival mode before. I don’t want to escape, and I already agreed to be his prey by running instead of leaving, so I’m not sure why I’m doing this.

Maybe it’s to draw out the beast inside him, entice him, and turn him into a crazed being.

Jeremy effortlessly pushes me onto my back with his hold on my hair. The breath is knocked out of my lungs when I meet the solid deck.

But it’s not only due to the impact.

I freeze at the shadow hovering over me, chest rising and falling with terrifying calmness. I can make out the bulging of his muscles against the black shirt, the rippling of his ink, and the darkness of his eyes behind the mask.

There’s also the knife in his left hand.

“You look so innocent, but that head of yours is a fucked-up place, Lisichka. *My* fucked-up place.” He kneels between my legs and slides the blunt side of the blade against my pussy.

I shudder when he lifts it under the moonlight and I watch, entrapped, as it glistens with my arousal.

My rasping breaths start tumbling out of my mouth the longer he forces me to see the sick evidence of my tendencies. A tinge of shame settles at the bottom of my belly despite myself.

I’m lying here fully naked while he’s entirely dressed. And I don’t miss the inequality of the situation and how much power he holds.

“You’re so wet for my cock, so sensitive and horny. You act like a prude, but you’re nothing but a dirty little slut.”

My ears heat and I try to close my legs, but he digs his fingers in the tender flesh and slaps them apart.

He’s on me then, his fingers pinching my nipples, torturing, squeezing. An onslaught of emotion rushes through me as he touches me everywhere —my breasts, my throat, my stomach, my thighs.

I’m trembling beneath him, a leaf with nowhere to fall.

This is the feeling I’ve always yearned for; the abandon of losing control and allowing someone else to do everything.

To take.

And take.

And Jeremy is definitely the type who takes.

He gives me untold pleasure in return. A raw lash of his fingers and knife so that I become a vessel for his depravity.

I'm nothing more than a doll he molds into his plaything and manhandles any way he wishes, and all I can do is take it.

Or I can say the safe word.

Smoke.

But that would mean this whole thing would end.

As if hearing my thoughts, Jeremy lifts his head from the puffy flesh of my nipples and the air grows silent. He pants from beneath his mask, in sync with my heavy breaths.

It's a silent communication.

An understanding.

I'm the beast and you're my prey, his eyes tell me.

Don't let me be a coward or allow me to escape, must be what I'm communicating back.

Still maintaining eye contact, he slides the blunt side of his knife through my folds. A sense of terror takes hold of me, but that slowly subsides when the rhythm becomes pleasurable.

He teases my clit in rough circles until I'm bucking, reaching, arching my back off the deck.

And then, all of a sudden, he pushes off me and unbuttons his jeans.

The moment his hard shaft is freed, I gasp. Yes, I saw it last night, but I was drunk and he didn't fuck me. I still think it's too big for sex.

A sense of apprehension rushes through me and I place a hand on his chest, shaking my head.

The neon mask camouflages his expression, but I can see his eyes through the holes, all dark and terrifying.

He's going to hurt me. I can read it loud and clear.

Jeremy snatches both my wrists and slams them on the wood above my head. "Keep them there and stop touching me."

My lips tremble and I whisper, "I…need more time."

I can't let him take my virginity like an animal, on a deck, in the midst of owls, crows, and ravens.

Something I should've thought about when he asked me to run.

Jeremy lifts his mask and throws it away, revealing his sharp, handsome features. I can't see him clearly due to the lack of light, but the little I do see causes my heart to beat faster and my core clenches tighter.

He slides the knife from my pussy to my hip, up my stomach, and then grazes the tip against my nipple. A droplet of blood gathers on the tight bud, then rolls down the side of my breast that's firm with arousal.

His hooded gaze watches the path of the blood, and I do, too, transfixed by the weirdly erotic sight.

But then an eruption happens.

His lips fall on me. He darts his tongue out and licks the droplet of blood, chases it and drinks it off my skin, and then bites my nipple. Hard.

Holy. Shit.

A zap of pleasure strikes the base of my stomach and expands to the rest of my body. I'm still not used to the sensation when he yanks my thighs farther apart and thrusts into my pussy.

My insides recoil and I jerk on the rough wood.

Pain explodes where he tears through me and it hurts. It hurts so much that I cry and try to push at him, but that only makes him thrust again. Brutally.

"Please…please." I dig my nails into his chest, but I might as well be touching an unfeeling wall.

"Shhh. I told you I'll break this little cunt, didn't I? You're taking my cock so well, Lisichka. Mmm. So fucking tight. Your blood is the best lube I've ever had." He drives in again and my limbs shake from the violence of it.

He doesn't take it easy. He definitely doesn't let me adjust.

He's a beast after his own pleasure and I'm just the vessel at his disposal.

No matter how much I sob and beg, he's not hearing me. A part of me likes this. I like the primal savagery of it all and how harshly he takes me.

I don't want him to take it easy on me.

I'd never admit this, but a part of me enjoys how he massacres my hymen and uses my blood and arousal as lube.

He drives inside me with harsh strokes, pulling out to the crown, then ramming back in until my back scrapes on the deck.

He does that over and over until I think I'm going to faint.

But something entirely different happens.

In the middle of the savage fucking and methodical thrusts, my belly tightens, my nipples pucker, and my skin heats so suddenly, I think he's probably killing me with his thing.

“Mmm. Such a good girl. Do you feel your cunt milking my cock?”

My mouth falls open, but only choked gasps escape. My heart thunders as the tightening heightens and the pain morphs into the exact opposite.

Pleasure.

Boundless.

Absolutely insane.

It’s the type of desire that comes from extreme pain. The knowledge that he wants me so much, he’s hurting me.

He wants to hurt me.

He finds pleasure in chasing, manhandling, and fucking me like an animal.

My insides coil and rebel.

I fall into it.

Into being ravaged, taken, taken, and *taken*.

He craves my softness as much as I yearn for his dominant cruelty.

“You’re addictive. I want to break you.” *Thrust.* “Own you.” *Thrust.* “Mark you.”

He accentuates the last statement by biting my throat in the exact spot he did yesterday.

Everything inside me comes crashing down as sharp pain and pleasure overlap and detonate me all at once.

I’m falling and screaming and moaning, and he’s still fucking me.

He’s thrusting inside me like a madman, and then he’s feasting on my neck, biting, sucking, licking. I can feel him stiffening before warmth floods my insides.

And then he lifts his head, chasing crimson red off his lips with his tongue.

My blood.

He’s marked me fully, thoroughly.

It’s painful, it’s erotic.

It’s wrong.

But feels absolutely right.

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CECILY

You're disgusting.

My eyes slowly open, but the memories don't vanish.

They glare, snarl, and sink their sharp claws into the tender flesh of my consciousness.

Why are they coming right now? I'm over that part of me, have completely erased it and found myself a new beginning.

At least, I hope so.

An old wooden ceiling materializes above me and I attempt to move.

One problem: I can't.

My muscles are slack and I have no control over them. It's then I realize that I haven't completely opened my eyes and only a slit allows me to catch a glimpse of the ceiling.

A sharp sting of nerves explodes all over my limbs, and my brain revs to full capacity.

I know this feeling too well. The muted panic, the distorted consciousness, and the invisible black hands of panic squeezing my heart and squashing my chest bones.

That's exactly what happened when I was caught in a trap, had to feel every sting of its sharp edges, and inhale every polluted breath, but I couldn't escape.

I couldn't move.

I wanted to, I really did, and I fought and thrashed. I kicked, screamed, and wailed.

But it all happened in my head.

The scene repeats in tiny bursts of black.

Black.

Black.

And more damn *black*.

I try to regulate my breathing, but I have no control over that either. My inhales and exhales erupt in a mixture of choppy sounds.

This isn't the first time sleep paralysis has found refuge inside me. This out-of-body experience is even more frequent after those gruesome nightmares.

The more I fight the heavy weight on my chest, the black hands squeezing the life out of me, the more I'll drive myself into panic mode, so I force myself to remain still.

To let it pass.

It will eventually. No matter how scary it is or how much I want to cry, it'll eventually disappear.

Little by little, a dull ache explodes all over my skin, falling in sync with my irregular intake of air. Then, something warm and soothing snakes over the pillowy skin between my legs.

A cloth, a towel, or a mouth.

A moan slips from my lips as I attempt to stimulate my muscles but fail miserably.

My fingers are slack on the soft surface beneath me. My chest heaves due to the demon that's perching over me, scraping at the sensitive flesh of my heart, and my head is a jumbled mess.

But my pussy? That doesn't feel like part of my physical being. Or more like, the sensations running through it are separate.

It bursts with comforting energy. I focus on it, and my heart chases away the ghost of the black hands as it thunders back to life. My limbs gradually loosen and so does my brain capacity.

Just like that, events slam back in. The mask. The chase. The haunted property. Being taken on the deck. The blood. The knife.

Everything.

My chest quakes and I moan softly as the pleasure washes over me, slowly but surely untying the knot in my muscles.

His teeth nibble on my most intimate part and I realize it's definitely his mouth, not a cloth or a towel.

Did Jeremy go down on me while I was out of it?

This is so sick.

Or it's supposed to be, because the thought that he took me again, not caring whether I was awake or not, is kind of hot.

Not that I would admit it out loud.

God, I'm so ashamed of how much I loved my first time. I've known I had abnormal tendencies since I was sixteen, but I always thought they'd remain tucked in the dark corners of my heart as inaccessible fantasies.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd grow enough courage to act on them.

So the fact that I not only agreed to Jeremy's terms, but also allowed his beast to fuck me raw surpassed all my expectations and decimated them into smithereens.

And wow.

Since when do I even say the word 'fuck,' even in my head?

This man has been in my life for a short amount of time, but he's already corrupting me. He's making me wish and think of things that should've never seen the light of day.

My attempts to fully open my eyes fail again, or maybe I'm just too tired to do it, so I don't force it and try to focus on my environment instead.

His mouth has disappeared from my pussy, triggering a cold shiver and a map of goosebumps.

My body is covered with something, and I'm probably lying on a mattress.

Maybe he brought me back to the cottage. I was somewhat aware of that when he carried me in his arms earlier.

Everything after that, however, is a blur. I definitely fell asleep if I was able to have that nightmare about my supposedly finished past.

I can feel Jeremy's presence beside me. It's impossible to ignore the suffocating intensity radiating off him.

It's how I sensed him following me all those weeks ago. And since it's otherworldly, it can be felt by his absence, too, which is why I've been inexplicably empty, walking around with my attention scattered everywhere in case he showed up.

Right now, I don't only feel him, but I also smell him, wood and leather, and I sense the warmth emitting from him. It's weird to associate warmth with someone like Jeremy, but he is. Warm. At least, his body is hot-blooded.

His personality, however, is ice-cold.

Not to mention deviant.

He has the type of sexually deviant behavior that serial killers possess.

It's abnormal, dangerous, and might lead him down a destructive path.

What does that make me if I enjoy it?

My question remains hanging in the dark as he appears in the slit of my eyes, dressed all in black like a fallen angel, but I don't see the entirety of him.

It's mere glimpses of his chest, hints of the tattoos cording along his muscles, and his hands.

The large, veiny, and destructive hands that he touched, probed, and owned me with.

Jeremy pulls the sheet from my chest and my nipples puff and tighten at the friction from the fabric.

I can feel his raw gaze on me and the nefarious undertone that holds no other purpose than to devour me.

Only Jeremy would be able to make someone uncomfortable in their own skin with a mere glance.

The tip of his finger presses on my perky nipple and the cut from earlier burns, but Jeremy doesn't stop.

I doubt he even knows how to at this point. Which is bizarre, considering he's the most self-controlled person I know.

He squeezes the bud until I'm squirming, then he glides that same finger to my neck, to the assaulted, bruised spot he bit on, and presses again.

My lips part as soft moans spill out of my throat. The sound only invites him to use more force, as if my pain is his pleasure.

As if he enjoys driving me to the edge with his wicked touch and evil hands.

"So fucking breakable, Lisichka. I love how sensitive you are," he muses, tone slightly amicable.

I want to drown in it.

I want him to speak to me in that tone forever. The satiated one. While the beastly version from earlier exceeded my fantasies, this is the version I prefer right now.

The caring one.

Well, caring might be an overstatement, but he at least doesn't sound like he hates me.

Or is annoyed with me.

He sounds like he wants me for me. Not for any other reason than for me being myself.

His touch heightens in intensity, pinching, compressing, squeezing. “You have no idea how much I want to eat you up, bleed your porcelain skin and swallow you whole.”

The rich timbre of his voice sneaks beneath my flesh, drawing out the demented part of me I’ve been keeping under wraps for years.

“I crave your innocence, your fear, and your pain.” He spreads his fingers across the skin of my throat. “I’ve been fantasizing about bruising and marking this skin while you shattered around my cock and screamed and whimpered because it was too much. But here’s the twist. You love it when it gets too much.”

My lips twitch, but no words come out.

I’m caught in a trance by his crude descriptions and unapologetic view.

“I could tell you do. Your green eyes become the color of the forest at night, all dark and needy with dangerous lust. You fought me, but it wasn’t so you could push me away. It was to drag out the beast you saw in me. You hunger for that beast, don’t you, Lisichka?”

His commanding hand hovers over the mark on my neck before he envelops it whole. “That beast hungers for you, too. That’s why I couldn’t control it earlier or control me. I fucked you like an animal because I felt like one. I wanted to overpower and claim you. To bruise, bite, choke, and mark this translucent skin. My blood boiled and my beast yearned for it, which is why I didn’t use a condom. I needed to feel your blood coating my cock as I claimed your innocence. And I’ve never fucked without a condom before. That’s a first for both of us.”

My skin bursts into hot lava of overwhelming sensations at his hypnotic words, at my reaction to said words.

At the need for more.

His thumb toys with the cut on my nipple. “If you can hear me, wake up. I’m not done with you.”

He’s not?

A thrill of suppressed emotions rises to the surface and fills me with inexplicable determination.

“I’ll fuck you again, Cecily,” he announces with authoritative firmness. “I’ll take your cunt over and over until there’s nothing left for that

motherfucker Landon.”

I shake my head—or try to. I’m not sure if it’s visible as I mutter, “Lan…” *is the last thing on my mind right now.*

But the words get stuck on my numb tongue.

Silence stakes claim around me, but it’s not the calm type.

Tension grows thick and heavy with every moment. And then the hand that was torturing and sending waves of pleasure through me squeezes my throat.

The motion is so sudden and harsh that my whole body jerks. I reach up out of instinct to loosen his grip, but he doesn’t budge.

My air is stolen, and my head swims in chaos as my lungs burn.

I can’t breathe.

I can’t breathe.

I can’t breathe.

Then just like that, the deathly grip disappears as suddenly as it appeared.

And so does Jeremy’s presence.

It vanishes in a fog of smoke.

IT’S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE THE COTTAGE.

Three days of me questioning if maybe something is wrong with me.

Not only because I enjoyed what happened on the deck a bit too much and fell into every bit of the depravity Jeremy offered, but also because I’ve been on edge since.

After he nearly choked me to death—and I’m sure he did, considering the angry red marks I found around my neck when I woke up—he disappeared.

Back then, I was disoriented, not sure what was real and what was a hallucination. When I was lucid enough, I found myself lying on a sofa in front of that cozy fire in the cottage. A pair of men’s sweatpants and a hoodie were folded on the coffee table. There was also a first aid kit and some painkillers.

But there was no sign of Jeremy.

My chest still hurts thinking about how he disappeared into the night without a word. Not even a note or a text.

And I hate those emotions.

I, of all people, should know that Jeremy and I aren't supposed to be anything.

It's not like he was courting me for a relationship or offering me some form of a fairy tale. It was a simple arrangement to satisfy both our needs, and I have no right to feel so hurt about it.

Besides, I don't even like Jeremy.

Behind the beautiful façade lurks a devil with a taste for blood.

Literally.

The cut on my nipple has been healing, but the one on my neck is still purple and angry, and I have to wear turtleneck tops to hide it.

The fact remains, I've now satisfied my curiosity and we can both move on with our lives, right?

Wrong.

I can't help feeling that something went awry in the whole situation. Why would he have wiped me clean, massaged my sore pussy, and touched me so tenderly just so he'd nearly choke me to death after?

Because he's dangerous and you should stay away from him, is what my mind has been telling me.

But here's the thing—Jeremy isn't impulsive. I know he plots things to a fault, has a methodical character, and wouldn't have turned murderous on me just because it was on the spur of the moment.

So it doesn't make sense for him to do that out of the blue. Especially after the way he spoke to me, provoked my darkest parts, and said he wasn't done with me.

That one was a blatant lie.

The day after, I pretended nothing happened.

The second day, I went through his Instagram, developing unhealthy habits.

The third day, I sent him a text.

Did you take one of my mangas when you came into my room?

It was an excuse, and yes, he did take one from my boys' love collection, and I was too embarrassed to ask for it back in the beginning.

Embarrassment was the last thing I could think of the last couple of days, though, which is why I sent that text.

Jeremy ignored me.

And I refuse to put a name on the feeling that flooded my system afterward.

Turns out, he was actually done with me, and now, I should get over it and move on.

I tuck a drunk Ava into bed after listening to her mumble everything and nothing, and once I'm sure she's asleep, I leave and close her door. Then I cover Glyn with a blanket since she's fallen asleep in the living room sofa. I go to check on Annika, but I recall that she's spending the night at her brother's mansion.

The dull ache from earlier comes back at the mere thought of him, but I ignore it and slip into my room.

I don't want to sleep. The thought of black invisible hands, a heavy weight on my chest, and gruesome nightmares has made me terrified of closing my eyes.

Instead, I opt to study.

After fifteen minutes, I'm zoning out. This occurrence has been so frequent that it's starting to worry me.

Lately, sleep paralysis and zoning out have become the bane of my existence. They've always been there, but I could cope, pretend they weren't affecting my life.

Not anymore.

The other day, Ava said she was worried about me. Glyn, too. But I managed to wave them off.

I gently tap my cheeks and focus back on my book.

My phone vibrates on the table and I snatch it, my heart thundering back to life.

God, why am I like this?

Why do I have to have this reaction every time anyone texts me?

The name that shows on the screen isn't the one I was waiting for, though. My shoulders hunch as I open the message.

Landon: Don't you love it when it burns? Thanks for your services, Cecy.

My fingers shake as I open the video attached to the text. The scene of a burning mansion materializes in front of me.

Not just any mansion. The Heathens'.

The video was taken from an opposite angle, zoomed in to show students and firefighters running and trying to put the fire under control.

My phone falls to the table and I jump, grab it back, and call Landon. He picks up after two rings.

“Isn’t it exquisite?” His voice is eternally calm, a bit sadistic, and lacks a sliver of emotion.

“What have you done?” I whisper in a quivering voice.

“Me? I didn’t do anything aside from maybe selling inside intel about the Heathens’ compound to the Serpents and suggesting they start fireworks. Didn’t think they’d listen, but they’re vicious creatures, and their type love surprise attacks. If they eat each other, guess who comes out on top?”

I sway, both at the information he’s given me and at his apathetic manner of speech. I clutch the edge of the table for balance, sounding a lot calmer than I feel. “When you asked me to get information about the Heathens’ mansion layout, you said it was a negotiating chip and a defensive barrier in case they attacked you first. I didn’t want you, Bran, Remi, Creigh, or Eli hurt, which is why I agreed to the plan. You didn’t say anything about selling that intel to the Serpents.”

“Oh? I must’ve forgotten.”

“How could you do this?” I ask, incredulous. “Someone could get hurt!”

“Sacrifices need to be made for the greater good.”

My lips part and I hang up. There’s no talking any sense into him. I’ve always known Landon was unhinged, but I didn’t realize it was the manic, narcissistic type of unhinged until now.

He’s ready to sacrifice people for his own good and use me to do it.

My limbs won’t stop shaking as I pace the length of the room while dialing Anni.

“Hi, this is Annika. Leave a message and I’ll call you back ASAP.”

I hang up and tap on Jeremy’s contact with an unsteady finger.

It goes straight to voicemail, too.

I don’t think about it as I grab my keys and sprint out of the flat. During the drive, I keep calling both of them, but I get no reply.

When I arrive at the Heathens’ mansion gate, I find it closed.

A few TKU students linger outside, probably having heard about the fire, but from this distance, it’s nearly impossible to see anything.

I step out of the car and push through the crowd until I reach the gate. The smell of soot and smoke lingers in the air, but other than that, there's no sign of the fire.

They must've put it out. *Phew.* That's good.

A burly guard with a visible machine gun stands behind the gate and glares at me the moment I get too close.

"Step back," he orders with a Russian accent and a harsh tone.

"I'm Annika's friend. Can you please let me go see her?"

"No."

"I want to make sure she's okay."

"She is. Now, step back."

I release a breath. At least Anni is fine.

"How…how about everyone else?" I ask, telling myself it's only to make sure Killian is also all right.

Glyn won't be able to survive if something happens to her new-ish boyfriend. That's it.

That's *all*.

"Everyone except for Jeremy is okay."

My heartbeat spikes up and I fist my hand by my side to prevent it from trembling.

"W-what happened to Jeremy?"

"That's none of your concern. Leave before I make you."

I grab the metal of the gate. "Tell me what happened to Jeremy."

If he's hurt because of what I've done, if something has happened to him due to my recklessness, I'll never forgive myself.

The guard advances, probably to make good on his promise, when a leggy blonde breezes past me. She smells of an exotic perfume and looks to be straight off of a fashion runway with her low-cut dress, hourglass shape, and red lips.

Upon seeing her, the guard abandons his plan to dismantle me and opens the side gate for her.

"Where did you guys put Jeremy?" she asks in an American accent.

She's here for Jeremy, too.

But unlike me, she obviously has access, because the guard's tone changes to one of respect as he speaks, "Please go inside and they'll direct you to where he rests, miss."

She stops at the threshold and throws a glance at me. "And she is?"

“Miss Annika’s friend,” the guard replies.

Her look becomes one of distaste. “That midget always took pity on stray animals.”

“If you have something to tell me, say it out loud.” I speak calmly, clearly, despite the shaking in my insides or the cancerous thoughts plaguing my mind.

“Get the stray animal off the property,” she orders the guard, then storms inside.

When he steps forward, I back off. I don’t leave, though.

“If you’ll just let me know how Jeremy is doing, I’ll go.”

He lifts his gun, but another man appears behind him and taps his shoulder.

The newcomer looks no older than a student. He has white-blond hair, a square face, and a calm expression. And he looks familiar somehow.

Upon his tap, the guard at the front makes way for him.

“My name is Ilya and I’m Jeremy’s senior guard,” the blond tells me, and it’s then I notice that his clothes are full of soot.

“Hi,” I say awkwardly. “Is Jeremy okay?”

“No. He inhaled too much smoke and hurt his side during the escape attempt. He’s currently recuperating.”

My chest quakes and I physically jerk backward.

Oh, God.

What have I done?

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JEREMY

“Who did you say came here?” I pause in the middle of the jog to stare at my running partner, Ilya.

Nikolai was with us when we took off from the house, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he got bored and decided to sleep under a tree.

He didn’t need to come along in the first place, but he’s been acting worse than my mother since the fire last night.

Granted, I almost died, but I didn’t. Despite having a closet fall across my middle, I got out of the incident with a few scratches, a gash on my stomach, and lacerations.

The doctor said I should recuperate, so jogging is the last thing I ought to be doing, but fuck that noise.

I need to purge the energy that’s been tearing me open worse than the injuries.

The wound burns, and the pain spreads all over my skin and splashes the ticking sound in my brain.

I’ve always considered myself assertive, efficient, and highly unaffected, but my resolve and the very marrow of my control have been tested over the past few days.

So when Ilya just relayed the piece of information, I forget all about my attempts to calm down.

My guard jogs in place, sweat glistening off his pale skin that appears pasty in the cloudy daylight.

Ilya straightens and nonchalantly wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “In the midst of the chaos, right after you were taken to the East

Wing to recuperate and when we were putting out the fire, Miss Knight showed up at the gate. She asked the front guard about Miss Volkov and then about you."

I narrow my eyes, absolutely loathing the heartburn flowing through my chest. It's the injury. My doctor will be hearing about his incompetence in putting me back together.

Also, what the fuck is Cecily playing at now?

That night, the night I smeared her blood all over my cock and fucked her like a seasoned whore instead of an innocent virgin, I planned to abandon her on the deck and leave.

We weren't lovers and I don't even like her. I only fucked her because we both cater to the depravity of pretending to be primal strangers in the dark.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

But the thing is, I couldn't.

She looked so vulnerable and small, her pale skin serving as the perfect bait for predators that lurked in the dark. I simply was not allowing another predator besides me to touch her.

My courtesy should've stopped the moment I carried her to the house. But no, I went to further lengths.

I have no fucking clue what came over me when I warmed water and wiped her from head to toe. I massaged her muscles, too, especially when I felt her turning catatonic.

I shouldn't know that state is possible, even during sleep, but I do.

Very fucking well.

So I massaged her cunt with my tongue, partly because I wanted to, and partly because I figured it could loosen her muscles.

And it did.

She was slowly relaxing and releasing low, pleasure-filled sounds that hardened my cock and toyed with the beast inside me.

I was so ready to claim her again, strap my mark on her, and forbid her from leaving.

But she did something.

Something that I nearly killed her for.

She called me by that fucker's name.

She was probably dreaming about him and wishing he was the one who chased and fucked her like an animal, per her initial plan.

I can still feel the quickening of her pulse and the quivering of her flesh beneath my fingers when I choked the fuck out of her.

It's a miracle I managed not to kill her at that moment.

Or any of the other moments that followed.

"What are your orders?" Ilya asks when I remain silent. "Should I continue to keep an eye on her?"

"For now." I glide my forefinger along the side of my sweatpants.

The wisest thing to do under the circumstances is to drop the subject, ignore her as I've been attempting to the past couple of days, but the fucker of a beast who has been craving her since that first taste refuses to let go.

I meet Ilya's gaze. "What else did she say?"

"She refused to leave until we told her about your state, and when I did, she complied and got off the property without incident."

She wasn't supposed to be here in the first fucking place. What does she want after the 'Lan' episode?

My fist clenches with the need to find the fucker and erase his features. She won't be thinking about him if I somehow transform him into an ugly monster.

How are you any different from him?

I internally shut down that voice and start walking again. Ilya falls in step beside me, vehemently refusing to leave me unguarded, despite the fact that I told him I prefer to do this solo.

He also said I could have complications since I refuse to rest, so he's here in case he has to take me to a doctor.

"Boss."

"Hmm?"

The sound of birds and other small forest creatures swirl in the pause Ilya takes to speak up.

So I throw him a glance.

He clears his throat. "She looked worried and had tears in her eyes. Miss Knight, I mean."

I slide my finger against my thigh, back and forth, back and forth. Like a cryptic language.

Fuck if I care.

That's what I should say, and mean it, but I don't.

This is the part that didn't go according to plan. The part where I could've and should've been able to cut ties with her the moment we were

done on that deck.

The part where I should've erased her from my life as if she were never there in the first place.

But it took my beast one taste to develop an obsession with her.

Or maybe the obsession has been there for some time now and it only just grew.

"She was most likely worried about Annika," I say.

"I don't think so."

"That's not important right now." We walk for a few more silent beats. "We need to plot payback for last night's fire."

Our security team was able to gather footage of some men in masks who managed to infiltrate the property.

And while we couldn't get identities, Ilya was able to pinpoint one of them as an ex-colleague from the Serpents by his tattoos.

The part that caught my attention, however, isn't foolish painted masks or tattoos. It's not the audacity of those fucking snakes to come to our property, breach our security, and set us on fire.

It's how they got here.

Through the forest.

We've had a few infiltration attempts in the past, but they all came through the gate or over the walls.

No one would even consider coming through the forest, considering its thick and mystic nature, not to mention the cameras.

Which brings me to suspicion number two. How the fuck did they manage not to get caught by our cameras?

Only one got a shot of them, and that was newly installed.

It's as if they knew exactly where the cameras are. And that's impossible unless there's a traitor in our ranks.

"Did someone say payback?" Nikolai sprints in our direction wearing only shorts and then punches the air. "With fists and mayhem and burning down the whole fucking island?"

"We can't act rashly when we haven't gathered enough info yet," Ilya says, forever the mediator.

Nikolai lunges forward and pins Ilya with an elbow to his throat. Ilya isn't a small man, but my friend is similar to a titan. "I say how about you admit that you're the one who gave the Serpents inside intel? Confess now and I'll only skin you after you're dead. If you don't, I'll do the opposite."

I touch his shoulder. “Let him go.”

“This motherfucker is suspicious, Jer. It’s no coincidence that our inner security was leaked to the Serpents *after* he defected from their ranks and pretended to be your loyal servant.” He stabs Ilya’s trachea with his elbow. “Speak before I murder you.”

“I didn’t do it,” Ilya mutters even as his eyes bulge. “I wouldn’t have sold them out and revealed their identity if I had.”

I grab Nikolai by the nape and wrench him back, forcing him to release Ilya.

“This isn’t the time for inner conflict.” I stare at my friend. “If Ilya wanted to give them something, he would’ve handed over the mansion’s blueprint, including the newly installed security cameras. And he wouldn’t have stayed during the fire or saved Gareth.”

“The motherfucker could’ve been faking it.”

“Enough.” I exert pressure on Nikolai’s neck. “We should focus on making them pay *your* way.”

Light shines in his usually dead eyes and he smirks. “You can’t take that back. We’ll do it my way and you’ll tell those fuckers Kill and Gaz to obey me.”

“After I plan it.”

“Do your thing. *But* I’ll use explosives.”

“Explosives will get the authorities’ attention. No.”

“You said my way.”

“Anything but explosives.”

I’m sure he’ll come up with an equally screwed-up method, and I’ll allow it.

Those fuckers deserve whatever wrath Nikolai has planned.

And I will watch as their blood stains the streets.

After we get home, I stop at the front of the mansion to look at the fully burned east side. Some workers are already moving like bees, cleaning the space in preparation for renovating it.

We came out of the incident unscathed. Yes, I almost died, but something worse could’ve happened. Like losing my sister and the only friends I’ve had my whole life.

After taking a shower and changing my clothes, I go to my Annika’s room and knock on the door. This is a temporary one since her purple princess room is being cleaned.

“Come in,” she says with utter boredom from the other side.

I stroll in to find her lying on the bed on her stomach, legs in the air and phone in her hand.

Annika is the spitting image of Mom. They have the same long brown hair, petite features, and an elegant aura that it feels like I have a mini version of my mother with me.

Their similarities end on the physical level, though. Where Mom is soft-spoken and demure, Annika is extroverted to a fault, never stops talking, and has the energy of a bunny on crack.

Upon seeing me, she jumps up, throws her precious phone away, and inspects me. “Are you okay? Should you be moving? And why did you go jogging when the doctor said you should be resting?”

“Breathe, Annika.” I clutch her by the shoulder. “I’m fine.”

She narrows her eyes, observing me further, definitely not believing a word I said.

Since she was born when I was six, I’ve considered it my mission to protect her with my life. The fact that I couldn’t last night has been chipping away at a part of me.

“Enough about me. Are you okay, Anoushka? Do you need anything?”

“Aside from being set free of my Rapunzel tower? I don’t think so.”

I ruffle her hair. “It’s for your security.”

“Oh, please. You just like locking me up.” She swats my hand away. “And stop treating me like a kid.”

“No,” I say point-blank, and she makes a face.

“Come on, Jer.” She takes my hand in hers. “At least let me go to the dorm. I miss the girls so much, and they’re worried sick about me after they heard about the fire.”

The girls. Including, but not exclusive to, Cecily.

“No.”

“Jer!” she whines. “Please. You know how hard it was for me to make friends, and these girls really like me despite my status as a mafia princess and my last name. I can’t just lose them.”

“There will be no going back to the dorm temporarily.”

“You’re so heartless.” She drops my hand as if it’s an expired object. “I pity the girl who will have to marry you.”

“I was going to let you have lunch with your friends, but since I’m heartless…” I shrug.

“Oh, don’t be silly. You know I was kidding!” Annika laughs and lunges at me with a koala embrace. “Thanks, Jer!”

“You’ll be escorted by guards,” I tell her with a hand on her back.

“Okay!” She jumps down and disappears into her closet, probably to pick a dress from the hundred purple ones she owns.

Shaking my head, I step out and pause when my phone vibrates.

The name on the screen shouldn’t be there.

It should’ve been deleted, but it wasn’t.

I shouldn’t have been reading and rereading her last text about the manga that I stole from her room that night.

It’s that fucking obsession that I can’t shake.

Cecily: I heard about the fire. Are you okay?

I stare at her words or, more like, glare at them.

Why the fuck would she act so worried when she’s obviously hung up on someone else?

But then again, since when do I care about that?

I gave her a chance to escape me, but she didn’t take it.

If I want to own her, I will.

When I’m done with her, no other fucking man will be on her mind.

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CECILY

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're ghosting me, Cecy."

I take a slurp of my energy drink and try to remain cool and unaffected, despite Lan's shoulder that's nudging mine.

At Remi's and Ava's insistence, our group of friends have gotten together for drinks at a pub downtown.

The big table in the middle of the room overflows with drinks, chatter, side-nudges and the general hyper energy that takes place whenever we're together.

Remi dragged Bran and Creigh along, and Ava got me and Glyn to join.

Anni would've loved to be here as well, but she still hasn't gained back her full freedom and has to be monitored at all times by her guards. She's also been staying in the Heathens' mansion.

I would rather not be in a place that's buzzing with people, loud music, and sensory chaos, but I'm willing to do it instead of letting Ava get drunk and have no one to take care of her after.

Also, anywhere is a better place than my head.

I just didn't count on Lan joining us because A, he doesn't hang out in our circle and has his own entourage; and B, I really don't want to talk to him after the fire episode at the Heathens'.

That was a week and a half ago, and I still feel that burning sensation down my throat whenever I swallow.

Another tap on my shoulder, a subtle nudge, and the feeling of his breath down my neck.

I stare at Lan, who looks dashing in his casual clothes without him making an effort. It's the easygoing grin and the aristocratic features. He shares them with his twin brother, but Bran appears elegant and sophisticated.

He's nothing more than a devil.

"What do you want, Lan?"

"Don't sulk over such a trivial issue."

"Trivial," I whisper-yell so the others don't hear. "Did you just call arson *trivial*?"

"No one got hurt."

"Jeremy did." My chest squeezes, as is the case whenever I think about him.

"Meh. He survived." Lan's blank gaze remains in place, and I come to the bitter realization that I really don't know this man.

I've spent twenty years in his orbit and about three years crushing on him, and yet I have no clue who the hell he is.

"He was hurt, Lan," I repeat. "He was injured and needed medical attention."

"He still survived like a cat with nine lives. Also, hold on, why are you getting so worked up about Jeremy? Don't you hate him?"

Worked up.

Is that what it looks like from the outside? That I'm worked up?

Ava said something similar when I kept asking Anni questions as soon as she was able to meet with us again for lunch.

"Why are you so invested in this, Cecy?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

I waved her off, but now, I face Lan. "Because I unknowingly caused a fire after you used my goodwill for satanic purposes."

He laughs, slapping his knees, but none of the emotions reach his eyes. "Aren't you being a little dramatic? It's the Remi effect, isn't it?"

It dawns on me then. All of this is a joke to Lan, a game he plays, a fun activity he indulges in.

He couldn't care less who needs to be crushed as long as he has what he wants.

I'm just a pawn on his chessboard that he used and discarded.

"Did someone say my lordship's name?" Remi jumps up beside us. "Don't talk behind my back when you have the whole thing here."

"Oh?" Lan grins. "And here I thought you were ignoring me, Rems."

“Nonsense.” He gathers him in a bro hug. “There, there, don’t feel lonely, mate.”

Bran releases a puff of air. “He doesn’t even know the meaning of that word.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Lan says with a grin and utter ease, enjoying egging his twin brother on a bit too much.

He’s like that, whether it’s with his friends or family. Everyone is a fluid matter that could and would be used.

I guess I only just realized the extent he’d go to.

“Are you guys fighting for my attention? Don’t do that, I can’t choose!” Remi releases Lan and goes to sit beside Creigh. “I will only have my spawn, thank you very much. I know you miss Anni, even if you don’t say it, but I’ll keep you company.”

“He doesn’t care about you.” Ava raises her glass. “Maybe you should salvage your dignity while you can.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are we still talking about me? Because that whole speech could’ve been directed at you. Your dignity is shriveling and dying on the floor as we speak.”

“Oh, you’re so dead, bitch.”

“Bring it on, *bitch*.”

Ava goes for his throat and they bicker on and on, accidentally spilling each other’s secrets. Glyn, who’s allergic to conflict, tries to mediate and break them up. Bran offers them drinks to cool them down.

Neither work.

Usually, I’d take Ava’s side. One, it’s fun to rile Remi up. Two, she might not act like it, but she was hurt by his words and I don’t allow that.

But I can’t bring myself to move or talk. Some of that has to do with Lan being here.

In the past, I’d get all giddy whenever he joined us and fangirl internally. Now, I’m uncomfortable.

I don’t want to sit beside him, knowing what he’s done. It’s been a long time since I figured out he doesn’t care about me more than as a childhood friend, but this is the first time I’ve finally accepted it.

I wait for the pain to wash through me, but it doesn’t. It’s merely a dull ache now, and I’m not sure if it’s because of him or something else.

After taking a sip of my drink, I check my phone. It’s a stupid habit I’ve developed ever since a different devil barged into my life.

The last text I sent is sitting there. On Read.

Of course he didn’t reply. Why would he?

Besides, I was too stressed at the moment, thinking I actually hurt a person, as monstrous as he is, or I wouldn’t have sent him that text.

From his perspective, I must’ve looked like the clingy type who couldn’t move on from the madness of that one night.

A part of me regrets it, the part that was always ashamed of my preferences. The part that prides itself in being confident and assertive but still made the reckless mistake of showing my tendencies to a predator.

No, not a predator. A hunter.

The other part is relieved that I was finally able to do something about my fantasies. That I was courageous enough to let it happen while I was scared of it.

That I was strong enough to not have one of those panic attacks like I did in the past whenever sex was mentioned.

I just didn’t count on everything that happened afterward.

I’ve driven myself to the edge countless times since, especially after the fire, and my sleep paralysis has become more frequent and filled with images that make me cry and scream.

Only internally, though.

On the outside, I can’t move. I can’t call for help. I can only shriek in the confinements of my soul.

It’s like I’m yelling into the void with no one to hear me. I’m being ripped apart by the black hands and no one can save me.

I’ve started drinking all sorts of energy drinks, coffee, and any caffeinated stuff to stop myself from closing my eyes at night.

Sleep scares the shit out of me.

Another drink slides in front of me. I stare at the sparkling blue and realize I finished my current one.

Landon winks at me.

I smile but with no humor whatsoever as I snatch it.

Caffeine equals no sleep. Even if it’s unhealthy.

“Now that you've cooled down,” he whispers near my ear. “How about we talk business?”

“Business?”

“Annika takes you to the Heathens’ mansion for parties, no?”

“Rarely.”

“Rarely is an entry.”

I narrow my eyes. “Why are you asking?”

“I thought maybe you could finish what you started and get me a layout of the mansion.”

“Are you serious?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You must be out of your mind if you think I’ll help you again after you instigated arson.”

“Shh. They think it was the Serpents’ doing. They even burned their warehouse and beat them to a pulp for revenge. I finished the popcorn so fast while watching that particular show.”

A sadistic glint shines in his eyes. He’s enjoying this. Too much. It’s almost a part of who he is now, and nothing will stop him from carrying out his plans.

People like Lan don’t have a motive, a goal, or an endgame. They just get off on causing anarchy.

“I’m not going to help you with your plans,” I say with a calm I don’t feel. “Not now, not ever.”

Then I stand up, providing a flimsy excuse about needing the bathroom.

Instead, I go outside for fresh air, thankful for the slow disappearance of all the noise.

Some drunk uni kids stumble out, acting all rowdy and reeking of alcohol.

I walk in the opposite direction and exhale when I reach the car park.

My hair stands on end and I get that distinctive feeling of being watched and cryptic eyes following my every move.

Could it be him?

I look around, only to be greeted with a couple getting into their car and a guy talking on the phone at the far end.

Of course it’s nothing.

Why would I think he’s watching me when he hasn’t done it in weeks?

My chest deflates as I stand by my car’s door and pull out my phone to send a text in the girls’ group chat.

Cecily: I’m going home.

Ava: No, come back, Cecy. It’s no fun without you.

I appreciate her saying that, even though she thinks I’m too responsible and stiff to actually live.

But none of them know that I've already done something. The night I drove to that cottage and gave Jeremy the green light to ravage me was the day I felt the most alive in my whole life.

None of my friends will find out about it, though, because they might look at me as if I were a freak.

Glyndon: What she said.

Ava: Remi said of course you're leaving first, because you're a nerdy prude and can't handle fun times.

Cecily: Remi's opinion doesn't matter.

Ava: OMG!! You're letting him get away with it? I only said that so you'd come back and put him in his place.

I'd rather preserve that energy to read my mangas all night long, thank you very much.

Cecily: Night. Don't get too drunk. I mean it.

I'm about to tell Glyn to keep an eye on her, but I get a glimpse of a shadow in the car's window.

It's only for a moment in time.

A fraction of a second is all it takes for me to get caught in dark eyes.

The same eyes that I can't forget about, despite trying to. Despite convincing myself that he's nothing more than a devil and I should be thankful he's no longer interested in me.

My mouth opens, but he slams a hand over it. A large, masculine hand that steals my breath.

Or maybe that's not the entire reason behind my inability to breathe or the shaking in my limbs.

"Shh. Not a sound."

I gulp and that makes me taste him. The hint of cologne, wood, and leather mixed with his natural scent.

Something that I couldn't forget even if I tried.

"You're coming with me."

My body quivers for an entirely different reason as I spin around and shove at his chest.

I put all my strength behind the hit, too, completely unconcerned about the fact that he could subdue me in no time. Or that I'm no match for him physically.

"I'm going nowhere with you." I pant. "We're already over."

And he ignored me.

He ghosted me.

He gave me the best experience of my life, then completely erased me.

He brought me out of my invisible bubble just to decimate me.

And that hurt.

I didn’t realize how much it hurt until I stared at his soulless eyes a moment ago. Now that I’m looking at him, at his sharp features and unaffected expression, I want to sink my nails into his leather jacket where his heart is and rip it out, maybe see if there is one.

“Over?” He takes a step forward, trapping me against my car as a twitch lifts his lips. “We’re just getting started, Cecily.”

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JEREMY

I watched Cecily all night long.

I've been following close behind since she left the shelter and headed back to the flat, wearing tight jeans and a baggy sweater. Earbuds in her ears. Gaze lost in the horizon.

I remained on my bike behind the bushes and watched her window, waiting for her figure to appear, and it did, once, wrapped in nothing but a towel. Her wet silver hair cascaded to below her shoulders and she stood by the window.

For a moment, I thought she saw me, that no matter how strategically I hide, Cecily will always see me.

But that belief only lasted until I realized she was in fact caught in a trance. She stood there and looked, but no feelings could be detected.

She was there physically, but not mentally.

That state lasted for exactly fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes of remaining as still as a soulless statue.

Fifteen minutes of…nothingness.

My molars grinded together and I nearly crushed my helmet between my fingers from how much I squeezed it. I contemplated jumping through her window and shaking the fuck out of her.

But then Ava came in, her face and movements full of giddy excitement. Cecily snapped out of it soon after, crossed her arms over her chest and listened as her friend chattered on, grabbed her shoulders, and pushed her in the direction of the closet.

Twenty minutes later, they were in a downtown pub. With their guy friends. Namely, that motherfucker Landon.

I was around the corner when they whispered to each other, when he grinned at her and she smiled at him. When he offered her a drink and she took it sheepishly.

When she ignored everyone else and talked to him.

When he kept nudging her shoulder with his, demanding her attention and eventually getting it.

I was so close to walking up there and slicing his throat then watch as it formed a pool around his body.

Before I could act on those destructive thoughts, she slipped out of the group, looking miserable as fuck, expression downward and shoulders hunched.

I slipped behind her the moment she fetched her phone and started texting her friends.

She didn't even realize I was there until she saw my reflection in the glass.

I've thought of a million methods of handling Cecily Knight once I had her beneath my claws again. I could play with her until she breaks.

Hold her hostage until she squirms.

My favorite is to let her run just so I can catch her.

But now that she's standing in front of me so close that I can breathe the water lilies off her skin and count the freckles dusting her cheeks, none of those options seem like enough.

And when the green of her eyes darkens? Fuck me. I want to do bad things to this girl.

Yes, I know she's angry, but my cock can't take a hint to save his life.

Cecily never dresses up for nights out. She has the same copy-paste style of jeans, a T-shirt, and comfy-looking tennis shoes. But tonight, the shirt is a bit tighter, molding against the curve of her round breasts and her defined waist.

The writing on it is in big, bold letters. *Party person. Not.*

Ever since she whirled around, I've been clenching my fist at my side, barely stopping my beast from taking action. He's aroused by the expression on her face.

The stiffness of her muscles.

The sharpness of her demeanor.

Defiance radiates off her in waves. She's glaring at me, but something else lurks behind the apparent emotion.

Something like…disdain. *Pain.*

"I'm not starting anything with you." Her body shakes with the guttural quality of her voice.

She's forcing something a lot deeper than words.

I lean against the car behind me, letting my body fall into a neutral stance by crossing my legs at the ankles. Either that or I'll drag her with me by my hand around her throat.

A throat that's no longer red and purple with the evidence of my teeth. It's pale, translucent, crowded with veins and arteries peeking through the skin. Cecily watches my every move, that delicate throat working up and down with a swallow.

Note to self: mark it again.

I glide my forefinger against my thigh, back and forth in a controlled rhythm. "You *are* coming with me. Whether you do it nicely or after I resort to unpleasant methods is up to you."

Her eyes darken further, muscles stiffening, and a halo of tension envelops her body.

She clicks on her key, the sound of the unlocking car echoing around us, but Cecily doesn't break eye contact as she reaches behind her to open the door.

Hmm.

She's smart enough to not give me her back again or put herself in a vulnerable position that I could *and* would make use of.

I knew I liked how fast she catches on. She's so intelligent and careful, *too* careful sometimes, that I barely resist laughing at how far she's backing herself in a corner.

None of her guarded behavior will make a difference, but I like that she tries.

I like it too much.

"Don't."

She freezes at my single word, her inquisitive gaze watching me again, imploring, taking every bit of me into her subconscious.

"I'm going home," she announces with a lifted chin. She even sounds confident. I'll give her that.

"No, you're not."

She does a spectacular job of breathing in and out in a regular rhythm. Cecily isn't the type who's prone to dramatics and she always thinks her actions and words through before unleashing them on the world.

Carefully.

Assertively.

Except for where it matters the most—her sexuality. She's still too new to that side of her and too concerned about the outside world.

"What do you want from me, Jeremy?"

"I'll let you know that if you come with me."

"I'm not playing your games anymore."

"Games? Is that what you call what happened between us? A game? I like it, though I prefer calling it a hunt. Tell me, Cecily, did you go on the club's website again? Did you ask to be chased?"

She didn't and even terminated her membership in the club the night after I fucked her like an animal.

A fact that surprised me, considering the 'calling Landon's name' incident. I was so sure she'd throw herself into his arms now that she's had a taste of her kink.

"So what if I did?" She lifts her chin. "I don't see why that's any of your business."

"Do you mean to tell me that you had some random man chase you, strip you, tear through your cunt, and make you scream?"

Despite the night, her face glows a deep shade of red and she rubs the side of her nose once, twice, before she realizes what she's doing and forces her hand down.

"You get so flustered by any talk that's sexual in nature, and you want me to believe you allowed someone else to have you?"

"Whether I do that or not shouldn't concern you." She releases a deep breath, more resigned than frustrated. "Leave me alone, Jeremy. You already got what you wanted."

"Don't act like you didn't enjoy every second of my cock plowing into your tight little cunt. You came from it, twice, and fell apart asking for more." I step toward her and she glues herself to the side of her car. "You're so confident and innocent, but you're not naive, Lisichka. I know what goes on in your head, what you think about when you touch yourself beneath the sheets while hiding from the world. You dream of behind chased." My fingers wrap around her throat and I stroke the thumping pulse point. "You

dream of having your will taken and your body ravaged. You want someone to dirty you the fuck up while you scream and beg and come."

The shiver that skates through her small frame rushes all the way to my cock. *Ah, fuck.* Now I need inside her like I need air.

"S-shut up." Her lips tremble in sync with the rest of her body.

I tighten my grip on her throat. "You'll need to stop lying to yourself or hiding your true nature. I already saw you naked, touched every part of your body, felt your muscles quivering against me, and your cunt milking my cock. I drew your blood and feasted on it. I know your tendencies and what makes you come faster, what gets you on a high, and what turns you on. So do not fucking hide."

She shakes her head back and forth as if convincing herself of what her righteous, politically correct brain is dictating.

"I could've slapped any label on you, but I didn't think you'd be such a coward."

She stops shaking her head and glares at me, that fire igniting in the depths of her green gaze like a wildfire eating a forest.

"Let's go." I release her throat to grab her elbow, but she wrenches it away with a force that causes her to bang it against the car.

"I said, I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You can come with me now or you can do so after I go into that pub and tell your friends how much you love being chased in the dark. How you paid a club membership for it and asked someone to come rape you."

Her face loses all color and she balls her hands into fists on either side of her. "They won't believe you."

"Probably not. They think you're a prude, after all. But it'll create a niggling doubt and what-if questions. Ava might start putting the pieces together, such as when you always wore scarves or when you went home limping and closed yourself up in your room. They'll form theories, and you'll be put under increased pressure the more you deny them. With time, you'll become disgusted with yourself for lying to your best friend. She'll probably be revolted with you and question all the years you've spent together."

"Ava is not like that," she murmurs as if the statement is meant for herself instead of anyone else.

"You don't know that for sure. No matter how open-minded people pretend they are, deep down, they judge you for being different. They kink-

shame you, tag you with labels, and shove you into the lowest category. You'll be nothing more than an animal who's following their instinct. Someone who *asked* for it."

"Shut up." Her voice is barely a whisper, a trembling haunted sound that obviously scares the shit out of her.

Because she knows it to be the truth. It's why she's never shared this part of herself with anyone. She must've learned in her psychology endeavors that society doesn't react well to those who are different.

Society stomps on them, fills them with doubt, and throws them into a ditch where they rot and die.

And Cecily is terrified of that prospect.

A better person would've given her affirmation and attempted to lessen the blow.

But I'm not a good fucking person.

"Your precious Landon will see you as nothing more than a whore. A filthy slut with depraved tastes and several holes ready to be used. He might fuck you like he fucks the other holes, but he'll never like you as much as you like him. You'll be nothing more than a cum bucket."

She lifts her hand and I see the hit coming, but instead of stopping it, I let her slap me across the face.

Tears shine in her eyes despite the scrunching of her nose to keep them at bay and hide her weakness.

"You're a monster," she snarls. "I hate you."

"Your feelings for me have no importance." I turn around. "Follow me or I'll make your worst nightmare a reality."

She doesn't.

At least, at first.

From the corner of my eye, I can see her standing by the car, her whole frame shaking, but by the time I reach where I parked my bike, she beeps her car closed and quickens her steps toward me.

Cecily wipes her tears with the back of her hand and shoots imaginary daggers in my direction.

I pull out the extra helmet and strap it on her head. She starts to push me away so she can do it herself, but I sink my fingers in her arms and force her to let go.

Despite her having the helmet on, I can feel the animosity radiating off her, floating around us and attempting to stab my skin.

I put on my own helmet and straddle my bike. Cecily casts one last glance at the club, probably waiting for her Prince Not-Charming to come out and save her.

“Hop on,” I order not so gently and she jerks, whether it’s at my tone of voice or something else, I don’t know.

She gets on the bike and grabs onto my shoulders. “For the record, I don’t want to go with you.”

“So you keep telling me. You can be persistently repetitive.”

“And I will *keep* telling you. You know, just in case you grow a heart and start respecting people’s wishes.”

“I might if I had any fucks to give.”

I rev the engine and her small frame jerks against my back when I forcibly start forward.

Cecily has no choice but to wrap her frail arm around my waist tightly, holding on for dear life. That, or she’ll fall off.

Whenever I go at a steady pace, she tries to put distance between us, her hold loosening from around me. I go faster every time, hitting the brakes at small intervals, just to have her crash and glue herself to me.

Her perky tits smash against my back and her softer curves mold into my hard muscles. There’s a bizarre type of satisfaction whenever her fingers dig into my abs and she grabs onto me.

Or when her thighs touch mine, quivering, shivering.

Shuddering.

No clue if it’s because of the wind, the vibration of the bike’s engine, or her fear of the unknown, but I revel in every visceral emotion I rip out of her.

Every touch and every frantic thud of her heart.

It might be sadistic, downright demented, but I want to be the reason behind her extreme emotions.

Whether it’s sexual or not.

There’s something about corrupting a good girl, delving beneath her skin and ripping out her deepest, darkest parts.

I want to cut it open with my knife and flounder in its blood.

I want *her* blood.

Calm the fuck down.

I have to remind myself of that constantly whenever Cecily is involved.

After extending the ride for as long as possible, just so I can feel her jump, shake, and squirm, I arrive at the abandoned property I bought about a year after I got to Brighton Island.

Cecily flinches in sync with the creaking of the gate.

“What…” She clears her throat. “Why have you brought me here?”

Her question is eaten by the wild wind and scattered all over the sky. The vibration of her spooked voice hardens my cock in an instant.

Well, fuck.

Looks like she’s not the only one who’s deeply affected by this place.

“Jeremy…”

And I’m harder, just at the sound of my name in her voice.

What the fuck am I? A teenager with no control over his libido? Why would this fucking girl have so much of an effect on me without even trying?

I ignore her as I ride my bike inside. Despite not using any underhanded methods, she’s glued to my back and I can feel her watching our surroundings.

Nothing has changed since the last time she was here. The property is still barely kept, with wild bushes and unwanted grass everywhere.

The night makes it more ominous, distraught, and gives it a high possibility of turning into a hunting site.

I park the bike in front of the old cottage and kill the engine.

Cecily releases me with a jerk as if just realizing she’s been hugging me, but she doesn’t hop down from the bike when I do.

I remove my helmet, hang it on the clutch, and raise a brow. “Are you going to stay there all night?”

She lifts off her own helmet, letting her witch-like hair fly in the wind, stab her eyes, and create a mess against her face. “If need be.”

“You’ll freeze. It’s cold tonight.”

“I’d rather freeze to death than follow you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous and quit the dramatics. They don’t suit you.”

“So now you know what suits me and what doesn’t?”

“For the most part.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Are you going to come down?”

“No.”

We stare at each other for a beat.

Two.

Three.

I stride toward her and she shrieks when I lift her lithe body and effortlessly throw her over my shoulder.

This will be a long fucking night.

And I’ll enjoy every second of it.

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CECILY

What the actual hell?

In the beginning, I'm stunned into silence, completely caught off guard by the sudden change of events. Soon after, everything explodes into focus and I'm assaulted by sensory overload.

My middle easily bends on Jeremy's rock-hard shoulder as he imprisons me in place with a mere arm around my legs.

Blood rushes to my head, both due to the position and the way he's manhandling me.

I ball my hands into fists and bang at his back. "Let me down!"

The more I hit, the farther he marches into the cottage as if I'm banging on a wall and not his physical body.

"Jeremy!" I scream his name, hoping someone will hear and save me from his barbaric clutches.

No one does.

No one will.

Instead of taking me to the Heathens' mansion or a public place, he strategically chose this secluded gothic cottage where no one will be able to stop him.

Like two weeks ago, it's just me, him, and the creepy night animals outside.

Unlike back then, however, I didn't come of my own accord. He forced me and threatened to expose me in front of everyone I care about.

He twisted my arm and crossed a line that should never be crossed.

The moment I start to forget his monstrous nature, his devil peeks out his head, ready to destroy every normal thought I had about him.

Jeremy hits the light switch on the way inside the cottage's living room. His measured steps fall with a thudding sound on the wood flooring.

With every move, every breath, and every squeeze of his large, powerful hand on my thighs, he's engraving his presence deep in my chest.

It's like I'm being carried by a giant.

He oozes masculinity, whether it's his height, enormous build, harsh features, or skin-chilling scent.

He's toxic masculinity, though.

When he reaches the middle of the room, he places me on my feet with a softness that startles me. I don't know why I expected him to throw me on the nearest object just to prove a point.

I take a few steps back, scanning the space for an escape. Aside from the front door, there's the stairs and another door that leads to the kitchen.

I know because I actually took a tour of the cottage the last time he abandoned me here. But I was foolishly trying to find him, not explore.

"Don't."

There's that word again, a little bit low and very much commanding. It's like he's reading my mind without me needing to express my thoughts.

"I'm not doing anything."

He slides his finger on his jeans, up and down, like a fucked-up lullaby. "But you're thinking of escaping, which is both impossible and futile. The moment you run, I will chase you, Cecily. I don't have to tell you what I'll do if—*when*—I catch you, do I?"

I purse my lips, hating how images and sounds from the last time slaughter my consciousness.

Slapping, moaning, groaning, sucking, gasping, whimpering.

Falling.

I dig my nails in my palm to put a halt to those erotic memories and glare at him.

"Just because I let you do it once doesn't mean I'll allow it again." Screw him if he thinks I'll give him that power over me when he's prone to not only stomp on it, but also falsify, vilify, and threaten me with it.

He eats the distance between us in two large steps and it takes everything in me not to push back and show him exactly how much he intimidates me.

Because he does. Frighteningly so.

And it's not only because of his huge physique or how brutal he can get, it's that emotionless look in his cloudy eyes—the undeniable proof that he couldn't care less if he trampled all over me and left me for parts.

That, after he's done tormenting me, he'll grow bored and move on to his next victim.

Jeremy stares down his nose at me as if I'm nothing more than a nuisance in his path of criminal greatness. "You say that as if you can stop me. If I want to, I can squash you as if you never existed. So don't make me choose that option. Be smart, pick your battles, and quit the infuriating habit of going for my throat for the fun of it."

The apathy behind his words shoots a chill down my spine. He means it, doesn't he? It's not just a flex of power. This man is capable of robbing my humanity and leaving me for dead.

"So I don't have a choice in this? Whatever *this* is?"

"Of course you do." He cocks his head toward the door. "You can always leave."

"I can?"

"As long as you remember the consequences of running."

"How the hell is that a choice? If I stay, I'm doomed, and if I leave, I'm also doomed."

"You'll have to trust your instinct to make the better choice. Here's a tip, don't use emotions." He heads in the direction of the kitchen and doesn't turn around when he says, "Follow me."

The moment he disappears inside, I peek at the front door, so tempted to sprint outside.

But where would I go? And for how long can I run before he eventually finds me?

I have no doubt that he'll keep his word about what he'll do if he catches me. The first time was different because I actually wanted it, but I won't be able to handle an actual burst of violence.

My old wounds are barely stitched beneath the surface and if I undergo a similar episode, I'll go insane.

With a sigh, I trudge to the kitchen, stop at the threshold to get myself together—something I have to do often in this wanker's presence—then step inside.

Like the rest of the property, the kitchen gives a gothic vibe similar to Dracula tales and paranormal activities.

The wood is chipped in places, probably not having been maintained for years. There are two built-in banquettes with an old-looking table in between. They face the window and a glass door that leads to the patio outside.

The opposite side of the kitchen area isn't any better. The bar-style counter looks greasy, the stainless-steel equipment is gathering dust, and the fridge might as well be out of a nineties film.

Jeremy fetches some canned tuna from the overhead cupboard and dumps it in a frying pan on a surprisingly functional stove.

I remain in place, refusing to take another step forward as long as I don't have to.

Jeremy adds some eggs and vegetables from the fridge and mixes them up with expert moves.

It's kind of weird to see him do mundane things such as cooking. He looks like the type who was served his entire life and wouldn't know what a kitchen looks like from the inside.

"Instead of watching like a creep, how about you set the table?"

I flinch at the sudden flow of his voice. There's something about it, a depth or a gruff inflection that gets me every time. Even when he's being casual. Jeremy has the type of voice that's made to command, a voice I imagine generals and warlords had in ancient times.

After gathering my bearings, I cross my arms. "That's funny. I thought you were the creep."

"I'm open to sharing." He glances at me over his shoulder. "The word creep, not something else. Can you help out?"

"And if I don't want to?" I ask slowly.

"Remember the part about picking your battles? This is a perfect example. Don't provoke me for trivial reasons or you'll be the one who suffers the fallout."

I'm so tempted to grab the nearest object and throw it at his head, but he's right. I'll only make the situation harder on myself if he decides to put on his arsehole hat.

With a sigh, I head to the cupboard and start searching for utensils and dishes. It takes me more time than if I'd asked him about their whereabouts,

but screw that. I'd rather waste time than talk to him. It's my form of rebellion.

As if seeing straight through my plan, Jeremy doesn't offer to help and continues with his cooking.

By the time I find two plates—one chipped on the edge—two glasses, and utensils, I feel somewhat victorious.

It takes me longer to clean the surface of the table with some detergent I find. I only loosen up when it's not so greasy anymore. Just to make sure, I scrub the pesky marks on the corners.

On and on, I rub on those spots, refusing to admit defeat.

"Do you have a cleaning OCD?"

I flinch at the sound near my back. I'd be lying if I said that I forgot he was there, but I thought he was still at the stove and I had a bit more time to try to forget his presence.

"It's…greasy." I let out in a breath as he places the pan on the surface. "How can you even eat in a place like this? It's a hygiene hazard."

He flings open one of the cupboards and retrieves a bottle of vodka. I eye the thing so hard, I'm surprised it doesn't shatter into pieces.

Whenever I see that drink, I recall that time at the restaurant, his punishing touch, his pliant lips, the commanding way he held me on his lap.

It's strange how Jeremy can show different sides depending on the situation. He can be weirdly caring like in that club or after he carried me to the cottage, but he can also transform into a beast in a fraction of a second.

"It's not that bad." He slides onto the sofa.

"It's a disaster." I take the spot opposite him and stare at the ominous lake through the dirty window and glass door. "What is this place, anyway?"

He scoops what looks like a weird omelet onto my plate—the non-chipped one. "Let's call it a vacation house."

"More like a horror house."

He lifts a shoulder. "Name it whatever you want."

I wipe the glass with a paper napkin, and after I make sure it's all clean, I pour some water into it. "How did you access it?"

"I bought it."

"Really?"

"It was on the market for a bargain price, and I needed a place of my own outside of the mansion, so I bought this one."

“You couldn’t buy a flat or something? Surely your family could afford it.”

“Flats are boring. I prefer open space.”

“With a haunted aura, creepy night creatures, and a gothic vibe.”

“Where else will I be able to hunt you?” He smirks from the rim of his glass and I want to poke his eyes out.

“Can we not talk about that?”

“Why not?”

“Seriously, stop answering my questions with other questions.”

“Why would I?”

Ugh. This prick.

He tilts his head in my untouched dish’s direction. “Eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You didn’t eat all night long, so you must be.”

“How do you know that…? Wait a minute, were you watching me again?”

He cuts through his food, and even though he doesn’t answer me, I’m sure he was.

Does that mean the small bursts of apprehension I had throughout the week were real? But that’s impossible. He couldn’t have been there since he was recuperating from what happened in the fire.

I know because Anni told me.

A part of me is relieved that he’s safe. I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself if he’d suffered the fallout from that fire.

I still hate his ways, though.

“Stalking is a crime, you know.”

“Only if it’s proved.”

“What?”

“A stalker only becomes a criminal when he’s caught. Besides, I prefer to call it *inquiring*.” He cocks his head in my direction. “Eat. If I ask a third time, it won’t be with words.”

I clench my fingers around the utensils and glare at him. “How do I know it’s not poisoned?”

“I’m a direct person. If I wanted to kill you, it would be via more brutal methods than poison.”

My mouth falls open. I’ve always known Jeremy belongs to a criminal organization, but this is the first time I’ve had full comprehension of that.

“What if you drug me to have your way with me?”

He glides his forefinger across the rim of his glass, back and forth, in a cryptic rhythm, as if attempting to hypnotize me.

“It’s more fun when you’re awake. How else will I hear you moaning, gasping, and most importantly, *screaming*?”

I should be sick to my stomach, and I am, but at the same time, I’m caught in a trance by the subtle change in his tone and expression when he says the last word. By the way his voice deepens and a familiar spark flashes in his usually cold eyes.

It’s the same expression he wore when he pinned me down on the deck until I had nowhere else to go.

Instead of getting trapped in it all over again, I lower my head and cut a small piece of the omelet thingy and throw it in my mouth, fully intent on swallowing without tasting.

But I do taste it and I pause, then take another bite and chew it slowly this time.

Despite the normal ingredients and the canned tuna, there’s something special about it that I can’t put my finger on.

Maybe it is drugs, after all.

So I take another bite and another. Just to make sure.

“You like it?”

I lift my head to find Jeremy swirling the contents of his glass and watching me intently, his plate barely touched.

My ears heat when I realize I’ve almost finished mine.

“It’s not bad,” I say all businesslike, trying to downplay my embarrassment.

Jeremy’s lips twitch and he pushes his plate in my direction. “You can have this, too.”

“I’m not that hungry.”

He doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t take back his plate either. He plants his elbow on the table, leans his chin against his fist, and continues watching me from the rim of his cup.

The way he looks at me is unnerving. It’s like he wants to devour me instead of the food and then break me. Or maybe both at the same time.

So I focus on the omelet, trying and failing to figure out the special ingredient. Is it spices?

I choke in my haste and Jeremy slides a glass of water in my direction.

Only when I drink half of it and I'm assaulted by the burn do I realize it's not water.

I cough, spluttering and hitting my chest as the burn settles there. "Why…why the hell would you give me pure vodka?"

He lifts a shoulder. "You were choking."

"Water is fine."

"Alcohol is better. You don't drink much, why?"

"I'm not even going to ask how you know that. I just…don't like losing my inhibitions."

"I assume it has to do with drugging being a hard limit?"

I purse my lips, but apparently, that's all the answer he needs, because he nods all-knowingly. This man is annoyingly observant and when I'm around him, I constantly have this feeling of being under a microscope.

He retrieves his glass and makes a show of drinking right from where my lip marks are.

Usually, that would make me squeamish, but right now, all I can do is stop and stare.

I clear my throat, more to disperse my attention than anything. "What happens after we eat?"

"We're still eating."

"I know. I'm asking about what comes after."

"You need to learn how to live in the moment sometimes. Being too future-oriented will only lead you to the grave."

"Thanks for the unsolicited advice."

"You're welcome."

"That was sarcasm."

"I know. Doesn't suit you, but I digress."

I eat a mouthful of food and stare at him. "Why do you think you're an expert on what suits me and what doesn't?"

"I wouldn't call myself an expert, but I notice telltale signs and patterns. It's what I do best."

"Because you're in the mafia?"

"Because I had to in order to predict the behavior of someone."

"Someone?"

He raises a brow. "Aren't you full of questions today? If I didn't know better, I'd say you're interested in me."

“As if.” I push the empty plate away. “I just want to know who I’m dealing with.”

“You know, you don’t have to make this unpleasant, Cecily. You and I are compatible and share a very specific kink. I can make you feel alive and desired in ways no one else is capable of. I can take away the burden of being socially accepted. It’s all in the palm of your hand if you quit being standoffish and stop fighting me every step of the way.”

“We’re not compatible, Jeremy.”

“How so?”

“You think of me as your toy, someone you can dish out orders to and expect to fall in line, and I just refuse to be that way. You don’t even give me a fair chance to make my own choices.”

“I gave you that and you chose wrong.” His voice darkens to a frightening edge.

“What? When?”

He doesn’t answer, as usual, and I’m left with the worst case of bemusement.

Ever since I became acquainted with Jeremy, he’s never given me a choice. Not even once.

So how the hell can he say I chose wrong?

He stands up with the lethargy of a big black cat and I push back against the banquette.

There’s been a shift in the air. I’m not sure why, but it’s there, and it’s rippling with suffocating tension.

“Are you done eating?”

“Why?” My voice is barely a murmur, despite how much of a pep talk I internally give myself.

“Didn’t you ask what we’ll do after we eat? The answer is a game.”

“What type of game?”

“My favorite. Russian roulette.”

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CECILY

"Did you just say Russian roulette?"

"If you know the game, it doesn't need any introduction." A cruel smirk lifts the corner of Jeremy's lips as he marches to a side cupboard and retrieves a small metal suitcase.

Like the ones you see in action films.

He slides it on the table between us and opens it, pulling out a revolver.

Not a toy gun, not a prop, but a real one.

His long fingers slide around the metal with expert ease as he rolls the rotating cylinder open and dumps all the bullets on the table.

They scatter and bounce in a haunting sound that strikes straight through to my bones.

For a moment, I wish this was one of those nightmares where my subconscious has a field day with bringing all my fears and weaknesses to the surface.

I wish the scene in front of me was nothing more than a cruel joke.

But the more I blink, the realer it gets.

Jeremy actually has a gun and he said he's going to play a game with it.

Russian roulette.

"Please tell me you're joking," I whisper, my heart thundering so hard in my chest, I'm surprised I don't faint.

He doesn't spare me a glance, continuing his task, erasing me from his immediate surroundings.

"Jeremy!" My voice quakes and chokes.

Finally, he slides his intense gaze to me, and it's…dead.

Gone is the person who made me food and even smiled while talking earlier. A demon has taken his place and transformed him into a soulless monster, who's hungry for flesh.

My flesh.

"What do you think you're doing?" I try and fail to control the quivering in my voice.

"I told you. Russian roulette." He pushes a bullet into one of the gruesome holes of the rotating cylinder and slams it shut, then rolls it with a blurry speed. "But let's make it truth time. We'll ask two questions each and when the other answers, he has to shoot. It might be the last thing we say, so lying is prohibited. There are five empty shots and we'll play four rounds. You go first."

I shake my head frantically and jump up. I'm not staying here or taking part in this madness.

His earlier threat about what he'll do if I run away pales in comparison to actually shooting ourselves.

I'm one step away when a strong arm wraps around my wrist and I'm tugged back with a force that knocks the breath out of my lungs.

He forces me down onto something hard. His lap. To keep me in place, he wraps an arm around my middle, forbidding me from moving an inch.

A deep sense of terror grips hold of me and I push at his arm, scratching, clawing, hitting.

I pour all my energy in the struggle, but I might as well be remaining still. Not only does he not budge, but his grip has tightened until I can barely breathe.

"Are you done?" His hot breath draws shivers against the skin of my ear.

I cast a glance at him behind me, at his chiseled face and handsome features. At the beautiful creature who might as well be cut from the darkness.

"Don't do this, please," I say more calmly, holding on to my rationality by a thread. "I…don't want to die."

"Neither do I."

"How is this different from committing suicide?"

"It's not about dying. It's about the truth." He hands me the gun. "You have more chances of survival if you go first. I'll ask the question."

"I'll answer any questions you have. Just not like this."

“Why do you periodically go into a catatonic state?”

A jolt zips through me and I stare at him, dumbfounded. How does he know that when I’ve managed to hide it so well?

Even the closest people to me think I’m prone to zone out, but they wouldn’t name it as specifically as he does.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My voice is barely above a murmur. Low and haunted.

Jeremy snatches my hand that’s balling into a fist and splays it out on the gun. I try to resist, to fight, but I’m no match for his strength.

His larger palm engulfs mine and he forces my finger to press on the trigger. He then lifts it to my temple with chilling calm until the cold muzzle is glued to my skin.

“Don’t do this.” My words tremble in sync with my insides. “I don’t want to die.”

When he speaks, it’s as if a demon has possessed him. His voice is monotone, cruel, and absolutely frightening. “Answer the question or you’ll have to take two in a row.”

I shake my head, my vision becoming blurry, and it’s then I realize my eyes are filled with tears. I can feel the air being forced out of my lungs and how the gun gains more weight with every passing second.

“If you’re calling my bluff…” He exerts force on my trigger finger.

“Wait, wait!” I blurt, the high of emotions wrecking through me like a hurricane. “It…it started during the last year of secondary school.”

“I didn’t ask you when it started, I asked why.”

I purse my lips. “Mental stress.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. What’s the reason behind the mental stress, Cecily? What drives a confident girl like you to the point of dissociating from the world?”

I can feel my carefully built armor cracking, disintegrating, and scattering around me in bloody pieces, but I still hold on to the illusion that I can hide this part of me. “Does there need to be a reason?”

“There’s always a reason for choosing to escape inside your mind.” His voice hardens. “Why do you shut out the world and people who care about you to entertain your demons?”

My spine jerks, more at his tone and stiffening posture than what he’s demanding of me.

A crazy thought forms in my head. Could he be interested in this because he encountered something similar?

Or am I imagining things?

“Answer the question, Cecily. Properly this time.”

The nonnegotiable quality of his voice mixes with his firm grip on my finger.

If I die, then he killed me.

The fact that this might be the last moments I have, that in a few seconds, he might blow my head off, gives me the courage and openness I’ve never experienced before.

Not even when I’m drunk.

The words tumble out of me in broken sentences, “My…my secondary school boyfriend…uh…he tried to have sex with me, but I always told him I wasn’t ready, and he was mad about it so he…drugged me and stripped me. I was frozen on the bed as he turned my body left and right. I was screaming in my head, but no sound came out. I was calling for help, but no one heard me. All I could do was watch as he removed every piece of my clothing. I couldn’t stop him, couldn’t fight, couldn’t do anything as I lay there and smelled his putrid cologne and cigarettes. He tried to rape me, but the moment he put his thing in my mouth, I vomited all over him. He called me disgusting and left, but not before taking pictures and videos of me in compromising positions. He said…he said if I told anyone or reported him, he’d release all the material he had on porn sites.” I choke on my words. “I couldn’t… I couldn’t even tell my own parents. I was so scared and wanted to confide in them so badly, but that would have meant that Papa would see his little girl all drugged and stripped and think he couldn’t protect me. Mum would feel so bad, too, and hurting them would’ve killed me. So I preferred to keep it a secret. But I think—*no*—I’m sure I overestimated my ability to get past the traumatic experience. Ever since then, I go into these phases where I’m helpless, unable to scream or move or ask for help. Just like then.”

Silence falls in the room except for my harsh breathing and the involuntary sniffles that accompany my tears.

I try to stop them, but I can’t.

I can’t help the breakdown that storms through me and destroys everything in its path.

My heart hurts and everything in me aches with a force that I can’t contain. And the sole witness of my pathetic, vulnerable state is none other than Jeremy.

The devil Jeremy who forced me to tell him about a part of me I’ve kept buried for so long.

The monster Jeremy who has no heart to feel what I’m voicing for the first time since it happened about two years ago.

But maybe this is better. If I’d told this to Papa, Mum, Ava, or the others, they would’ve been devastated. They would’ve blamed themselves and blamed me for keeping it hidden. Emotions would’ve been at an all-time high and it would’ve broken me.

But Jeremy is an emotionless vault. A heartless man who only serves his own agenda.

He won’t pity me.

He won’t judge me.

He just listened, and for some reason, that’s comforting in a bizarre way.

His grip remains firm on the trigger and his body language doesn’t change.

But then he pushes my finger.

Click.

My sobs echo around us as the rush of life surges through me with a ferocity I’ve never felt before.

I could’ve died just now, but I didn’t.

It’s like I’ve been reborn.

Calmly, almost methodically, Jeremy pulls the gun from between my clammy, numb fingers and places it against his temple. “Your turn.”

“Stop, please.” I barely see him through my blurry eyes.

“Don’t you want to see if I survive or blow my head off? If it’s the second option, you don’t have to worry. It’ll be ruled a suicide.”

I whirl around and fist both hands on his jacket. “You might be content with this game, but I’m not. I don’t want to watch you die.”

“Is that worry I hear in your tone, Lisichka?”

“It’s common sense! Who in their right mind would play a death game?”

“Me. So either ask the question, or I will.” He starts to remove the gun.

I have no doubt that he’ll keep his word.

Jeremy is no different than an unmovable mountain. A merciless apex predator.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I blurt, my voice hoarse and my nose clogged from all the crying.

“Because your darkness calls to mine. I want to unleash that repressed part of you and toy with it, with you, like when I smeared your innocence all over my cock. I want to own you, Cecily, every part of you, what you show and what you hide beneath self-imposed shackles. I won’t stop until you’re fully, thoroughly, and undeniably mine.”

I shudder at each of his calmly spoken words, at the assertiveness behind them, the determination coating them.

And for the first time since I stumbled into Jeremy’s path, I realize just how screwed I am.

Because this man won’t stop. No matter how far I run or how well I hide, he’ll flip the world upside down just to find me.

He doesn’t want me for me. He wants me due to his fixation on me or whatever image he’s created of me in his twisted head.

So when he pulls the trigger, a sane person should wish for his death. As he said, it’ll be ruled a suicide and I’ll get rid of him.

But I find myself holding my breath, trembling and pining for the thud of his heartbeat beneath my fingers.

The evidence that he’s alive.

That he’ll keep his promise and strip off my every self-imposed shackle.

In a last-ditch attempt, I reach for the gun and I gasp when he pulls the trigger. I slam my eyes shut, not wanting to see the bloodbath that could explode on his face.

A click sounds in the air and a long breath whooshes out of me.

His heartbeat doesn’t thud beneath my fingers, doesn’t spike—it remains the same. Alive but completely unaffected by the near-death experience.

That rush of life from earlier buzzes to the surface again, hooking against my bones and leaving me breathless.

I slowly open my eyes to find him watching me in that intense way that knots my insides.

“Your turn.” He hands me the gun.

I want to scream.

I want to hit him with it upside the head.

But instead of doing that, I grab it with unsteady fingers and then throw it with all my might at the window.

The shattering of glass nearly deafens me. Soon after, the gun falls to the wood porch outside with a thud.

My chest rises and falls so heavily, I can't contain it, or the tears that are still staining my cheeks or the way I look at Jeremy.

It's new, slightly spooked, slightly apprehensive, but it couldn't be any more true. Real. Powerful.

He's a force to be reckoned with and I'm right in his path. I finally accept that, even if I'll never accept the reason why he's so obsessed with me.

Or more like, I don't understand it.

He offers no explanation or excuses so that I can see his point of view.

As he stares in the direction of the shattered window, I slip out of his hold, all but jumping back like a scared kitten.

I overestimate my ability to remain standing. My legs are like Jell-O from all the adrenaline and I have to grip the table for balance.

Jeremy pushes up to a standing position, and a ripple of fear rushes through me and locks my limbs. No matter how courageous I try to be, this man is still the most intimidating force of nature I've ever encountered.

Especially when his features are closed off and he's risen to his full height.

"Are you going to run, Cecily?"

I bob my head up and down.

A sadistic gleam illuminates his usually dark eyes. "You sure about that? I won't take it easy on you."

"When have you ever?"

"True that." He steps toward me and I take several back as his voice lowers, deepens, and crowds with tension. "I won't give you a head start."

Not thinking about the consequences of my choice, I run. All I know is that this option is better than a game of death.

The adrenaline from earlier rushes through my limbs and I climb the stairs that lead to the first floor. At first, I don't hear him, and I think maybe I'm faster due to the superhuman energy that I gained tonight.

But then a thud of steps follows after me and I shriek when I feel his overwhelming presence behind me. I grab a fake plant and throw it at him.

But he dodges it and the pot crashes to the floor.

Blimey!

If I stay in the house, I'm going to get myself trapped. In a snap decision, I slip from between the stairs' wide railings and jump.

My legs take a hit, but it barely hurts under the circumstances. I roll down on the ground, then leap to my feet and sprint without looking back.

I pause at the threshold of the kitchen door, casting a glance at where I threw the gun.

Only, it's not there.

I don't hear any footsteps or sounds.

The next second, a fistful of my hair is grabbed from behind. I shriek, clutching his hand to stop him from tearing at my scalp.

"Caught you." His hotly murmured words drive me into a state of madness.

I claw at his skin, kick, and bite. Or try to. Most of my attempts end up an epic failure.

He's a beast who's come out to play and I'm his prey of choice.

He shoves me against the porch railing, pressing my stomach into the wood.

My hair nearly rips out from the savage hold he has on me and I can feel him bending down behind me.

From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of him grabbing a shard of glass. Before I can panic, he releases my hair, grasps a fistful of my jeans, and cuts them from behind.

Crimson red explodes on his palm from the glass and drips all over my thighs—warm, dark red, and absolutely fucked up.

But he doesn't seem to care about that as he shreds my shirt, bra, and underwear so that I'm standing there completely naked.

Then he spins me around to face him and switches the red piece of glass from his injured palm to the other one.

I watch in stunned shock as he slides his bloodied fingers from my hip to my stomach, my breasts, coating them in red before he wraps them around my throat.

My eyes bulge even though he's not exerting force. "W-what…"

"Shh." He runs the shard of glass over the tip of my nipple. "Are you scared?"

I nod. Scared is an epic understatement. This man is crazy. The calm type of crazy, which is the most dangerous type.

“Good. I love how your cunt feels when you’re scared. It tightens and swallows my cock like my favorite slut, but first…” He releases my throat and reaches in his waistband, then pulls out his gun. The same gun I threw away earlier. “We’re not done.”

He slides it in his mouth, licks it, and I gasp when he glides it between my inner thighs, over my folds, and then drives it inside my pussy.

I’m soaking wet from the chase, from how he savagely caught me and shred my clothes off me, but I’m not ready for a gun inside me.

The metal feels cold as it’s swallowed by my walls, but then he thrusts it in, and I get on my tiptoes.

A carnal sensation grips hold of me the more he rams the weapon inside me. My skin tightens, my thighs clench, and my nipples pucker and stiffen.

I’m being fucked by a gun.

Holy. Shit.

Does he really want to kill me?

And why am I getting wetter and slicker?

I can’t stop staring at his punishing eyes, at the sheer power they exude without him having to say a word.

It’s like I’m caught in a trance no one can save me from.

“You pretend to be all righteous and morally superior, but you’re nothing but a greedy little whore.” He slides the gun inside. “Is this how you’ll milk my cock, too? It’s bigger, but you’ll fit me, won’t you? You’ll swallow and take every inch of me.”

A whimper rips out of my throat.

It’s weird how I never liked anything sex-related before, but I’m enjoying how he blows my world to pieces in the most unconventional ways. How he speaks to me in that crude manner.

The man has a gun inside me and a shard of glass to my nipple that he turned red with his blood, and I can’t stop wanting him.

“Say my name,” he orders, the command nonnegotiable.

“Jeremy,” I moan, ready to tell him anything right now.

“Say you wanted me that first time, not some other fucker, *me*.”

The words get stuck at the back of my throat. I’m not sure I can admit that part. I can’t even admit it to myself after all this time.

Jeremy’s expression darkens. “So while I chased you, feasted on your blood, and fucked you to oblivion, he was the one you were thinking about?”

Who's he?

I still shake my head, because I don't like the way his lashes fall over his eyes, shuttering over his expression and sealing him away.

A click sounds in the air. From the gun. He pulled the trigger.

Holy hell.

I'm not sure how it happens or why, but a strong wave washes over me. It's life, I realize, that rush of breaths after believing I could've died.

Jeremy throws the shard of glass aside, unbuttons his jeans, and fists his hard, pulsating cock.

"My turn." He wrenches the gun from inside me and slides it in his mouth.

The same gun that's all messed up with my arousal is now between his lips as he licks it clean. Then, the crazy bastard places it against his temple.

"Beg me to fuck you."

A whole-body shiver goes through me. "If I do, will you stop playing with the gun?"

"I wasn't asking, Cecily, and this isn't a fucking negotiation. Beg me to ram my cock inside you and fuck you like you want—rough and out of control."

I can't stop staring at the gun shoved up against his head. There's a fifty percent chance that he's going to get himself killed.

That might seem like a good percentage, but it's not. Far from it. One can be lucky for only so long before he vanishes, just like that.

"Please," I murmur.

He jerks himself up and down in a brutal rhythm that makes my mouth dry. "Please what?"

"Please take me."

"It's fuck, not take. Say it properly."

I bite my lower lip. "Please fuck me."

The word is barely out when he digs his fingers into the flesh of my outer thigh, lifts my leg, and drives inside me.

My whole body convulses as I fall into his chest, my heart pounding while his remains the same—eternal, unaffected, absolutely cold.

It's been some time since he was inside me, and I feel his size with every motion and every thrust.

"You're mine, not anyone else's, fucking *mine*. Now, beg and say my name."

“Please, Jeremy, please.”

He drives into me in a brutal rhythm that triggers the primal part of me. Unable to stand on one leg, I grip his shoulder for balance.

The position, the fact that I’m entirely naked, covered with blood, and he’s fully clothed is a clear translation of the power imbalance between us. Of how much he owns a hidden part of me.

The part that’s yearning to let go and let him ravage me until there’s nothing left.

The part that’s been hoping, pining, and being absolutely ashamed of this side of myself.

There’s no shame when I’m in Jeremy’s arms. He doesn’t judge me. He wants me to own that part of me.

And most importantly, he fucks me like he craves me, like he can’t keep his hands off me.

Like if he stops fucking me, he won’t be the same.

I hold on to those emotions as I beg and call his name. The more I beg to be fucked, the harder he goes, the deeper he delves, the crazier he becomes.

He bites my neck, my breasts, my earlobe—anywhere his teeth can reach.

It’s a claim, a territorial declaration of ownership, and I have to bear his marks.

With each thrust, he hits my G-spot, once, twice, until I’m unable to stand.

The stimulation builds inside me and then explodes all at once. I hug his shoulder as the orgasm racks through me with stupefying strength.

“Ask me a question.” His voice barely reaches my hazy brain.

Only when I open my eyes do I realize that he still has the gun to his temple. The twisted pleasure comes to a slow halt.

“Jeremy, please stop.”

He drives into me, ruthlessly, not looking close to being done. “Ask. Me.”

“What do you want?” I whisper, quivering against him.

His thrusts grow in intensity and length. Jeremy is a sight to behold when he’s orgasming. His muscles stiffen and harden beneath my fingers, and he slightly bites the corner of his lip. But most importantly, his grip on me tightens like he refuses to ever let me go as warmth spills inside me.

“*You*,” he says, then pulls the trigger.
I scream.

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JEREMY

Cecily stands unmoving under the shower.

Water cascades down her neck, over the slope of her creamy tits, and down her swollen, pink pussy.

My blood and cum swirl into the drain and disappear.

I lean against the counter, facing the glass shower, legs crossed at the ankles and my hands gripping the sink behind me. It's a hopeless attempt to stop myself from lunging in her direction and messing her all up with my blood and cum again.

Dirty her.

Mark her.

My cock jumps, straining against my jeans at the thought of ramming into her tight heat, throwing her up against the nearest surface, and pinning her down.

I'd chase, catch, and fuck her until she's crying.

No—sobbing. She begged me to fuck her, but she still cried and whimpered.

Whether she did it because it was too much or something else, I'm not sure.

There are a lot of things I can't pinpoint when it comes to Cecily Knight.

Such as why I'm watching her take a shower, and why the fuck it's taking superhuman effort to not join her. All while trying to figure how to get rid of the shell-shocked expression on her face.

It’s been there ever since I carried her into the house and planted her beneath the shower.

The moment I pulled the trigger against my temple, she cried the hardest. It was no different than witnessing a breakdown. A person’s disintegration into another universe.

But the tears have come to a halt and she’s crossing into different territory.

Fucking decimation.

She’s not fully into the catatonic state, but if I leave her alone, she’ll definitely reach that point.

“Cecily,” I call with a calm I don’t feel.

She flinches, and I can see the life rushing back to her bright green eyes before she whips her head in my direction. “Huh?”

It takes all my control not to study every nook in her body, every cavity, and every slope. I can still feel her flesh trembling against mine when I fucked her like an animal earlier.

And the time before that.

I’m reduced to my primal instinct when this woman is around and I don’t like that.

Not one bit.

She’s waiting for me to speak, her expression sober, but there’s still the probability of her slipping into an unreachable state.

I crane my chin and point it behind her. “Use shower gel.”

A delicate frown appears between her brows, and I’m almost sure she’ll choose to be difficult just to piss me off, but she reaches behind her for a shower sponge and pours the gel all over it.

She lowers her head as she lathers her shoulders, armpits, and breasts.

“Eyes on me.” My voice roughens despite my attempts to remain unaffected.

And when those mystic eyes fixate on me? Fuck. I honestly wonder why I’m not in there taking over the task.

But then I recall that I need her to be conscious of her actions. If I do it for her, it’ll be easier to dissociate.

A blush covers her cheeks, neck, and even her ears as she hastily runs the sponge over her stomach and thighs.

Cecily might pretend that she’s not affected by me, might deny the palpable attraction between us and say that she wants nothing of what I’m

offering, but her body doesn’t lie.

Her nipples have become harder since her eyes met mine, to the point that she winces whenever she touches them.

A soft shade of pink covers her pale flesh and she’s clenching her legs.

“Clean your pussy, too.”

Her throat works with a swallow. “Can I get some privacy?”

“No.”

A slow but steady fire lights up her expression. “I’m uncomfortable.”

“And I don’t give a fuck.”

The sound of her heavy breathing echoes in the air as she opens her thighs and scrubs her cunt not so gently.

Unease and anger mean she’s here and won’t be lured to whatever alternate reality her brain leads her to.

She finishes in record time, her movements jerky and fueled with her clear disdain.

I’m starting to learn that Cecily’s body language is able to express her feelings better than her words.

It’s not that she’s lacking in the verbal department. She’s intelligent, with a brain that can contain different interests and subjects without failing any. But she has an awful relationship with the sensory world.

She’s the type who trips over a rock due to being too caught up in her head.

As a result, when push comes to shove, she can’t find the right words to express what’s inside her. At least, when it comes to herself. She’s more eloquent when she has to turn on the mama bear mode and protect her friends—my sister included.

Cecily is selfless to an annoying degree and I’m contemplating a way to erase those habits.

Once she’s finished, she turns off the water and slips out of the shower. I push off the counter, my fingers aching from how hard I gripped the surface.

There should be a reward for the effort I spent to back off. Too bad my cock only accepts her pussy as compensation.

Cecily jerks to a halt the moment I move, her expression no different than an injured animal’s. A prisoner who hasn’t seen light in decades.

I grab a clean towel from the shelves and open it, holding it out, soundlessly telling her to walk toward me.

She does, her steps as light as a feather and as quiet as a kitten. Her body is physical perfection, all creamy, lithe, and small. Especially after I marked it with red bites and hickeys all over her neck, breasts, and thighs.

She's custom-made for me.

Her silver hair drips all over the tile until she reaches me. And then she attempts to snatch the towel. "I can do it myself."

I hold it out of reach. "Get in here."

She glares up at me, lips pursing, but she probably figures out this isn't a battle worth fighting, so she steps into the towel, so her back faces me.

I wrap it around her, wiping the water away, and accidentally—or not so accidentally—pause on her nipples, waist, pussy, and ass.

Cecily jerks with each brush of my hand against her skin. Due to her poor relationship with her sensory world, she's sensitive to every external stimulus.

Just to fuck with her, I brush my thumb against her nipple when I finally tie the towel around her.

She grabs the cloth in a tight fist even as her ears grow red. I retrieve another towel and dump it on her hair, then take my time drying it.

Usually, her scent is that of delicate water lilies, but right now, she smells of me.

Not sure which one I like the best.

My fingers slide through her hair, giving every silver strand the same attention. Gliding, caressing, and curling against her skull, then down her nape and bare shoulders.

The longer I touch her, the redder her ears become, and she flinches every time I do something new.

"Why did you choose this color for your hair?"

"Why are you asking?" Her soft voice carries in the space and ends up beneath my skin.

"It's an unusual color to dye one's hair to. Commonly, people would try to hide gray hair, no?"

"I guess. Not me, though."

"Why not?"

"You'll think it's stupid."

"Try me." *And since when does she care about my opinion?*

"White-haired characters are usually my favorites in mangas and anime. They have this intelligent, wise, and reserved aura that I always loved, so I

went for it. Not going to lie, it’s a pain to maintain, but it’s worth it.”

“So you love characters like yourself?”

“I’m not intelligent and wise. Reserved, maybe.”

“You’re the smartest and wisest person I know. Except for when you’re being a pain in the ass.”

Red splashes her cheeks as silence pulses between us, heavy with our wild breathing. Neither of us breaks it for long minutes as I continue my task.

“Are you done?” she murmurs in a voice that I’m sure wasn’t supposed to come out so low, erotic, and with every attention of stroking my cock to life.

When I don’t answer, she glances at me. “I think it’s all dry.”

“Not yet.” I grab her chin and turn her attention forward so I can focus.

I go on until I feel her bubbling with that antagonistic energy. Only when I feel she’s about to act on it do I release her.

I throw the towel in the sink. “Follow me.”

She exhales an exasperated breath but marches behind me. “What’s with you and ordering me around?”

“How else will you do as I tell you?” I step to the living room that’s illuminated by the fire’s orange hue. After I carried her to the shower earlier, I lit the fireplace to warm the room.

Cecily observes her surroundings as if it’s the first time she’s been here, her feet padding along the wood floor. “I’d rather not be ordered around.”

“And I’d rather you do as I say.”

That glare, the one full of life and attitude, comes back, but it slowly disappears as she composes herself. “Can you give me some clothes? I want to go home.”

“Not yet.”

“What else do you want?” Despite her attempts to sound cool, her voice shakes at the end.

“It’s early.”

She points at the grandfather clock above the fireplace. “It’s midnight.”

“Which means early.”

“I have classes in the morning.”

“So do I, but you don’t see me whining about it.”

“I’m surprised you even study…” she mutters under her breath, then trails off when she spots her phone and keys on the small coffee table.

Still holding her towel with a death grip, as if *that* would stop me, she sits on the sofa, legs tucked underneath her, and checks her phone.

Then she listens to a voice message from an obviously drunk Ava.

"Cecy!! I can't believe you left me…alone, you little bitch. But, like, a pretty bitch. Come back, Cecy… If you're asleep, I'm gonna wake you up, uh-huh. Also! I bought one of those small packets of M&M's like the ones Aunt Kim gave us when we were kids. I saved you some, but if you're not here, I'll eat them all. I hate it when I'm craving chocolate… Glyn says it's because I'm sad, but I'm not. Right, Cecy?"

There's a commotion on the other end before Glyndon's voice calls in the background. "Ava! Jesus, what the hell are you doing standing in the middle of the road? It's dangerous!"

"I'm manifesting Cecy. Let's do it together, Glyn!"

"We should probably go back to the dorm."

"Nooo—"

And then the voice message is cut off. Cecily releases a long breath and mutters, "This child, I swear."

I soundlessly slide behind the sofa as she types something—a reply to her friend's message in a group chat called 'Foursome.'

After Ava's VM, there's a text from none other than my sister.

Annika: It looks like you guys had so much fun. I'm definitely NOT jealous while I sit in my ivory tower.

I narrow my eyes, but I continue reading.

Glyndon: It wasn't that much fun. Eli showed up and Ava went off, and yeah, it was a disaster.

Ava: In this house, we don't speak of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.

Glyndon: @Cecily Knight I wish you had been there to calm her down. You're the only one who knows how. She wouldn't stop drinking and playing her cello and crying. I think she's going to sleep now, though. Where are you, anyway?

Cecily's expression is aimed downward as she types her reply with fast, elegant fingers.

Cecily: Group study. I'll be late. Please check on Ava @Glyndon King. Put a bucket by her bed and give her a painkiller. Also, wipe her forehead with a cold towel and make sure her alarm is set. You should go to sleep, too, Glyn, it's late. Didn't you say you have an important class tomorrow morning?

Glyndon: Yes, Mum! *salute emoji*

Cecily releases a long breath and I lean over, causing it to get caught before being fully expelled.

“So I’m a group study now?”

She slaps her phone to her chest and slowly glances at me like a character from a horror movie. “Is the concept of privacy foreign to you?”

“Possibly.”

She puffs out an exasperated breath. “I have to go back and check on my friends.”

“They’re adults, and unlike what Glyndon said, you’re not their mother.” I round the sofa and sit beside her.

Cecily scoots up and glues herself to the edge, trying and failing to put some distance between us. I can feel the warmth radiating off her and the hot energy that mirrors mine.

“Don’t,” I grind out.

“W-what?”

“Your nervous energy turns me on, so unless you’re up for riding my cock, tone it down.”

Her ears redden again and she rubs the side of her nose. “What makes you think I’m nervous? Maybe I’m disgusted.”

I know this aggressiveness is a reply to how much coercion I put her through, and usually, I don’t rise to provocations. But then again, my system has never been the same since she came into the picture.

I reach a hand out and she flinches, but I’ve already grabbed her hair and slid her across the old leather sofa that creaks underneath her weight.

Cecily’s eyes widen as I glare down at her. “You seem to have a misconception about certain terms. Should I give you a real reason to be disgusted?”

She purses her lips.

“Answer the fucking question, Cecily. Should I?”

“No.”

“That’s right. No. Don’t ask for something you can’t handle.” I release her for the sole reason that touching her, having her shiver against me, is enough to make me want to fuck her.

And I actually don’t want to hurt her when she must be sore.

Cecily clutches her towel so tight that her knuckles whiten, then she rushes back to sit against the other end of the sofa.

The sound of the burning logs fills the living room and mixes with her quickening breaths before she releases a sigh.

“And what am I supposed to do now? Drown in your broody, emotionless company?”

“Here’s what you’re not supposed to do. Sarcasm. Didn’t I tell you to drop it? If I repeat myself again, it won’t be with words.”

Silence, fidgeting, and more silence. Then she abruptly stands up. “I’m going to look for some clothes.”

“You look fine the way you are.”

“I’m sure you’d think that,” she starts to mock, but then clears her throat. “Do you have to rip my clothes?”

“No, but it’s more thrilling when I do.”

“Wow. Okay. That was direct.”

“I’m nothing less than direct.”

A weird expression covers her features, almost like resignation, or understanding.

Or maybe I’m imagining both.

“I can see that,” she says with revering calm. “But you’re not impulsive or reckless, so why did you make us play that game earlier? It’s out of character for you to put your life in danger. You don’t seem suicidal.”

“I’m not.”

“What if one of us died?”

“We wouldn’t have. I removed the bullet before you started.”

Her lips part and she stares at me as if I’m Lucifer himself. “You… you…”

“No rush. Take your time in finding the words.”

“I really thought I was going to die!”

“Which made you more honest. Aren’t you glad I was creative to find a way to make you open up?”

“Screw you,” she mutters, then trudges to the stairs and disappears at the top.

She must’ve taken a discovery tour around here the last time. I’m not worried that she’ll escape since the balconies and windows are high.

I remove my jacket, throw it on a nearby chair, and text back and forth with Ilya about security details.

Preferably, this should’ve been done in person, and I should’ve also plotted to inflict more damage on the Serpents. But the thought of leaving

this place to do all of those chores holds no appeal.

No, not this place. *Someone* in this place.

“Why…do you have these?”

I lift my head from my phone to stare at Cecily. She’s wearing a pair of jeans and a black tee that molds against her tits.

The items in question are a few mangas she probably found on the nightstand. Even as she holds them, her hands aren’t completely steady.

I raise a brow. “Don’t you love reading about boys' love? I did some research and that’s apparently a thing a lot of women do. Reading and watching gay men material.”

Her face turns a deep shade of crimson. “So what? We’re not hurting anyone by cheering on gay men to get together. I won’t allow you to shame me.”

It takes everything in me not to smile at the spikiness in her voice or how she hugs the mangas as if protecting them from me.

“Who says I’m shaming you?”

Her defensive stance turns into that of careful bemusement. “You’re… not?”

“Why would I buy you those if I were?”

She narrows her eyes. “Why did you buy these, anyway?”

“So you can read them here.”

“How do you know I’ve gotten this far in all the volumes?”

“I was in your room the other time, remember?”

“Stalker,” she mutters, but she sits down opposite me and strokes the covers of the mangas.

“I know.”

She whips her head up, her slowly drying strands swishing with the motion. “It doesn’t bother you to be called that?”

“If that label makes you feel at ease, go right ahead. I have no fucks to give.”

Cecily watches me peculiarly. “It’s not normal that you stalk me, buy the mangas I read, do some research on them, and even buy clothes that are exactly my size. Did you go through my wardrobe?”

“I did, but I didn’t need that to know your size.” I lift a hand and trace an imaginary outline. “I remember every nook of your body and can guess the size.”

Her lips tremble, but she murmurs, “You’re really impossible.”

“So you keep telling me. You need to learn that I don’t give a fuck about what’s considered normal or socially acceptable. If I want something, I *will* have it.”

She goes still, probably detecting my nonnegotiable tone. Her gaze slides all over me, from my face to my nonchalant position to the ink that’s spilling out from my short-sleeved shirt.

It lingers there, on the ink, before she slides it back to my face. “How are you any different from barbarians?”

“Don’t know and don’t care. Labels hold no importance for me.”

“What does then?”

“At the moment? You and your submission.”

She swallows thickly. “What if I say no?”

“Then you’d be lying to me and yourself. You enjoy this, Cecily. It’s in your nature, so how about you let go for once?”

She clamps her lips shut, not saying anything.

I know I have a long way to go with her. She didn’t even admit to the reason behind her decimation until I basically forced it out of her.

My blood turns ice-cold in my veins at the thought of that fucker who hurt her and transformed a proud girl into someone who can’t control herself. What he did to her must be the reason why gagging and drugging are her limits.

I will find him.

I will make him regret fucking with her.

Cecily might be a toy, but she’s my fucking toy and no one is allowed to touch her.

Hurt her.

Or engrave a permanent scar inside her.

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CECILY

Two weeks pass in a blur.

A crazy, twisted blur that I can't keep up with.

The moment I start to adjust, Jeremy pulls the rug from beneath my feet and we go back to square one.

Every night, I have to show up at the cottage. If I don't, his shadow will loom wherever I am. Whether I'm at the shelter, the library, or out with friends.

Anywhere.

He's become a seasoned stalker who's everywhere. He doesn't need to say anything to prove his existence—his actions speak louder than words.

There's nothing more frightening or threatening than his mere presence that he thoroughly uses to intimidate people—me included.

The thought of him acting on his threats and actually telling everyone what I enjoy doing in the dark terrorizes me more than I like to admit.

So every night, after the girls fall asleep, I sneak out of the flat like a thief and drive to the gothic place in the middle of nowhere.

It's where I'm veiled by night. No one sees when I go to take part in my depraved tendencies, and no one hears when I scream as he fucks me into oblivion.

Because he does, and often, sometimes a few times during the same night.

He chases me whether inside the house or all over the property. The harder I run and fight him, the more animalistic he becomes, like a primal being who's staking his claim.

The louder I scream, the deeper he goes, exposing and provoking the darkest parts of me.

He makes me beg sometimes, too, and always tells me to scream his name when he's fucking me, smashing my world to pieces and ripping it apart.

Jeremy is a savage devil and an unapologetic sociopath. I know because I've been around him long enough to put an appropriate label on him.

Though he might be a psychopath, considering his lack of impulsive actions. He always seems in control, the commander of his being, and a planner. But he somehow cares for those closest to him, namely Annika, and his Heathen gang.

His parents, too, according to what his sister tells us.

But I'm not sure if that's genuine care or a sense of responsibility that's been implemented in him ever since he was young. Either way, Jeremy lacks humanity and empathy.

He has no qualms about destroying anyone who stands in his path, and he certainly feels no remorse for his actions. In his mind, he believes the course of events that took place had to happen in that certain way, and there's no force of nature that can convince him otherwise.

Due to his inflexible values, opinions, and actions, it's hard to get a say with him.

It's even harder to get him to see reason—not when he believes that his way is the most logical choice.

It's more impossible to get him to let me go.

In the beginning, I thought his fixation with me was a phase that would dull with time. An obsession that would eventually purge its way out of his system.

After all, whether he's a sociopath or a psychopath, Jeremy scores high on the antisocial spectrum, and his type has a fickle sense of relationships and an even shorter attention span.

To my horror, the exact opposite has happened.

Not only is he not growing bored of me, but he's also extending the amount of time I spend in his company.

Now, he fucks me longer and won't let me leave until the early hours of the morning, so I've started going back to the flat at near dawn.

He never asks me to stay the night, though. Never fucks me unclothed, and never steps in the shower with me.

That’s his way of creating distance between us and letting me know that I’m nothing more than his fuck toy. One he enjoys chasing and fucking, but never one to hold in his arms or show affection to.

He cooks for me, cleans me afterward, and even carries me in his arms to the cottage, but that’s the extent of his affection. Or the lack thereof.

At the start, I refused to admit that his treatment of me after sex is the reason for the bursts of emptiness I feel sometimes. I don’t even like Jeremy.

I don’t.

Not even if he buys me special editions of my favorite mangas, lets me talk about whatever subject I’m studying, and fixes me delicious dishes.

I certainly wouldn’t grow a soft spot for him because he makes each of my sexual fantasies come true. Or admit that he’s slowly allowing me to grow into that part of myself and accept it as a fragment of who I am.

While I enjoy the sexual part of things and how he pushes every button inside me, I’m well aware of who Jeremy Volkov actually is.

I know of his mafia legacy. While I’ve been dreaming of helping others as Mum does, he’s set to be a leader for blood-fests.

We don’t speak or think the same things. He’s too emotionless, and I’m too caring. He lacks empathy, while I feel it more than need be.

Jeremy and I are doomed for disaster, but don’t they say toxic relationships have the best sex? Though we’re not in a relationship.

I don’t even know what to call the thing we have.

It’s something, but I’m not sure what.

And because we’re not in a relationship, I shouldn’t have let Ava drag me to the fight club to watch him.

Or more like to watch the semi-finals. Between Jeremy and Landon.

I’ve been on edge ever since I heard those two would fight, but I never thought it would be so nerve-racking in person.

The buzzing crowd from our university and TKU don’t help. Noise, chatter, and bets made under the table mix in a symphony of chaos.

I’ve never liked these scenes, but Ava has a thing for watching men clash.

And I don’t have the heart to let Ava come on her own. Glyn loathes violence and never comes here if she can help it, not to mention she’s probably busy with her boyfriend, Killian.

As for Anni, well, she's occupied with her own romance, too. Besides, she's forbidden to set foot here under her tyrant brother's orders.

I swear he enjoys ordering people around. Whenever I attempt to defy him, he turns up the crazy a notch to put me back where he thinks I belong.

Ava punches her open palm, craning her head in the direction of the fighting ring. We're in the second row on the side, so we have an excellent view, all thanks to her ticket-purchasing talents.

"May Lan beat that arsehole to a pulp and free Anni of his dictatorial reign. Amen."

I inch closer to her when some guy bumps into me. Ava shoos him away and takes my place, so I'm near the wall. My friend knows full well that I don't like to be touched, especially suddenly or by strangers.

You don't mind being fucked to within an inch of your life by Jeremy.

"I don't hear your amen, Cecy." Ava gasps. "Or do you want Jeremy to win?"

"What? Of course not."

I don't even know what I'm doing watching this match.

There's been murky water between me and Lan ever since he abused my trust. I deleted the folder I have of his pictures and stopped having stupid feelings for him. As for Jeremy and me, we're…fuck buddies who share the same kink but don't have anything else in common.

No clue why that thought fills me with a sense of depression.

As if on cue, Landon strolls to the middle of the ring in a roar of cheers from REU students.

He's wearing only blue satin shorts and wraps that cover his hands and wrists. The crowd goes nuts and starts cheering and screaming and chanting his name.

A wolfish grin lifts his lips as he flings his arms wide and throws his head back, looking to be in complete euphoria.

"King! King! King!"

Lan was made for showmanship and doesn't miss a chance to flaunt his superior looks, defined physique, and genius skills.

While most art students are allergic to violence and even sports to protect their hands, Landon punches with the same hands that create masterpieces.

He's been part of the underground fighting scene since we were in secondary school and didn't quit at uni.

Not only that, but he’s also the leader of the Elites, and the number one student grades-wise in the whole of REU and TKU combined. He’s been getting some competition from a girl in the American university, but she’s yet to push him off from his first spot.

Lan always makes sure to come out on top, demanding to be worshipped like the god he thinks himself to be.

And while I ignored those narcissistic traits in the past, they make me uncomfortable now. Especially as I watch him bite his lip, enjoying every chant, every admiration.

It hits me then.

Lan never belonged to anyone but himself.

“Woohoo! Go, Lan! King! King! King!” Ava shouts at the top of her lungs and I shake my head.

She’s too enthusiastic about this.

The commotion from our students partially dies down when TKU’s crowd roars to life.

Jeremy strides to the ring accompanied by Nikolai and a blond man—the guard who told me about his state that day I went to the Heathens’ mansion.

I’ve been fucked continuously by Jeremy for the past two weeks and a few times before that, but this is the first time I’ve see him half naked.

Considering the way his muscles bulge through his shirts and leather jackets and whenever I’m flattened against him, I figured he had a developed physique, but nothing I could’ve imagined would rival the scene in front of me.

Jeremy is a big man with wide shoulders and an impressive build, even compared to others from his entourage. He has slick abs and a defined V-line that disappears beneath the black shorts that hang low on his hips.

I knew he was tatted by the small glimpse I saw on his arms, but now, I get the whole picture. Artistic skulls pierced with knives and guns stretch from his full sleeves to portions of his chest and abs, creating a striking, intimidating image. At the top of his chest, he has a cursive scrip tattoo that reads, *Veni, Vidi, Vici*.

I came. I saw. I conquered.

That’s what a mafia heir looks like. A beast in the making. An animal since he was born.

Even if his father wasn’t part of the Bratva, I have no doubt that Jeremy would’ve followed a similar path. He’s certainly not built to be an ordinary citizen.

With each of his powerful strides, the spectators go wild. He doesn’t have to flaunt himself or change his expression to capture everyone’s attention.

It happens naturally and effortlessly.

Like the way he trapped me.

I internally shake that idea out of my head.

Nikolai hits him on the shoulder and remains behind as Jeremy slides into the ring. His attention zeroes in on Lan, who’s smirking in his usual provocative way.

The moment the referee announces the beginning of the fight, there seems to be a collateral holding of breaths. Everyone has been looking forward to the clashing of two titans, the leaders of the Heathens and the Elites and the lifetime rivals at REU and TKU.

This is the fight for the championship. Maybe a final before the final.

Jeremy and Lan circle each other for a few seconds before Jeremy lunges at him. He lands the first punch successfully, causing an uproar of the crowd.

But he doesn’t even pull away when Lan drives his fist into the side of his face, so hard that blood explodes on Jeremy’s lips.

I gasp along with many others. Ava is jumping up and down and punching the air.

“Yes! That’s my boy. Get him, Lan!”

A whole-body shiver goes through me and I can’t even breathe properly as the same scenario happens again.

Every time one of them punches, the other jumps back up and delivers a stronger one.

The crowd alternates between holding their breath, gasping, and cheering so loudly that my eardrums nearly explode.

I’ve never seen a more brutal manifestation of violence and testosterone than right now.

It’s like they’re out to kill one another while everyone watches.

I was aware of the animosity that ran between them, but I didn’t think it was this savage.

Or out of control.

The more I watch, the tighter my stomach gets. I don't think I can stay for the whole thing.

I'm sure Ava will be able to get home by herself—

My thoughts are cut off when Jeremy wipes the blood off the corner of his mouth and stares straight at me. As if he knew I was there all along.

How the hell did he find me in the middle of all these people?

My stomach flutters the more he watches me with that icy stare of his. Only, right now, fire erupts in their gray depths. No, it's a wildfire that won't be stopped unless it devours everything in its wake.

He's looking at me as if I'm the first he'll devour.

As if I'm the only one he sees in the crowd.

And that doesn't make sense. Jeremy has never looked at me this way.

Or has he?

That night, the first night at the deck, after he took me inside and went down on me in the middle of my stupid sleep paralysis, I think he had this look before he attempted to choke me.

I gasp when Landon uses his small moment of distraction and pummels him to the ground.

He leans down to whisper something in his ear, then stands to his full height, opens his arms wide, and grins, showing bloodied teeth as our students chant.

"King! King! King!"

But their celebratory yells end in a collective "Ahhh" when Jeremy jumps up and punches Lan into a corner.

He drives his fists in his face over and over. The brutality is criminal level and keeps heightening with every passing second.

Our students go silent while TKU's become insane. Their cheers grow with Jeremy's craziness.

The referee jumps in to announce that he won by points, but instead of backing away, Jeremy punches Lan one more time.

And when he tries to stand up? Jeremy throws him back down again as if to prove a point.

I'm deaf to all the noise, to the students chattering, to Ava grumbling about losing the money she bet on Lan.

My gaze remains locked on Jeremy, who's glaring at Landon as if he has a personal grudge against him.

Could he know about Landon’s involvement in the fire? Maybe about *my* involvement?

I’ve never stopped feeling guilty about that, not even after Jeremy threatened me and basically turned me into his sex toy.

His morals shouldn’t reflect mine, and I don’t want to hurt people. However, I’m not idiotic enough to tell him about it. That would only create trouble.

I was so sure Landon wouldn’t either, but he’s been clearly displeased by how I’ve been refusing to be his spy, so maybe he sold me out.

No.

He wouldn’t do that. At least, I hope not.

Either way, I don’t want to stay here. I manage to drag Ava with me. Considering her dejected state, she doesn’t mind too much and doesn’t call me a killjoy.

We eat some ice cream on the way to the dorm, and then I tell her I’m going to study.

She says she’ll practice her cello.

Usually, I wait for her to go to sleep so I can sneak out, but I’m restless tonight.

Fifteen minutes after the sound of her cello fills the space, I throw on my hoodie and slip out of the flat.

It feels like it takes me forever to reach the cottage. I open the gate with the wireless key Jeremy gave me soon after I became a regular visitor at his property.

The whole house is shrouded in darkness, but the gothic vibe doesn’t bother me tonight.

Something else does.

Out of instinct, I stop at the door of the cottage. Usually, this is when he’ll ambush me, then chase me all over the place.

However, when I push open the door, nothing happens.

Though I’m sure I saw his bike outside. Could he be taking a shower?

I go all over the cottage, but there’s no sign of him. However, I catch a glimpse of a mass of muscles through the kitchen window—that he fixed after I shattered it to pieces.

My steps are careful as I head in his direction. Jeremy sits on the deck, leaning back his palms on the wood as he stares at the gloomy lake that I’m sure is filled with water ghosts.

I stop right behind him, and I yelp, then shriek when he grabs me by the ankle and flings me forward.

But before I tumble into the water, he plops me on his lap so that I'm straddling it and wraps a large hand around my waist. He stares at me with dark eyes, so dark, they practically blend with the night.

However, another novel emotion I've never witnessed on his face lurks beneath the surface.

Something like…relief. Surprise?

"You came." It's a bewildered statement at best.

I let my palms flatten on his shoulders. "You told me to come every night, remember?"

His grip tightens around my waist. "You're early."

"Ava went to sleep early." *Liar.*

"I see." There's something weird about his tone and expression tonight. It's…softer. More human than beast.

And Jeremy is never soft, so this is throwing me off, but I also grab on to it, wanting, no, *needing*, to get inside his armor somehow. It's not fair that he's the only one who gets that privilege.

I touch the cut at the side of his lip, slowly, tentatively. "You should probably treat these."

He releases an ambiguous sound but otherwise remains silent.

"Earlier." I clear my throat. "How did you know I was there?"

"I know everything about you, Lisichka"

"But I don't."

"You don't know everything about yourself?"

"I don't know anything about you, Jeremy."

"You don't need to."

"I want to."

His expression tightens, but he speaks calmly. "Why?"

"To make it fair."

"I'm not a fair person."

"I'm well aware." I let my fingers linger on his hard jaw. "But I still want to find out."

"Good luck. Trying is free, succeeding isn't."

"Very convenient."

"You're welcome."

"I didn't thank you."

“You’re welcome anyway.”

I release a breath and he smiles a little—as much of a smile as Jeremy can offer. And holy shit. Why does he appear tenfold more attractive when he does that? It’s not healthy for my skyrocketing heartbeat.

Little by little, my doubts vanish. Lan couldn’t have told him about my involvement in the fire.

There’s no way Jeremy would remain collected if that were the case. He would’ve drowned me in the lake by now.

I still don’t feel any form of relief.

“Are you disappointed?”

His question catches me completely off guard. “W-what?”

“That I won against your precious Landon and ruined his beautiful looks.”

“Not really. I mean, I would rather you guys didn’t fight, but there needed to be a winner. I’m sure Lan would’ve done the same if he’d been in your position.”

He pauses, observing me with strange intent. “Weren’t you rooting for him?”

“Ava was. She cursed you all night long for the money she lost.”

“How about you? Did you curse me?”

“No, and I wasn’t rooting for Lan.”

“Then were you rooting for me?”

“I don’t think so.”

“That means it’s a possibility. I’ll believe that you were cheering me on.”

“Why is that important?”

He lifts a shoulder, but his arm tightens around my middle. “Beats me.”

We remain like that for a while. Seconds. Minutes. During that time, his gaze gets lost in the lake and I watch his face.

This is the first time he’s sort of hugged me outside of sex, and I want to extend the moment for as long as possible.

“I’m going to stay the night,” I announce out of nowhere.

No, actually, I’ve been thinking about it all week long, but I’ve had the courage to say it out loud now.

His gaze slides to me and I can’t help feeling a tinge of discomfort at the sight of the bruises and cuts on his face.

“Why?” he asks, his tone curious instead of accusatory.

“Because I want to.”
“Why would you want to?”
“I told you. Because I want to get to know you.”
“Spending the night won’t allow you to get to know me.”
“Maybe not, but it’s a start.”
And I will fight tooth and nail to get a say in whatever we have.

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JEREMY

What the fuck am I doing?

None of this is going to plan, and I can't find a name for whatever 'this' is.

It's as confusing as the girl who's causing the whole fucked-up change. I hate change, especially when I haven't anticipated it. There's nothing more irritating than being in a situation I can't predict.

I thought I knew Cecily Knight, that I'd found her buttons and identified everything that makes her tick.

But then again, watching or going through her things might've been the easiest part of understanding the girl who's now sleeping wrapped around me.

This scene happened after she announced that she'd be staying the night.

She shouldn't want to stay the night. I was fully expecting her to run after she saw me pummel her fucking prince. I had every intention of hunting the fuck out of her if that were the case, but still, the fact that she not only didn't run but also came here early brought about an unwelcome change.

When I felt her presence behind me, I was overtaken by a powerful emotion that was novel to me. Because instead of nursing the fucker's wounds, she came to me.

She chose *me*.

Or did she?

This could be a game she plotted with that motherfucker.

I wasn’t rooting for Lan.

Those were her words from earlier, bristling and dripping with unmatched honesty.

I release a long breath, and as if feeling my distress, Cecily buries her face further into my chest, mumbling something unintelligible.

My fingers glide in her silver hair, smoothing it down, and she goes slack against me, her small hand barely touching my shoulder. Her legs tucked in my lap and her tiny body pressed against mine.

Any other person would’ve fallen into this peaceful moment, taken it for what it is, and thought about everything else afterward.

I fucking can’t.

My pragmatic nature forbids it and I can’t erase everything that I know thus far.

Such as the fact that she’s liked Landon for years or that she called his name after sex. It was only that one time, but it fucking counts. Because every time after we’re finished, I wait for her to say the fucker’s name.

And every time, I resist the urge to slam my hand over her mouth so she doesn’t.

Even now, I’m waiting for her to whisper the word and dig her own grave.

Why the fuck would she trust me enough to stay and even sleep on my lap?

I could throw her in the lake and watch as she panics and chokes on the water. Maybe I should do that, after all, to quench these chaotic feelings.

Something stops me, though.

As much as I want to punish her, to eradicate the name of that motherfucker from her vocabulary, I actually don’t want to hurt her.

Deep down, Cecily has become part of who I am. I can’t be the cause of her pain.

At least, not outside of sex.

With a sigh, I gather her in my arms bridal style and stride in the direction of the house.

Her head falls on my shoulder and she moans softly, the sound sending a signal straight to my cock.

My beast demands that I strip her bare, let her run, then fuck her. It doesn’t matter that I have her every night and more than once. The moment I’m done, I want more.

There’s this constant need to be inside her and never allow her out of my sight.

During the day, I think about the coming night and how she’ll give in to her instincts and me. During the night, I think about how a few hours are not fucking enough.

There’s no reason why I shouldn’t have her at my disposal every second of every minute of every day, however and wherever I please.

My beast wants to cage her here, lock the doors, and forbid her from leaving. She might fight at the beginning, but she’d have no choice once I erased every escape route.

But that would mean losing the fire that simmers inside her, the fight, and…the life.

She’s so full of life, despite some of her dissociating episodes that are becoming fewer and farther between.

They still happen, though. A part of her is trapped in that hotel room two years ago with the fucker who will soon lose everything.

I’ve got someone looking into him, his family, and the fucking skeletons in his closet. Once I have all the information I need, his life will be over.

As soon as we’re inside, I lay Cecily on the sofa and cover her with a light blanket. Then I sit on the chair opposite her, elbow on the armrest and chin leaning on my fist.

This is what I do whenever she falls asleep or if I’m following her from afar. I watch, think, and try to decide what I’m going to do with her.

What started as a game of twisted lust and beastly desire is turning into dangerous possessiveness and a deranged obsessiveness I can’t put a halt to.

My phone vibrates and I stand, then go outside, closing the door behind me.

I answer with, “You have something for me?”

“No *hello, how is my favorite uncle doing*?” Yan says with an incredulous tone from the other end.

Not only is he one of my father’s closest guards, but he’s also been my mother’s best friend for as long as I’ve been alive. A fact Dad isn’t so keen on.

“I suppose you wouldn’t call if you didn’t have information for me,” I say in a businesslike tone.

“You are so much like your father, it’s revolting.” He speaks in a Russian-accented voice, then sighs. “And here I thought the years we spent

together would enable you to pick up my superior character."

"*Yan.*"

"Fine, fine. Though I'm not sure what your beef is with a preppy kid, I was able to identify and locate the motherfucker. It was a lot easier than you advertised, which is also another word for boring."

I slide my forefinger against my thigh, back and forth. "Send me everything you have."

"No *thank you, Yan. I'll get you a souvenir from England*?"

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"That's more like it." He pauses. "I'm sure I don't need to worry about you, but you're not getting yourself in trouble, are you? And if you do end up in trouble, you'll be sure to let me know so I can join, right?"

"This is my fight. Nothing you should concern yourself with."

"That's my boy. But don't get yourself hurt. Your mother is worried, thinking that you're growing up into this heartless man who's like a younger version of your father. Spoiler alert, she wasn't his biggest fan back then."

I know all about it.

Just because I was a kid, my parents and even Yan think that I don't remember things, that I was too happy-go-lucky to notice how my mother's ghosts ate her from the inside out and left nothing for Dad and me.

How, instead of sleeping, I did everything I could to sneak into their bedroom and lie beside my unmoving mother's side.

Sometimes, she didn't even know I was there.

Other times, she looked at me and didn't see me.

Oftentimes, she forgot about me.

"Tell her all is well and that she doesn't need to worry. I have everything under control."

"Don't say that. It's a sure way for everything to spiral out of control. Promise to be careful, kid."

"I will. Thanks again."

I end the call with Yan and go through the files he sent me. My father has the best intelligence, not only in the Bratva but in all criminal organizations. He has a web of hackers and informants that he uses to make himself untouchable and maintain the Bratva as a force to be reckoned with in New York.

Yes, I could've found the fucker myself, but that would've taken longer considering that Cecily erased every trace of him from her electronic devices and social media and vehemently refuses to talk about the experience after that Russian roulette game.

I could've interrogated her friends, but the chances that she's disclosed anything is slim to none and they'd also grow suspicious. Despite my utter annoyance with the lack of information, I respect her need to tell them in her own time. That is, if she does choose to divulge that part about her past.

There's also Annika, but when I tested the waters and veered a conversation toward her friends' exes, she admitted that she doesn't even know if Cecily has a boyfriend, and if she does, she never talks about it.

So asking Yan for help was the most efficient way to go about this.

I scroll through every picture, every file, every folder. I study the motherfucker for what seems like hours, until I feel him materializing right in front of me. I learn every tick, every rotten memory of his past. Every weakness.

I'm going to make his life hell. It won't be easy or fast. It won't end with torture or fucking death.

It'll be slow and infinite, until he loses his damn mind.

After planning what I'll do with him, I step into the house. The first thing my eyes track is the unmoving, rigid body on the sofa.

Fuck.

I stride to where Cecily sleeps, and when I touch her shoulder, sure enough, it's as stiff and heavy as stone.

Her face is pale and tense, but her features look neutral. From the outside looking in, this might appear normal, but I know better.

I crouch beside her and grab her heavy hand that barely moves.

Calling her name is futile. She doesn't hear me when she's in this state. Probably caught in the nightmare from the past. The one she can't get over, no matter how much she tries.

And she does try.

In her journal, she often has entries about how she wants to get past that version of herself. How much she hates it. How weak she feels for not being able to erase it.

In one entry, she wrote 'Get over it, Cecily' a hundred times, and those words were splashed with tear marks.

That fucker will cry tears of blood instead.

I stroke the back of her hand once, twice, and while that doesn't dissipate the stiffness, it makes her arm less heavy.

It's not much, but it's a start.

I caress her arm, her collarbone, and then her throat, pausing at the fading mark at the side. Note to self: make a new one.

No matter how much I massage her skin and touch her gently, she barely shows any response. I know she's in there somewhere, and I need to pull her out of whatever nightmare she's trapped in.

Usually, I'd eat her pussy, and the orgasm would be enough to snap her out of this state. And while I'm game for that, I want to find other methods that I can use in public.

My fingers glide over her jaw, throat, and other pressure points. She shudders when I squeeze the back of her neck.

So I do it again. "Cecily?"

Her eyes slowly blink open, but she's staring at an invisible point behind me.

I press yet again. "Cecily, can you hear me?"

"Jeremy," she whispers, and then tears cascade down her cheeks as her attention zooms in on me.

My thumb skims back and forth on the sensitive skin on her nape in a gentle rhythm I'm not used to. It's experimental at best, but since she leans into my touch, I don't stop.

"Jeremy," she repeats, blinking away the moisture gathered in her lids.

"I'm right here."

"I know." She sits up and fists her hand in my shirt. "I felt you. When I was being swarmed away, I felt *you*. I heard your voice and even smelled you. Usually, no one hears me screaming for help in my head, but you did."

Still grabbing onto me with a desperate hold and a shaky frame, she smiles through her tears.

Hope amidst ruin.

This is the most beautiful fucking sight I've ever seen.

Usually, I do anything to kill any hint of softness or humanity she tries to see in me, but right now, I can't.

All I can do is stop and stare as she whispers, "Thank you."

Fuck.

Why is a simple thank-you enough to tilt everything off its axis? Why is this infuriating girl looking at me in this trusting way?

I’m tempted to crush that trust, to show her exactly why I’m the last person she should give this power to.

However, I find myself asking, “What do you dream of in that state?”

She sniffles and slowly releases me to wipe the tears off her face. I expect her not to answer, but then her soft voice carries in the small living room.

“Sometimes, it’s blurry images and faceless monsters. But often, I relive what happened back then, or at least, the helplessness of the situation and how desperately I wanted to stop it but couldn’t.”

That motherfucker will wish for death when I get my hands on him.

“Other times”—her voice tightens with emotion—“I dream of Mum’s and Papa’s devastated faces, especially Mum’s. When I started going out with him, Mum didn’t like him, and that dislike grew once she met him. She said he gave her a bad feeling that she couldn’t put a finger on, but I told her she was overreacting and that I was lucky to have him as a boyfriend. Can you believe I actually used that word? *Lucky*?”

She laughs to herself, the sound choked and uncomfortable, like her entire posture.

“He was popular, well-mannered, and good-looking, so I couldn’t figure out what exactly Mum found so wrong about him. Every time I talked about him, she’d get this weird expression on her face and try to convince me to find someone else. She’d tell me that I’m pretty and smart, and I could have anyone I want. But I refused and even disliked her for misjudging him. Little did I know that her feelings were spot on.” She sniffles. “After I got back home, I couldn’t face her and kind of fled to stay with my grandfathers. I still can’t face her sometimes. I keep wondering if everything would’ve been all right if I’d just listened to her instead of being stubborn. And somehow, I created some sort of a rift between us that I can’t mend.”

“You didn’t know.”

“But she did.”

“No, she didn’t. She only had a feeling, that’s all.”

“But I should’ve listened to her.”

“You. Didn’t. Know.” I enunciate every word. “Don’t blame yourself for something you can’t control. That’s where vicious ghosts lurk.”

She swallows, then clenches her hands in her lap. “I just feel bad for the feelings I had toward Mum at the time. She’s done nothing but support me

in everything I've ever done. And I guess—I guess…I've been holding an inexplicable grudge against her all these years because of how absent she was sometimes."

I tilt my head to the side. "Absent how?"

"She has depression and sometimes, maybe once every few months, she'd feel distant. Not that she'd push me away or anything, but I'd feel like I couldn't reach her. I don't know how to explain it. Papa would always tell me that she needed time, and usually, she'd come around in a day or two, but I hated how she had to deal with it on her own and I wasn't part of the process." She pauses and smiles awkwardly. "Saying that out loud makes me sound like a spoiled brat."

A familiar pain I thought I was long over tightens in my chest. "No. You just didn't like being pushed aside by your mother."

"Right! I felt worthless and I couldn't…couldn't…"

"Do anything to help when she retreated into her own head. It was like she was dead yet looked alive."

I regret saying the words as soon as they're out, because Cecily looks at me differently. With tears clinging to her lids as if she's about to cry again.

But she doesn't.

She's watches me intently, without blinking, as if she's seeing a part of me she never thought existed before.

And because she's an infuriating, smart little shit, she manages to put the pieces together. "Was…your mother like that, too?"

My jaw clenches, but I say nothing.

"Anni said your parents had issues before she was born and you were the one who brought them together. But did that happen at the expense of witnessing her deteriorating mental state?"

That big mouth Annika.

I stand up. "Go back to sleep."

A small hand wraps around my wrist and she blurts, "Okay, okay. I won't pry if you don't like it, but can you stay until I fall back asleep?"

"You're not a baby." I'm about to wrench my hand from hers.

But the fucking girl sinks her nails into my skin. "I haven't been able to sleep properly in months, because I didn't feel safe, but if you're here, I'll be able to."

I stare down at her small frame on the sofa, at the desperation written all over her face.

She said she'd get to know me, and I told her that wouldn't be possible, but she's throwing her whole weight behind this.

If I didn't know she was an awkward human being who barely knows how to communicate with anyone who's outside of her closest circle, I'd swear she was acting.

Acting or not, though, her state shouldn't be able to affect me. Not even a little.

Not anywhere close.

But as I stare into the glittery green of her eyes, a myriad of unknown emotions fester in my chest.

"I'm the last person you should feel safe around, Cecily."

"But I do."

"Despite everything I do to you?"

"I wanted that. If I didn't, I wouldn't have come here every day."

I thought she did it because of the threats.

Well, fuck me.

She came because she *wanted* to? And she's actually admitting to that?

"I'll stay if you answer my question."

She nods twice.

I know I'm going to sound illogical and I'm pushing it, but I need to confirm this once and for all.

"Would you have preferred to have this arrangement with Landon?"

She blinks, probably not expecting this question, but then she seems to mull over her words.

"In the beginning, I admit that I wanted it to be Landon. I had a crush on him long before I had a boyfriend, so he was like an unreachable god to me. One I would've done anything to stay close to."

I should've killed the motherfucker earlier today.

Maybe if I hunt him down now, I can finish what I started.

My murderous thoughts come to a halt when Cecily squeezes my hand. "I started having this twisted fantasy about being ravaged soon after I hit puberty and kept it to myself, thinking something was wrong with me. Those feelings were more prominent after that incident with my ex, and I thought I was being punished for having the fantasy. I didn't dare act on it until this year, and I'm glad it wasn't Lan who made it come true, because I realize just how shallow my feelings for him were and how much he wouldn't have cared."

Were.

Her feelings for him are a ‘were.’

She’s glad it wasn’t him who made the fantasy come true, which means she’s glad it’s me.

Well, she ddidn’t say it like that exactly, but I choose to believe that.

“And you think I do care?” I ask like a dick.

She rubs the side of her nose with her index finger. *Fucking adorable*.

“Sometimes.”

Sometimes is enough.

For now.

I was so intent on leaving earlier, but instead, I do something I’ve never done before.

I stay.

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CECILY

“Can you guys like not?”

I slide my attention to Annika, realizing I zoned out, but it was the good kind this time.

I was sort of daydreaming about two days ago when Jeremy not only let me stay, but he also actually slept beside me.

Or more like, I slept sandwiched between him and the edge of the sofa. I woke up a bit achy due to the position and the cramped space, but I didn’t have another instance of sleep paralysis.

It didn’t happen last night either.

Last night, however, he did fuck me on the deck with my head hanging above the lake while I screamed and begged and called his name, but after that, he stepped in the shower with me, and then he carried me to the bed upstairs.

Something that’s never happened before.

I didn’t have to ask him to stay or feel like I had to walk on eggshells so as not to provoke his monster side.

In fact, he’s the one who pulled me on his lap when I was trying to put some clothes on and kind of made us sleep like that.

Naked. With his large body wrapped around me.

Another first.

Before, Jeremy was always clothed in some way, even while he set my world ablaze. I figured it was because he needed to put a barrier between us and to make it clear that whatever we have is exclusive to using each other’s bodies.

But a shift happened two nights ago. It started when he sat me on his lap and was content with talking to me instead of fucking me the moment he saw me.

Some sort of a connection blossomed between us that night, which is probably why I felt safe and offered him truths I don't usually talk about to anyone.

In return, I caught a glimpse of Jeremy's depths. Not the beast who chased and caught me, but of the man who used to keep me at arm's length.

He still shut me down the moment I started to probe, but he at least stayed. And last night, we slept flesh-to-flesh.

I think that was because he needed to have access to me the next morning, but that's not important.

The fact that he's letting me in is.

Despite not wanting to get tangled in his web, I most certainly am. At the moment, I can't find a way out—and I'm not sure I want to.

I meant it when I said that I plan to get to know him, because I do. Not only do I feel completely safe around him—despite his warnings not to—but I also like myself when I'm with him.

I'm more open about what I enjoy sexually and I even get to be my nerdy self and talk about my mangas and studies without sensing that he's getting bored.

In fact, he listens attentively, as if everything I say is important, and I don't think he realizes that, because I'm a little nervous around him, I resort to talking in order to expel that energy.

I also appreciate how he never judges me about anything. Hell, he even buys me mangas, comfort clothes, and my favorite tea—while calling me a stereotypical English who loves their tea.

I appreciate the ease in his expression when he sees me and the softness in his voice when he says, "Sleep. I'm not going anywhere."

Those small moments of warmth, the cracks in his cold exterior, are what make me hold out hope for more.

But, on the other hand, I'm not sure if more is what I should want from someone like Jeremy.

"Cecily!" Annika waves a hand in front of my face, and this time, I really do snap out of it.

Or try to.

Anni and I are at a local coffee shop that she loves to come to, probably because they have her favorite apple juice.

It's big yet cozy with its pastel colors and fluffy objects hanging from the ceiling.

Many students come here between classes, but Anni drops by any chance she gets. We have some time before our shift at the shelter, which is why she dragged me inside.

"What?" I take a sip of my tea.

Anni narrows her eyes—bright blue-grays that are nothing like her brother's intense ones. "What were you thinking about so intently that you totally door-slammed me?"

Your brother.

I certainly don't say that. Hell, I don't even like to think about how she would view our unconventional relationship if she learned about it.

Annika might tell us that her brother is an unbearable tyrant who plays the role of her warden, but the girl might as well revere him.

He's protected her since she was born and maybe that's part of the reason why I choose to think he has some humanity beneath all the freezing ice.

I trace the rim of my cup. "Just school stuff."

"If everyone were as diligent as you when it comes to studying, the world would be a better place." She grins. "Anyway, I was saying, have you heard about the group of TKU football players who were suspended because their drug tests came back positive? And that's not even the worst of it. They got into an accident on their way to the airport and barely escaped death. Some are still in the hospital."

"Wow. That sounds intense."

"I know, right? Like it feels too convenient, doesn't it? Apparently, Kill and Gaz think the same, because this morning, while we were having breakfast, they asked Jeremy if he had anything to do with it, because they saw Ilya roaming around those players."

"Ilya?"

"Oh, right. You probably don't know him. He's the big blond guy, about your age, who's shadowing Jeremy and acting as his senior guard."

I know him.

I've caught a glimpse of him a few times in the past. I think he even attended some of my classes, but how could he when I'm sure he's a TKU

student?

“Anyway, Jer didn’t deny or confirm it, but we were all sure he actually plotted the whole thing. He can seriously be brutal whenever he puts someone in his sights, and I kind of feel sorry for those guys, but they probably did something to piss him off. You know, like the way they did you dirty.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Ava told me the captain of TKU’s football team and some of his teammates bothered you, stole your books. and were a pain in the ass because you turned him down at a club once. This coincidence is kind of fitting, don’t you think?”

My limbs stiffen as I replay and mull over the information I just learned. I don’t think it’s a coincidence.

“Anni?”

She slurps from her drink. “Yeah?”

“Have you ever mentioned those American football guys bothering me to Jeremy?”

“I think I did once. The fact that Jer had a beef with them, too, is such a cool coincidence.”

Is it really?

I want to believe that he wouldn’t hurt people for me since we’re not really in a relationship, but I’m not sure what to think about what he might have done.

I hope it’s just a coincidence like Anni said.

“Also!” She taps the table in front of me. “You guys don’t have to egg Creighton on when he comes around.”

I can’t help the smile that tilts my lips. “And why is that? You don’t like it when we tease him about his first relationship that somehow happens to be with you?”

“Aw, stop it.” She hits my shoulder playfully. “You know how grumpy and silent he is, so whenever you give him shit, he won’t say anything, and I’m obliged to speak on his behalf since I’m his number one lawyer and all. Point is, I don’t want conflict with you guys.”

“Don’t worry. We’re just messing with him. Truly, we’re all glad that he’s no longer the silent kid among us. Besides, he speaks just fine when he becomes all territorial over you.”

She blushes, her finger playing with her straw. “I know! He took me by surprise, I swear. I just like him so much, it feels like a dream sometimes.”

“It definitely isn’t. Who knew Creigh’s lack of interest was all a camouflage? Anyway, you deserve to be happy, Anni.”

“Aw, stop it. I’m blushing.”

After a moment of letting her pat her pink cheeks, I clear my throat. “Do you plan to tell your brother about Creigh?”

The fact that I know of Annika and Creighton’s relationship while Jeremy doesn’t is something I’ve been feeling slightly guilty about. Of course, I wasn’t planning to tell him, but I hope she will so I don’t feel horrible for hiding it from him. Not only do I know how much he cares for her, but I also dislike keeping secrets from him.

Maybe you should tell him about how you helped Lan burn down his property and endanger his life then.

I shudder at the dreadful sound of my internal voice and shove it back to where it belongs.

“Nooo,” Anni says with an awkward laugh, then it abruptly dies down. “I’ve been imagining telling him, and every time, I picture Creigh and Jer either getting into a fight or killing each other. I love my brother, but he’s hotheaded.”

Tell me about it.

I lean forward in my chair. “You can’t hide this from him forever; he’ll eventually find out. Don’t you think it’s better if he hears from you instead of some random person?”

She shakes her head. “That topic and Jeremy are giving me a migraine. I’d rather not think about his reaction that will either be violent or destructive or both.”

I take another sip of my tea, letting the liquid soothe my dry throat. “Has he always been opposed to any possible relationship you could have?”

She lifts a shoulder. “I guess he and Papa feel like no one is good enough for me. They have a Volkov god complex, I swear.”

“Volkov god complex?”

“Yeah, like no one is worthy of our bloodline except for a Russian. I mean, not really, but secretly, they do think that. Maybe I can convince Creigh to start drinking vodka like it’s milk. Do you think he’d be game?”

“I think he prefers wine.”

“I know! He’s like an old man sometimes…” she trails off as she looks behind me. At the window, I think.

While I prefer not to have a direct view of the street, Annika always likes to watch passersby, wave at a baby here and smile at a pet there.

But she’s neither waving nor smiling right now. In fact, her eyes are squinting and her lips are pursed.

I spin in my chair and follow her line of vision. My grip tightens on the teacup when I see none other than Jeremy leaning against his bike, stance nonchalant and expression calm.

But he’s not alone.

A leggy blonde grabs onto his arm, a wide smile brightening her face. She’s dressed in a micro skirt and a tight blouse that leaves nothing to the imagination. Her shiny straight hair falls to the middle of her back and she has the type of beautiful makeup only influencers are able to pull off.

It’s the same girl I saw in front of the Heathens’ mansion after the fire. The one the guard called ‘Miss,’ then let in.

No clue why I erased that incident from my memory. No, not erased. I kind of hoped it meant nothing and she was just a family friend checking on him.

Apparently, I hoped wrong.

“That *bitch*,” Annika hisses under her breath.

“Who is that?”

“Maya.” She narrows her eyes further. “Nikolai’s sister. I swear she’s like a clingy mosquito. Be right back. I’m going to put her in her place.”

Annika abruptly stands up and storms out of the coffee shop, leaving her purse, drink, and phone behind.

Shit must be really hitting the fan if Annika forgot her phone that looks like it was dipped in purple glitter.

I should probably stay here and not start unwanted drama, but something has happened ever since I saw Jeremy with her and recalled that fire.

That night, after I heard he was hurt, I was sick with worry and couldn’t sleep. And while I was struggling with my demons and nearly throwing up due to nausea, that girl probably spent the night by his side.

After gathering Anni’s stuff, I put on my backpack and head outside. Jeremy’s eyes find me before I even cross the street, and it’s like they’re storms brewing in the distance.

A disaster that's threatening to happen any second.

How dare he look at me that way when he has another girl on the side that he never told me about?

Or maybe I'm the girl on the side.

After all, we were never in a relationship.

That thought makes my stomach plummet and tightens my chest. My steps are surprisingly calm as I walk toward them. Annika grabs onto her brother's free arm and glares at the blonde—Maya.

"I have something to talk about with Jer. You can go."

"Or *you* can go because I was here first," Maya says with a fake smile.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but whether you were here first or last doesn't count, because I have sister privileges. Now, off you go."

"Nuh-uh." She slides her attention to me. "And who is this?"

"My friend." Anni all but pulls me toward her by the arm so that she's sandwiched between me and Jeremy. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot you don't know what that word means since you stab them in the back and try to snatch their brother. Jer will never marry you, Maya. Go find yourself another victim."

Marry?

Did she just say marry?

I glance at Jeremy, thinking he's focused on his sister and Maya, but a shiver chills me when I find him looking at me.

He's studying me intently, as if he's peeling off my skin and peeking inside me.

What exactly is he searching for?

Maya hikes a hand up on her tiny waist. "When my father and yours have a talk about our marriage, you won't have a say in it, Annika."

"And yet, they haven't, and they *won't*. But do you know what will *totally* happen? I'm so going to tell Nikolai you're hitting on his best friend."

"No, you won't."

"Guess you'll have to wait and see."

"You're too cowardly to do that, Nika."

I wince.

Annika gasps. "No, you didn't just call me that!"

"Totes did."

"I'm gonna kill you."

“Can you even reach my shoulder, midget?”

Annika gasps again. “You *bitch*!”

Then she lunges at her, but before she can actually hit her, Maya’s clone appears and pushes Annika back when she stands in front of the original Maya.

She’s wearing a black dress, heavy-looking boots, and her blonde ponytail is held together with ribbons.

Twin sister.

If they had the same style, no one would be able to figure out who is who.

“Stay out of this, Mia,” Annika snarls. “Your sister called me Nika *and* a midget. Today is her funeral.”

The newcomer, Mia, glares back at her sister, who’s smiling in a gloating way and studying her manicured nails. “What? She said I was a bitch, and while I am sometimes, I wasn’t just now. She was being a busybody.”

Mia signs something to her sister and Maya sighs deeply. “I’m not apologizing. If you look her name up, Nika is really a nickname and she *is* actually short. Not my fault she doesn’t have my sublime legs.”

Mia stares at Annika and signs.

“Nope.” Annika lifts a hand. “Not hearing your apology. Take your clone and leave. Also, you’ll only marry my brother over my dead body, Maya. I swear to Tchaikovsky.”

Maya grins. “R.I.P. then, *midget*.”

“You little—” Annika lunges at her again and Maya only makes a face as Mia tries to singlehandedly break up the fight, signing with intense energy.

In the middle of the whole show, the person who caused this, Jeremy, remains in the same relaxed position against his bike.

Still staring at me in that unnerving, chill-inducing way.

I break eye contact before I’m roped into whatever trap he’s laying for me.

For some reason, I always feel like he’s plotting chaos or scheming against me.

As if he wants to prove a point by making sure I know that he doesn’t care. That no matter how much I learn about him, it’ll all be for nothing.

That I shouldn’t trust him, like he told me.

Well, I’m just not going to let that happen without some form of resistance.

I tell Annika I’m going to the shelter, but she’s too busy verbally sparring with Maya to hear me.

Still, I turn around and leave, feeling awkward at first, then I lift my chin and try to look normal while carrying a fluffy bag and a glittery cup that don’t fit with my jeans, shirt, and backpack.

Finally, about five minutes later, Annika catches up to me and I can be rid of her super girly belongings.

“That bitch.” She breathes heavily, then takes an aggressive drink of her juice as she falls in step with me. “Can you believe that she said she won’t only marry Jeremy but she’ll also *make* me a maid of honor? The audacity, the nerve, the gumption!”

“Calm down, Anni.” I stroke her shoulder. “You don’t usually get into fights.”

She’s somewhat of a people pleaser. The type who doesn’t want anyone around her to feel uncomfortable—or she was before Creigh started purging those traits out of her.

“Maya is the exception. She’s a super diva bitch who thinks everyone is beneath her.”

“Her sister looked nice.”

“Mia is anything but nice, but she’s not a clingy, condescending bitch like her sister. I swear Maya has gotten worse ever since she set her sights on my brother.”

An ache blossoms in my chest and I hate the feeling, or how much I want it to go away but can’t do anything about it.

“Are they…” I clear my throat when I’m about to choke on my words. “Are she and Jeremy engaged or set to be engaged?”

“She wishes.” Annika punches the air. “Maya started this agenda on her own last year and has been actively trying to make it real.”

“Maybe Jeremy agrees, or she wouldn’t have been this persistent.”

“Like hell he does. He really just talks to her and Mia because they’re Nikolai’s sisters. She’s the delusional one who acts like he he’s her nonexistent fiancé sometimes. Ugh. I hate her guts and I’m so going to tell Nikolai so he’ll keep her in line.”

I slide my finger on the side of my nose. “What if Jeremy wants to marry her?”

“Don’t jinx it. No, he doesn’t.”

“He didn’t look bothered just now.”

“Oh, please. That’s his standard expression, but what if…” Her face pales and she comes to an abrupt halt. “What if he actually agrees if our parents arrange the marriage? She’s Russian!”

I pat Annika’s shoulder even as mine goes rigid.

“No, no,” she says, not seeming to believe her own words. “I’m the one jinxing it now. There’s no way that would happen.”

My friend spends the rest of the walk to the shelter convincing herself that it’s all a play of her imagination and cursing Maya for calling her Nika and a midget.

Me?

I just get lost in my own head as I go over the stock of pet food.

On one hand, I shouldn’t feel this way for someone I’m not even dating.

On the other, I hate that I can’t stop.

But what I hate even more is that I care.

Maybe this wouldn’t have made a difference a week ago, but after that night he and I talked, I stupidly thought we shared something more than twisted kinks and savage sex.

But maybe that was wishful thinking on my part.

Maybe, as he said, I should neither trust him nor find him safe.

Because he’s using me as much as I’m using him, and that’s it.

I’m dejected the whole day, despite my attempts to cheer myself up and even chatting with my parents for over thirty minutes.

The thought of going to the cottage and deepening this feeling of nausea doesn’t sit right with me.

You know what? I’m not going.

It’s not mandatory or anything.

So I snuggle in bed with a book, ready to spend a peaceful night.

Now, if I could actually enjoy what I’m reading or focus on it, that would be great.

My door flings open and Ava stands there wearing a killer pink dress and bold red lips and stilettos. “Guess who got us tickets to a VIP lounge?”

I flip a page. “I’m busy.”

“Bitch, please. With what?”

“Reading.”

“You actually developed a habit of doing that upside down?”

It’s then I realize I’m holding the book the wrong way. With a deep sigh, I close it and place it on my lap.

“I’m not in the mood, Ava. Take Glyn or Anni.”

“Both are with their boyfriends. Besides, I want my Cecy with me.”

I snicker.

She grins, reaches me in a few steps, and grabs my shoulder. “Come on, it’ll be *so* much fun.”

“My and your idea of fun are so different.”

“Pretty *please*. I’ll owe you a week of Netflix and chill.”

I stay silent.

“Come on, that’s like your kink.”

My kink is something entirely different. But I nod because I’m not going to let her go alone, and maybe a change of scenery is everything I need tonight.

“Yes!! Let’s get you into something pretty.”

“What’s wrong with my jeans?”

“Hell no. You can’t go there in jeans, Cecy. They won’t let you in.”

“Fine. But nothing over the top.”

She squeals. “Let me go pick you something real quick.”

Her ‘real quick’ will take at least an hour.

Shaking my head, I slip out of bed after she’s gone and pause when my phone vibrates on the side table.

Jeremy: What do you want for dinner?

I narrow my eyes to make sure this is in fact a real text. The nerve of this prick to send me this after what happened today. He’s not even going to address it?

But fine. If he wants to play this game, then it’s on.

Cecily: I’m going out with friends and I won’t be coming tonight. So you can have whatever dinner you want.

Jeremy: Come over after you’re done.

Cecily: No.

Jeremy: I wasn’t asking, Cecily.

Cecily: And I wasn’t stuttering, Jeremy. I’m having a night off.

Then I turn off my phone, my blood boiling.

Screw that arsehole. It’s time he gets a taste of his own medicine.

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CECILY

It’s been twenty minutes since we arrived at this VIP club and I’m already regretting letting Ava drag me into this.

I swear she’s a magnet for trouble and has been screwing herself, and me, in retrospect, ever since we were children.

She often comes up with ideas for fun, which always include breaking some rule, like staying out after curfew and treading into prohibited places.

And we often get caught. Papa’s always disappointed that I’ve done something like that, while Aunt Silver and Mum give us an earful. Ava pretends to understand and reflect on her actions, but soon after, she goes back to her rule-breaking habit.

But despite that, she never lets the blame fall on me and will say things like, “I’m sorry, Aunt Kim, for corrupting your daughter, but please don’t take her away from me.”

It was only after we grew up that I realized Ava does this to satiate a hungry beast inside her. She’s not doing it for attention like many others, since she tries her hardest not to get caught. She’s doing it for herself.

As if trying to feel alive.

The reason she drags me along every time is for a sense of safety, because she knows I have her back.

Also, she really believes I’m wasting away my youth by not taking part in all the parties and adrenaline-filled activities.

But no matter how many clubs she drags me to, I still can’t get used to the feeling of being swarmed by so many people and so much noise.

This club in particular is crowded with enough humans to populate a continent. Not really, but that's how it feels.

Blue and violet lights cover the dome structure of the ceiling like laser beams as a trendy DJ plays one hit song after another.

Bodies wiggle, shake, and slither like snakes all over each other. The stench of strong perfumes, sweat, and musk mix together and suffocate my breathing.

Everything does. The loud music, the vibration of the floor beneath us, the shouting, hollering, dancing, and more dancing.

It's an absolute sensory overload that makes me want to hide in a corner.

But I can't, because Ava just had her third shot. I pull the fourth from her fingers and yell, "That's enough!"

"Don't be a killjoy!" She tries to fight me for her shot and I keep it out of reach.

But Ava is a bit taller than me, so she manages to grab hold of it. In a swift move, I snatch the shot back and down it, wincing at the strong burn, and she grins, then taps the counter for more.

"Ava!" I reprimand. "I can't carry you on my own if you pass out from too much drinking."

"Relax, I'm not going to reach that state—" she interrupts herself when the beat drops. "Woohoo! I love this song!"

Once the shots arrive, she sneakily throws one back and grabs my hand. "Let's dance!"

"No!"

"Come on, Cecy. You look hot. May I have this dance?"

"No."

She makes a face, but then she pushes through the crowd, swaying her hips and shaking in sync with the music.

I lean against the counter so I can have a clear view of her. My tight dress hunches up with the movement and I shove it back down so that it reaches my middle thigh.

Since Ava doesn't get a lot of chances to play dress-up with me, she put me in this black dress with spaghetti straps that molds against my body.

Her first choice was a backless red one, but that was a hell no.

And heels. We can't forget the heels that are currently murdering my feet.

But what makes me really uncomfortable is the fact that I'm wearing a dress. They used to be my preferred style when I was young since they made me feel like a princess.

But I almost never wear them ever since that night I was drugged in one and *he* ripped it off me so easily.

I slide sideways to get a better view of Ava, who's dancing, shaking her arse, and attracting a group of guys.

As they start approaching her, I push through the crowd and wrap an arm around her waist.

"You came!" She grabs me by the shoulder and makes me twirl. "You're dancing!"

"No, I'm not. Let's get out of here." I discreetly motion to the side. "Some wankers have been eyeing you."

"Looking is free. Touching is not." She puts both her hands on my waist and makes me sway to the music with her.

All my attention remains on those guys and some sleazy older man who's watching us and licking his lips.

Gross.

My best friend is completely oblivious to them or the looks we get as she brings on her dancing A game.

"Relax, Cecy!" she tells me. "Can't you turn off your brain for a second?"

I wish I could.

But I saw a bunch of people buying drugs in the corners. And that sleazy man just touched his junk while watching us.

There's no way in hell I'll be able to turn my brain off after witnessing some of these scenes. Even I realize that becoming overly suspicious and careful is a translation of my trauma.

The world isn't a safe place.

And while I want to get out of here, I can't just leave Ava alone. Those arseholes will probably pounce on her—not that they wouldn't while I'm here, but I can at least try to save her.

The guys reach us first. All three are tall, well-dressed, and look like university kids. Probably a year older than me.

One of them, a curly-haired brunet, slides behind Ava, dancing to the same rhythm as her without touching her, and the two others, one a blond and the other with black hair, surround me.

My temperature rises to my throat, cheeks, and ears. I'm thinking about grabbing Ava's hand and scramming the hell out of here, but she's dancing with Curly Hair and wiggling her arse against him.

"Relax," she mouths, probably seeing the doomsday reaction on my face.

Easy for her to say. I don't know how the hell I'll be able to even breathe properly in this atmosphere.

Curly Hair whispers something in her ear and she laughs and shouts back, "I'm Ava! That's Cecily!"

"I love your name, Cecily," the blond guy murmurs in my ear in an American accent, and my knee-jerk reaction is to elbow him in the side and run. "I'm Steven."

"Larry," the black-haired one supplies.

One of them, Steven, touches my arm. Goosebumps erupt all over my skin, but it's respectful enough that I don't feel threatening vibes.

You also didn't feel threatening vibes with that scum.

I lift my head to look at Ava and she's full-on dancing with the curly-haired one, both of them showing their moves. She slides her fingers through her hair and tips her head back in rhythm to the music.

I can't help scanning our surroundings for Eli's presence. If he has eyes here—and he has eyes everywhere—then she's in deep trouble.

"Donovan and I are going to get some drinks!" she shouts and then disappears with the guy before I can stop her.

And I'm left with these two.

Larry remains behind me, dancing slowly to match my awkward rhythm while Steven comes in front of me and grabs my arm.

He picked up that I'm peeved out about being touched, so he's been keeping his respectful distance, and I appreciate that. At least, I don't feel the need to retch all over his designer shoes.

But I still want to remove myself from this situation.

Clubs are really not my scene.

And neither is peopling.

Where the hell is Ava?

"I haven't seen you around," Steven shouts over the music as he and his friend basically sandwich me in the middle.

"I don't usually do this," I say with enough awkwardness to feel embarrassed.

“Figured! You’re too beautiful to be hidden away.”

My spine jerks upright and I stare at him with wide eyes.

You’re too beautiful to be hidden away, Cecily.

Those exact words stumble in my brain, crashing and clawing until I’m unable to breathe.

He said them to me when we first started dating.

No, this can’t be.

I’m imagining things, right?

Steven looks nothing like him, but maybe he knows him?

His hand slides from my arm to my waist, getting bolder and rougher.

I hyperventilate, but instead of breathing harshly, my body goes into a state of shock. It’s hardening and turning into stone.

No, no. I need to get out of here first.

Shit, shit.

I attempt to elbow him, but I’m not moving.

I *can’t* move.

Larry’s clutching my hip now, his touch burning the material of my dress and branding itself on my skin.

I don’t want him to touch me, but I can’t stop him.

Hell, I can’t even breathe properly.

The state of helplessness rushes to the surface, bubbling with nausea and terrorizing fear.

Just when I think I’m going to be sick, a large hand grips Steven’s shoulder. A masculine, veiny, very familiar hand.

In a flash, Steven is wrenched back so powerfully that he nearly knocks out a few other people with him.

I swear my heart flutters when I see exactly who’s in front of me.

My eyes slide over Jeremy’s impressive build, the jeans and leather jacket that hug his muscles, before they finally lock on his cold, blank face.

While this isn’t particularly different from his usual expression, there’s something unusual now.

An emotion so potent, it lingers in the air and strikes me in my bones.

Wrath.

It drips off Jeremy in a deranged manner as he clutches Steven with apparent nonchalance but hidden rage.

The type that simmers beneath the surface and has dire consequences.

“Fuck off.” He throws Steven away as if he were no different than a useless rag.

Larry, who was behind me, goes to his friend’s side and casts a fearful look in our direction, probably recognizing Jeremy.

And while he’s not prone to violence in public, except for when it’s in the fighting ring, anyone on the island knows he’s not one to be messed with.

Even I know that.

And I still went to his mansion that first time. Sometimes, I hate and admire that version of me in equal measure.

Slowly, the stiffness unlocks from my muscles, but I remain frozen in place, for a completely different reason.

The fact that Jeremy is here. In public. Not attempting to hide our acquaintance.

Steven starts in our direction again, brushing off Larry who’s trying to hold him back.

“We were here first,” he snarls in Jeremy’s face, obviously not reading the atmosphere, and probably not recognizing him.

Jeremy drives his fist into Steven’s face so hard that the people surrounding us gasp.

He falls to the floor, clutching his bleeding nose and wailing.

“I said.” Jeremy towers over him. “Fuck. Off. Touch her again and a bleeding nose will be the least of your worries.”

Larry tries to help his friend up as he screams over the music, “Security! Security!”

Suddenly, a muscular blond guy appears behind them. The guard whom Annika said is called Ilya and acts as Jeremy’s senior guard.

He shares a look with Jeremy, then he singlehandedly drags both Steven and Larry out by a grip on the collars of their shirts.

And just like that, I’m left all alone with a beast of a man who’s staring at me as if he wants to throttle me.

Yes, there are people around us, lots of them, but they might as well be invisible under the invading scrutiny of his gaze.

He steps forward, killing the distance between us and crushing his chest against my breasts. My heart hammers as my nose fills with his scent.

It’s impossible to be unaffected when I’m overwhelmed by his warmth, presence, and that enchanting look in his ash eyes.

Silence hangs between us for a few intense seconds, and I resist the urge to blurt something incoherent. Then all of a sudden, he grabs hold of my elbow and basically shoves his way off of the dance floor, dragging me behind him. I have to jog to keep up with his long strides, and that just puts more pressure on my assaulted feet.

But it's impossible to end this hurricane or to escape the wrath that's radiating off him in waves.

He storms down the hall and stops in front of a room that's guarded by a man in a black suit.

Upon seeing us, he nods at Jeremy and opens the leather-studded door. Jeremy barely nods at the man before he drags me inside and swings the door shut.

All the chaos, music, and chatter from outside dies down. My heavy breathing becomes loud in the silence of what I think is a VIP room.

Two elegant velvet sofas sit opposite each other with a glass coffee table between them.

But I barely focus on the details when Jeremy slams me against the wall. The aggressive energy from earlier multiplies tenfold as his large hand grips me by the hip and his deep, angry-calm voice strikes me like a whip.

"Not only did you refuse to keep your side of the bargain and show up, but you also turned off your phone, wore fuck-me clothes, and came here to dance with some assholes." His hand slides to where my dress stops at my thighs. "Did you think anyone else could touch you, Cecily? Hmm? That someone else would be able to put their fucking hands on what's mine?"

Hand bunching in the material, he yanks the dress up in one go, making me gasp. "I'll cut their wrists off before they come near my cunt." He rips my underwear off and throws the shreds aside, then digs his fingers into my skin. "My ass." He flings me against him and his jeans create friction against my stimulated core. "My fucking property."

I bang a hand on his chest, lips trembling, as the onslaught of emotions and erotic stimuli rushes over me. "I'm not your property, Jeremy. I'm a person."

"*My* person," he nearly growls the words. "Next time you let anyone touch you, I'll fuck you in their blood and make you come all over their corpse."

In a swift movement, he frees his cock and bumps the crown against my clit.

Once.

Twice.

On the third time, I'm about to beg him for it like the wanton girl he trained me to be.

I've become so attuned to his rough handling that I'm dripping between my thighs.

Without any warning, he thrusts inside me in one violent go.

My back arches off the wall and a powerful shudder rips through me.

He lifts my legs so they're wrapped around his sculpted waist as he drives into me with deep, harsh strokes that are meant to punish.

"This is the final time you ignore me. You will never come to a place like this without me again."

I grab onto his neck with both hands. I feel like if I don't hold on to him, I'll fall to my face.

"We're not in a relationship," I say, despite my shattered voice. "You have no right to tell me what to do."

"Being in a relationship or not doesn't make you want me any less. Feel your cunt taking my cock so well and your body coming alive for me? No one else, *me*." He releases one of my arse cheeks and then slaps it. "Next time you let another dick near you, I want you to remember how you're milking my cock like a dirty little whore."

"You did it first," I strain, unable to keep up with the rhythm as I bounce off his cock. "You had that girl hanging on your arm earlier. Why don't you go to her and leave me alone?"

"Is that what you want?" He pulls out all the way to the tip, then slams back in, hitting my G-spot and turning me into a puddle of emotions. "You want me to ram my cock into another cunt?"

My mind goes awry at images of him with another woman, namely that blonde bombshell Maya.

"Tell me, Cecily. You want me to fuck her until she's screaming my name?"

My lips tremble and I purse them shut before I say, "If you do that, I'll sleep with someone else."

I probably wouldn't, because the idea of sex with someone other than Jeremy still scares the bejeesus out of me. But I won't let him have the satisfaction of crumbling me to pieces.

His expression turns blank, too blank, as he slides his hand up my breasts and calmly wraps it around my throat. “And who is that someone, hmm? A guy who’ll kiss your body, caress you, and make love to you? That’s not what you want, Cecily. Far from it. You love being chased and degraded. You love being fucked into oblivion until you lose control. You love being my filthy little slut.”

And then he’s choking me as he drives into me harder. He fucks me like he owns every inch of me, like he can’t miss any part, any nook or cranny.

The more he confiscates my air, the tighter I grow around him, strangling his dick as he groans.

He likes having me so helpless, so pliant, so attuned to his ruthless rhythm that I moan because of it.

That I beg for more due to it.

In no time, he’s turned me into a masochist for his violence. I’m so used to him that I’ve been trained to crave his savagery.

My core clenches in short intervals, and when he hits my secret spot again, I’m spluttering due the lack of air and coming so hard, I feel like I might pass out.

But I don’t.

I stay there, being strangled against the wall as his cock plows into me, hard, fast, and unforgiving. Jeremy isn’t the type who comes quickly. He draws out his pleasure, needing to rearrange my insides before he even considers the option of coming.

He goes on and on until I think he’ll never be done. Just when I believe he’ll finally come, he changes our position. He fucks me against the sofa with my arse in the air and then on all fours on the floor with his fingers wrapped around my hair. Then on my back while he looms over me like a tyrant god.

One who needs blood sacrifices.

Because that’s what he does. He leans down, pulls on one of my breasts, and bites down on the soft flesh so hard, it burns.

Blood coats his lips when he lifts his head and growls, “Say my name.”

I purse my lips.

“Cecily, say my fucking name.”

A tear slides down my cheek, and I turn my head to the side, refusing to give him what he wants.

“I said. Say my name.” Jeremy bites down again and I scream in pain, but I don’t say his name.

He fucks me more ruthlessly than before, pounding into me until I slide across the floor. He fucks me like he needs me to feel every savage thrust.

He fucks me like he’s on the edge and I can either save or push him down the cliff.

It’s raw and dangerous. Illicit and primal.

Intense and punishing.

Then, finally, I feel his seed coating my insides in a long rush.

I’m sniffling, still trying to get my bearings when Jeremy pulls out of me, uses some tissues to clean my thighs, then hauls me to my unstable feet by my arm.

I pull away from him and smooth my dress, wincing when I cover the bite mark. Still, I refuse to make a sound and use all my dignity to remain composed. He’s turned me into his whore, but that’s only during sex.

If he thinks I’ll be his plaything in real life, he has another thing coming.

I smooth my hair and dab beneath my eyes, thankful for waterproof mascara.

For the life of me, I can’t understand why a mere touch from other guys turn me into a mess, but Jeremy is able to fuck me up, splinter my world to pieces, and I don’t feel threatened.

Hell, I’ve never had a panic attack around him.

A large body steps into my line of vision, and when I ignore him, he lifts my chin with his thumb and index finger, eyes narrowed and jaw set. “What the fuck was that all about?”

“If you want someone to say your name, go to your Maya.” I flip my hair, then I walk out of there. I want to waltz out like a badass, but I have to move as slowly as possible because I’m sore.

That’s when I remember something very important.

Ava.

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JEREMY

The need to pummel something into the ground reddens my vision.

My fist clenches, but I don't act on the urges.

Or impulses.

In fact, I'm calculative to a fault and only take action once I've predicted all the possible outcomes of a certain situation.

Apparently, that principle doesn't apply to the infuriating girl who just left the room.

I stay behind for a few minutes, not only to expel all impulsive thoughts, but also to put my cock to fucking sleep.

It doesn't matter that I was inside her not ten minutes ago; there's always this primal need to claw deep into her skin and never stop.

But either I calm the fuck down or I'll permanently kidnap her to my lair, where no one will be able to find her, let alone see her.

Or touch her.

The image of those two fuckers putting their hands on her sends a new wave of rage—definitely not the image to have in my futile attempts to relax.

I'm not worried that she'll get away. I'm acquainted with the club's owner, a new guy trying to do business with the mafia, and he'll give me access to security footage if I ask for it. Also, my most efficient guard, Ilya, has explicit orders to watch Cecily in case she turns off her phone like she did earlier or disappears without notice.

It's how I knew she was here and I followed.

I dial his number, and he answers after two rings.

“Situation,” I say point-blank.

“Miss Knight is trying to carry her friend, who’s drunk enough to laugh while she’s sleeping.”

“Location.”

“The left side of the bar.”

“Shoo away any unwanted attention until I get there.”

“Got it, Boss.”

“What happened to the two from earlier?” I step out of the room, not feeling any calmer in the fucking slightest.

“I got them thrown out of the club.”

“Good.”

“Boss.”

“Yeah?”

“One of them, the blond, said something that made Miss Knight go pale.”

I pause, my finger sliding up and down the back of the phone. Now that I think about it, Cecily looked to be on the verge of her dissociating state. I thought it was because she was surrounded by two guys and might’ve felt threatened in the presence of the opposite sex.

It was a provocation when she said she’d sleep with someone else. I know she can’t, but it still pissed me the fuck off.

“What did he say?” I ask Ilya.

“Something about her being too beautiful to be hidden. As soon as he said those words, it was like something came over her.”

That could be part of her cautious character, but something tells me that’s not the case.

“He’s a student at our university, right?”

“Probably. He and his friend are American.”

“Find him.”

That’s when I’ll know if it’s only a small-time felony for daring to dance with her or something else. And who am I kidding? This might as well be an excuse to cut his dick off for having the audacity to touch her.

After hanging up, I stride to the bar area. Ilya stands on the opposite end, close enough to intervene if anyone pushes their luck, but far enough not to be noticed.

Cecily pulls on a drunk Ava’s hand, only to be tugged down and trip.

She’s wearing heels tonight and a fuck-me dress that’s designed to show off her curves, her slim legs, and her pale shoulders.

My cock twitches at the sight. Again. And I close my eyes for a brief second before I stalk toward them.

“Come on, Ava.” Cecily grabs her friend’s hand. “I told you I can’t carry you when you’re drunk.”

“Cecy!” Ava wraps her in a hug, grinning. “My beautiful bestie.”

Then she sniffs and pulls back. “Why do you smell like male cologne? And sex? Oh my fucking God, did you shag?”

Cecily’s face goes red.

Ava’s mouth opens and then closes before she blurts, “OMG, OMG, you’re not a prude anymore. OMGEEE. Everyone! This girl right here finally got the D!”

“Ava!” Cecily slams a hand on her mouth. “I swear to God, if you don’t get up and help me take you to the car, I’m going to call Eli so he’ll pick us up.”

A glare is all Ava offers before she sluggishly gets up and leans on Cecily.

“You’re a cruel little bitch.” Ava staggers, then falls on her. “How can you threaten me with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?”

Cecily tries to half carry her and crumbles every second at her weight. “Ugh, when did you become so heavy?”

“Rude. I’m not heavy…” Ava trails off, and blinks upon seeing me standing behind them. “Oh, hi, Anni’s scary brother. Do you also party here? Good taste, good taste. Also, can you let Anni live a little? Thanks in advance.”

Cecily freezes, then whips her head in my direction. She must loosen her grip from around Ava, because she falls to the floor in a heap of giggles.

“What are you doing here?” Cecily purses her lips. “Go away.”

“Don’t.” I step into her space and she has no room to push back unless she’s willing to step on her friend.

I grab her by the waist and press her front against my chest. “You seem to be developing the habit of defying me just to get on my nerves, but that won’t serve any purpose except for pissing me off. And you know exactly what I become like when I’m mad, so don’t fucking test me.”

She bangs her tiny fists against my chest as if that will somehow hurt me. “Just leave me alone. Me trying to get my friend home has nothing to

do with our arrangement, so you shouldn't even be here."

"I'll be the one to decide that." I release her for no other reason than to control myself.

If I touch her soft skin for one more minute, I'll need to plow inside her tight heat.

Again.

Cecily crouches down to hold Ava, who's using the floor as her pillow and is practically sleeping. She nudges her friend and implores her to wake up, but there's no sign of responsiveness.

I nod at Ilya and he swiftly picks up Ava and carries her in his arms. Cecily's eyes widen. "What are you doing?"

"Giving you a ride home." I interlink her fingers with mine when she tries to snatch Ava from Ilya.

When he starts toward the back exit, she practically jogs behind him, and only my grip keeps her from physically stopping him.

This is the first time I've held her hand and I can't help feeling that it's small, soft, and fits perfectly in mine.

"I can call one of our friends," she tries to tell me, having figured that Ilya won't listen to her.

"Or you can just go with me," I say, tightening my hold on her hand when I remember that fucker Landon is one of their *friends*.

I should've really put him in a coma when I had the chance.

I stopped because people romanticize about anyone who's hurt, and I wasn't doing the motherfucker the favor.

"Eli will kill me if he finds out about this," she mutters.

"Why?" I ask.

"I just let another guy carry her." She throws her free hand in the air. "You wouldn't understand."

"He wouldn't be able to lay a finger on you," I say matter-of-factly.

She just releases a long breath, and I swear she's about to smile but stops herself. "You guys are cut from the same cloth."

When we reach her small car, she beeps it open, and Ilya gives me a glance because the car might as well be a tiny turtle's nest.

I nod at him to put Ava at the back. As soon as Cecily makes sure her friend is all settled, she opts to drive, but Ilya is already sliding into the driver's seat after a lot of bending.

When I join him in the front seat, it's like I'm sitting in a damn toy car.

I have to bend my legs and head, despite pushing back the seat to its maximum capacity.

Cecily stares at us through the window and does a shit job at hiding her smile.

“Get in,” I order. “And this isn’t funny.”

“It actually is. You two would look adorable with one of Anni’s fluffy bandanas.”

“*Cecily*.”

“Fine, fine. You don’t have to order me around about everything, you know.” She shakes her head but then sits beside her friend and lays Ava’s head on her shoulder.

Thankfully their dorm isn’t far from the club, and we arrive before Ilya or I can get a muscle cramp.

Cecily starts to protest when Ilya carries Ava inside but soon drops it, knowing full well that she can’t do it herself.

I stay in the living room as he takes Ava to her room, with Cecily following behind.

Soon after, he reemerges, and she slams the door shut.

“Find those two from tonight. The one who was with Ava, too.”

He nods and heads out, closing the front door behind him.

I study the living room that Cecily spends some of her time in. Annika always talks about how Cecily and Glyndon want peaceful nights in, while she and Ava prefer to go out.

It’s simple, full of small stuffed rabbits and other animals that I’m sure isn’t her doing.

Her room speaks of her more than this shared space.

I make a swift check of the place in case of a security hazard, but I find nothing suspicious.

For now.

Fifteen minutes later, Cecily reemerges from Ava’s room, holding her heels in her hand and tiptoeing as she slowly closes the door.

I stalk behind her and whisper in her ear, “Why are you acting like a thief?”

She gasps and turns around so fast, she tumbles backward. I grab her by the elbow and steady her. Her shoes end up on the floor, though.

Her throat works with a swallow as she stares at me and whispers, “I thought you left.”

“I’m obviously still here,” I murmur back.

“I heard the front door open and close.”

Which is probably why she let her guard down. She might not be as oblivious to her surroundings as I previously thought.

“That was Ilya.” I lean closer. “How long are we supposed to keep whispering?”

She grabs my hand—no, it’s just my wrist—and drags me to her room, then closes the door. “You need to leave.”

“Why?”

“How the hell am I supposed to explain you to Ava? We’re not in a relationship.”

That’s the second fucking time she’s said that sentence tonight. The difference is that she doesn’t sound accusing now and is only stating facts.

“Do you want to be in a relationship?”

Her lips part the slightest bit, but that’s enough of a sign. “What?”

“You were jealous of Maya, and you apparently need a label to put your busy brain at ease. Will being in a relationship satisfy you?”

“What does being in a relationship with you mean, Jeremy? That you get to order me around, have me do your bidding while you continue to push me out? Because that’s called ownership, not a relationship, and I’m not a fan.”

“Watch that mouth.”

She releases a long breath, then speaks in a less strained tone. “A relationship means compromise, giving and taking, a partnership. It’s not an imbalance of power where you have the last word in everything and I’m along for the ride.”

“You love the ride.”

“Sexually, yeah, I do. I give you free rein to do whatever you please in that department. But not in the real world, Jeremy. I’m a human being with feelings, fears, and preferences. I’m also an independent person who cherishes her freedom. If you force me all the time, I’ll eventually close myself off from you. I don’t want that, and I’m sure you don’t want that either, right?”

I narrow my eyes on her.

She’s asking for something. What exactly, I don’t know.

“Say it.”

Her brow furrows. “Say what?”

“What you want.”

“I just want to know more about you. It’s unfair that you’re the only one who knows things about me.”

“You know everything there is to know.”

“Everything? You mean the fact that you study business, are the head of the Heathens, and a mafia heir? Those tell me nothing about your character.”

“You know about the bike, the cottage, and my sexual flavors.”

She relaxes a little, probably finally figuring out how she’s underestimating how much she knows me. Almost on the same level as my parents.

Hell, even they don’t know what I’m into.

She steps closer. “Have you always had this kink?”

“Since I hit puberty, yes.”

“When did you first act on it?”

“During that initiation when I was chasing you.”

Her face blushes. “You…never tried it before?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t trust anyone to do it with.”

“Does that mean you trust me?” She looks at me with big green eyes so full of hope and renewed affection.

No, she wants *my* affection.

She wants more from me.

Me.

That one baffles the fuck out of me. Why would she? The only thing I know how to give her is pleasure.

“Partially,” I say in answer to her question.

Her shoulders hunch and some of the brightness from before dims. “Why not fully?”

Because you called that motherfucker’s name during that first time.

And she refused to call mine earlier.

Not to mention that she’s begrudgingly into this, partly because I threatened her, partly because she can’t—and won’t—find anyone who satisfies her kink aside from me. Who touches her, fucks her, and pushes her buttons like I do.

But if she has the chance, I have no doubt she’ll bolt.

“It’s my turn to ask the questions.” I cross my arms. “What did that blond fucker do that caused you to zone out?”

She blinks at the jarring change of subject. “He didn’t do anything, but he said something too similar to what Jonah said when we first got together.”

“Who’s Jonah?” I ask, even though I know exactly who the fucker is.

“My scum of an ex,” she snarls at the mere mention of him.

That’s my girl.

“Was it too similar?” I ask.

“It was actually word for word.” She shudders. “It was creepy as hell.”

“Do you think they’re acquaintances?”

“I don’t know. I hope not.” A tinge of fear slips into her gaze. She’s scared that the reason behind her nightmares will come back into her life.

And I’ll get rid of it before it even gets close.

“I’m going to change my clothes,” she announces, and when I remain there, she adds, “that’s your cue to leave.”

“I will after you fall asleep.”

I can tell she wants to object, but she releases a sigh and goes on about her business.

I’ll wait for her to fall asleep and then I’ll find out exactly why the blond fucker and his friend approached Cecily tonight.

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JEREMY

"Go." Ilya rattles the door off of its hinges on our way inside when we were supposed to be discreet.

The look of absolute shock on the motherfuckers' faces when we slip into their apartment is worth it, though.

The dark-haired one, Larry, flinches from his slumber, blinks slowly, and then looks down at his barely covered junk.

His friend with curly hair, Donovan, wakes up next from his sleeping position on the floor.

There's no sign of Steven.

Ilya nods at me and flings open the other doors in search of him.

"What the fuck?" Donovan says in a craggy voice. It's early morning, and while this operation was supposed to happen late last night, I kind of couldn't leave when Cecily fell asleep in my arms.

And I may have spent hours watching her sleep like the creep she labeled me as.

It wasn't until Ilya texted me, reminding me that these fuckers have classes this morning and asking if we should reschedule for tonight, that I finally left her side.

The fact that I actually struggled to peel her warmth off me and leave is bothersome and downright annoying.

Ilya hauls Steven up with a grip on his collar. The bastard is sporting a purple bruise from when he was acquainted with my fist last night, and he looks like a grotesque version of himself.

My guard shoves him between his friends and makes the three of them kneel in front of the sofa while they fruitlessly struggle and release some juvenile *what the fuck*s.

“My father is powerful,” says Donovan, licking his lips and sweating profusely.

“What a coincidence.” I tilt my head to the side. “So is mine, but you don’t see me using his name or influence.”

Larry stares at Ilya, who’s nothing short of a wall behind him, then blurts, “Can we talk about this?”

“That’s what I had in mind.” I make a show of removing my jacket and laying it on a nearby chair before going back to stand in front of them. “You had a mission last night that entailed approaching Ava and Cecily, separating them, and cornering Cecily. I want to know all about that mission—the why, how, and who.”

Steven snarls, “Fuck you.”

I drive my fist into the good side of his face until blood explodes all over his features, splattering them with red, and then casually step back. “That wasn’t an answer. We’ll try again. Who put you up to it?”

“Listen, man.” Donovan trembles at the sight of his friend. “We really meant no harm.”

I punch him, harder than I did his friend, and he wails like a kicked puppy, grabbing his face and cursing.

My attention slides to Larry. “Will you tell me what I need to know, or should you meet your fate first?”

Steven tries to stand up, but Ilya shoves him back down and kicks Donovan, who comes to his aid.

Larry watches his useless friends and then studies my fist. “Fuck this.”

“No,” Steven shouts and wiggles under my guard’s clutches. “Don’t tell this motherfucker—”

His words end on an *oomph* when Ilya kicks him in the gut.

“It’s not worth it,” Larry says, then stares at me. “We were told by some guy at the club that if we did something for him, we’d get free drugs.”

My finger slides back and forth on my thigh. A guy at the club?

Jonah is in fucking London. What would he be doing at the club? Unless he dropped by for a visit?

But that’s not right either, considering I tagged him and I know precisely where that motherfucker is at all times.

Note to self: check with my guy on Jonah’s whereabouts last night.

I retrieve my phone, scroll to the pictures of the scum and show it to the three of them. “Is this him?”

“No,” Larry and Donovan say in unison.

I don’t even need to wait for Steven’s answer. No flash of recognition shone in their eyes when they saw the picture.

Unless they’re highly trained killers or psychopaths who are excellent at disguising their emotions, it’s impossible to hide that.

“What did he tell you to do?” I ask with a calm I don’t feel.

Larry swallows twice, then licks his lips three times before he speaks. “He pointed at two girls at the bar and told us to separate them. He didn’t care what we did to the blonde, but we had to make the silver-haired one uncomfortable. He told us to start respectively, though, or she would bolt, and if she bolted, we couldn’t have the good stuff. After we gained her trust us, we could grope her or do whatever we pleased.”

Blood boils in my veins, and destructive energy bubbles inside me with the need to purge.

“Whatever you pleased,” I repeat with a voice hanging on edge.

“We weren’t planning to do anything,” Donovan blurts. “I swear.”

My gaze strays to Steven. “How about you, motherfucker? Did you have any ideas after you got the ‘whatever you please’ green light?”

“No,” he says in a complete bullshitting tone.

“I think you’re lying. I think you planned to get under her skin and have free access to her. He told you that sentence, didn’t he? *You’re too beautiful to be hidden away.* Probably said you should use that to fuck with her head and make her pliant. But here’s the thing.” I grab him by the collar, hauling him to his feet. “That girl you touched belongs to me, and do you know what I do to people who look at, let alone hurt, what’s mine? I make them wish for death.”

Steven's eyes shine with unbounded fear for the first time since we broke into their apartment.

He knows he fucked up and messed with the wrong person. The one person’s path he should never have crossed.

If they’d only made the mistake of approaching her in the club, a punch and a blacklisting from the club would be enough. Not really, but I would’ve forced myself to stop at that.

But these three fuckers had the nerve to hurt her emotionally and bring back memories she's been trying so hard to get over.

"Here's how it will go. I'll punish you for daring to come near Cecily and having the audacity to touch her, and I will make sure it hurts. I'll also leave a scar so you'll remember me. Then you'll remove yourselves from her life. If I spot you within a ten-mile radius of her, I will fucking kill you and dump you so deep in the sea, no one will find your corpse."

Then I singlehandedly beat the fuck out of the three of them, but Steven is different. Steven also gets to be waterboarded to within an inch of his life while he bleeds all over the apartment and shits himself.

Steven will remain on my radar long after he's healthy, so I'll beat the fuck out of him all over again. He'll live in fear, looking over his shoulder, under his bed, and in the closet, searching for the devil from his scariest nightmares.

It takes longer than I'd initially planned for us to leave their place. Partly because I enjoyed bloodying them the fuck up a bit too much.

Unlike what rumors imply, I don't get off on violence, and I don't go out of my way to pursue it.

Violence is just one of many purging methods that can be replaced by more peaceful ones, such as a bike ride.

Or a ruthless fuck with Cecily.

But I sure as hell got off on it when I punished those lowlifes and left them bleeding on their apartment floor.

However, it feels like too little compared to what they dared to do to Cecily—or worse, what they planned.

Something still sits wrong with me, though. The fact that Jonah wasn't the one who put them up to it.

But that doesn't make sense. Jonah is the only one who knows about his courting ways with Cecily.

Unless the slimy fuck put on a disguise. The three losers were probably drunk or high, and the club was dark, so they could've mistaken some details.

As Ilya pulls the car out and drives down the road, I fetch my phone and ask for security footage from the club last night.

The reply is almost immediate.

I scroll to the time the three fuckers went into the club, jumping around like monkeys on crack. Soon after, they slip into a corner near the

bathroom. The only hint of their companion is a glimpse of his black shirt.

That must be the guy who promised them drugs. I watch more and more of the footage, but there's no sign of him near them, not even at the bar, where he would be watching his handiwork from.

It's impossible to locate him in a busy club when all I have is that he was wearing a black shirt.

Could it be Jonah? I'm about to call my guy back in London, but I get distracted by a text.

Cecily: Morning. Thanks for these *sparkling heart emoji*

I spend a full minute of intense staring at the sparkling heart but still can't find an explanation for it. One thing's for sure, I like it, and it caught me completely by fucking surprise since it's the first time she's sent one.

Then I notice that she attached a picture of a box of waffles I had delivered to her apartment earlier.

Cecily: How did you know I love waffles?

It's in her stupid journal. I think they're her comfort food whenever she wants to feel better. I thought she might need a pick-me-up after last night.

While she didn't have any sleep paralysis, she shivered while she slept in my arms and tears clung to her lids. That's part of the reason why I couldn't bring myself to leave until she fell into quality sleep.

Jeremy: I know everything about you.

I'm about to tuck away my phone, expecting her to be too busy preparing for school, but her reply comes immediately.

Cecily: Is that how you managed to find me at the club? You had Ilya watch me, didn't you? Wait a minute. Was Ilya doing the job for you all those weeks when you disappeared?

This little fox is too smart for her own good.

Jeremy: He was there in case you needed protection.

Cecily: More like, he was a pseudo-stalker. Seriously, the one I need protection from the most is you.

Jeremy: Too bad no one can protect you from me.

Cecily: Don't be so sure. I can stand up for myself.

I'm beginning to see that, considering everything she's demanded and how she put her foot down last night, and I'm not sure if I like that side of her.

Fuck it. I do. Just not when she's using it to get away from me.

Jeremy: You can stand up to me all you like, but there are nonnegotiable things, such as your safety.

Cecily: Oh, please. You have a tyrant's mentality and think everything is nonnegotiable. But don't even think I'll sit there and take it. That's simply not going to happen. Anyway, thanks for the waffles. Ava and I will enjoy them.

Jeremy: I sent them to you, not Ava.

Cecily: Sharing is caring.

Jeremy: I don't share. Everything about you is mine.

Besides, I don't like the way Ava was all over her when they danced at the club. Or how Cecily takes care of her with nauseating affection. Something she doesn't even do with me.

I'm so tempted to eliminate Ava completely, but that might make me lose Cecily for good.

So I shove that thought to the back of my mind.

For now.

Cecily: Are you seriously jealous of my best friend? Who's also a girl?

Jeremy: You give her too much of your attention.

Cecily: Okay, Mr. Caveman. Have a nice day, and please try not to hurt anyone *sparkling heart emoji*

I keep staring at that emoji longer than I did the first one.

"Is something wrong?" Ilya asks from his position behind the steering wheel.

"What does a sparkling heart emoji mean?"

Ilya stares at me for a beat, looking stunned for the first time ever, before he focuses back on the road. "Uh, don't all the heart emojis mean love and affection?"

"But it has sparkles around it. They should mean something else."

"I'm not sure."

I'm not sure why I'm focusing on this either. I'm used to Annika sending a newspaper of emojis stickers and GIFs in her texts. And they're often filled with all sorts of hearts, primarily purple and white ones.

But Cecily rarely talks in emojis. She's too straightforward for that.

Still, I want to know exactly what she meant by sending it.

"Boss."

"Hmm?" I answer Ilya absentmindedly, still staring at her text.

"What are your plans regarding Miss Volkov and the guy she's seeing?"

I turn off my phone’s screen at the reminder of my sister and her unwanted crush.

I’ve let it slide all this time to give her more freedom, but it has recently come to my attention that Creighton King, the guy Annika has chosen to like, is plotting something with Landon.

And while I didn’t give a fuck at the beginning that they’re cousins, mainly because Creighton stays out of anything related to the Elites, Nikolai found out that’s not the case lately.

It’ll be a cold day in hell before I allow that rotten family, especially Landon, to get close to my sister.

So I have to stop it before it’s too late.

Even if I have to hurt her in the process.

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CECILY

"Who got you smiling like that?"

I have no idea how I manage not to flinch and then calmly place the phone on the table.

We're in the kitchen that's filled with purple and pink chairs, utensils, and curtains. Even the fridge wrapper and dishes have some of those colors, thanks to the two girly fashionistas Glyn and I share a space with.

Ava sits across from me, waffle in hand while she licks the syrup that's managed to escape from her fingers.

She finally woke up when I announced I got us waffles. Her hair is gathered in a messy bun, and she has a white de-puffing mask on. Add that to the constant groaning and moaning about last night and it's like I'm in the company of a whiny ghost.

I busy myself with cutting a piece of waffle to avoid meeting her gaze. "Oh, nothing. Just some meme."

Please don't let it show on my face that I'm giddier than usual this morning.

"Uh-huh. Didn't know memes made you look like you're in love."

"Don't be ridiculous." I pour some orange juice and slide it in her direction. "Eat up or you'll be late to school."

"Try again." She lifts her leg up on the chair and hugs her knee, then brings the waffle to her mouth while she narrows her eyes at me. "*Sooo* I might have been drunk, *but,* and this is the important part, I remember things."

Blimey.

I'd hoped she was too hammered to remember stuff—she usually doesn't. Or maybe she only pretends she doesn't.

Mimicking a monk's serenity, I take a sip of my coffee. "Things like what?"

"Like how Jeremy was at the club last night."

That's not so bad. I can work with it. "He probably goes to all the clubs on the island. That's not weird."

"The fact that he talked to you is. He was close." She holds her thumb and forefinger a hairsbreadth apart. "This close."

"You were drunk. You probably saw it wrong."

"Did I also see it wrong when he got into your car with his silent scary mate? Or when you were talking to him outside my room? He was right here last night! Well, not here in the kitchen, but here in the flat."

My ears heat despite my extensive attempts to appear unaffected. That alone gives Ava the answer she's been playing detective to find.

"OMG! You totally shagged him in the club, didn't you?"

"Ava!"

"You did!" She all but rips the mask from her face, revealing her shocked expression. "You smelled like him, and you had these puffy lips, watery eyes, and flushed cheeks. I think I'm going into a state of shock."

"Hey—"

She holds up a hand. "I just need a moment to process things."

I grow stiffer in my chair, and my T-shirt starts to stick to my back with sweat the longer I wait for her.

Ava opens her mouth a few times, then shakes her head and clamps it shut before she finally asks, "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Everything I heard and saw and eventually deduced?"

I nod. It's useless to hide it from her anyway. She would've found out sooner or later.

"Oh my fucking God. This is *huge*." She drops her leg to the floor and leans forward in her chair. "When did it start? How? Why is it Jeremy, of all people? *The* Jeremy Volkov. Why is the scary big guy at TKU the one you gave up your prude status for? You hated him! Most importantly, why didn't you tell me? I thought we shared everything."

I wince, gripping the cup of tea tighter before I set it back on the table. "It's not that I didn't want to tell you, it's that we're not really a thing, per

se.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You guys are shagging, right?”

“Uh, yeah. But we only recently started some sort of a relationship.”

At least, I think so.

Jeremy didn’t promise me anything, but he also didn’t say no to what I asked. I know that with time, he’ll come around. I’ll try to make him come around.

Because I can’t just stand there while he takes and only gives back sex in return. It’ll eventually drain me, and I’ll have nothing left.

“The more I listen, the more surreal this becomes.” Ava grabs her phone. “Hold on. I need support. Can I tell Anni and Glyn the news and call for an urgent girl squad meeting?”

I all but fly across the table and snatch her phone away. “No.”

A crease appears between her delicate brows. “Why not?”

“I told you this thing is new, and I’m not sure if it’ll work. So I don’t want to get the others, especially Anni, involved yet.”

Hell. I don’t even know how she’ll react to this. She was super pissed about that Maya trying to steal away her brother, so maybe, she doesn’t think anyone is worthy of him.

“Fine, fine. I respect that,” Ava grumbles and stretches out in her chair. “Now, tell me, why Jeremy?”

“I don’t know either.”

“Come on, there must be something that drew you to him. I would’ve sworn you hated his guts, background, and everything in between. So how did cursing him and the whole of TKU turn into dirty fucks at the club?”

I flop down on the chair beside her with a sigh. The first time I officially met Jeremy, at the fight club, when he was exerting his controlling behavior and kicking Annika out, feels like ages ago.

“Now that you’ve reminded me, I did hate his guts. Honestly, sometimes, I still do. He’s controlling, abrasive, and doesn’t have a gentle bone in his body. Well, mostly. He can force himself to be soft sometimes, but it’s like he’s an alien who’s emulating human behavior. It doesn’t come naturally to him, but he puts in the effort, so I guess that’s a start. Oh, and he’s persistent.”

A stalker, actually.

But I won't tell Ava unnecessary things. If she finds out the extent of how fucked up Jeremy and I are, she'll probably try to poke his eyes out and will get herself shot dead by his guards.

Besides, it's not that I feel threatened by his presence or whenever I sense him watching my every move.

In fact, I feel surprisingly safe.

"That seems serious." She takes a slurp from her orange juice, looking pensive.

"It's nothing of the sort. We're just winging it."

"Cecy, I love you. I really do. But you don't even know the meaning of that word. Besides, Jeremy definitely didn't look at you like he was *winging it*."

"You were so drunk that you fell asleep. You have no idea what expression either of us wore."

"I do too! I can't mistake something like that. He looked at you like he…" she trails off, seeming at a loss for the right word before she snaps her fingers. "Like he can't get enough of you and wants more, more, and everything."

"You…must be imagining things."

"Hell no. Trust me. I know that look all too well. That guy is so obsessed with you, he beat that bloke for daring to touch you."

"You…saw that?"

"Uh-huh. It's slowly coming back to me." She grins like a Cheshire cat. "That's when the fucking happened, right?"

"Ava!"

"All right! I can't believe you're still a prude even after sex with a beast like Jeremy. He looks like he likes it rough."

You have no idea.

"Can we change the subject, please?"

"Okay, okay." She leans over and wraps me in a hug. "I'm so happy for you and how you're finally moving on from Jonah."

I automatically stiffen at the mention of his name, and I hate that. I hate that he affects me even long after he got out of my life.

"What are you talking about?" I speak in a tone so awkward, it vibrates through my chest cavity. "I was over Jonah a long time ago."

"Bollocks." She pulls back and strokes my hair. "You haven't been the same since you broke up with him. It's like a piece of you has been missing

or something. You weren't always so gloomy and distant before him and you stopped wearing dresses and dolling up after he got out of your life. It's like he sucked out your energy and left you with nothing. I did ask Bran and Creigh if we should find the arsehole and kick him in the balls for hurting you, but Creigh said you probably wouldn't like that. I still scratched his car and ruined clothes for daring to hurt you."

My lips part as I listen to her. This is the first time I've heard their perspective about that clusterfuck. Ava wouldn't stop asking why I broke up with him, and I told her we weren't compatible.

That's the only excuse I could come up with at the time.

I thought they'd let it go, but apparently, that's not the case.

"Point is." Ava smiles. "I'm glad you're regaining your old self, even if slowly. And while I'm not sure if Jeremy is good enough for you, if he makes you smile while looking at his texts, then it's a start. I'll totally kick him in the nuts if he hurts you. He might kill me, but I will have died for a good cause."

"You're saying that as if Eli would let him put a finger on you."

"Shhh. Not He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named." She squints, then her eyes widen. "Oh, fuck."

"What?"

"Remember the tidbit about how things are slowly coming back to me?"

"Yeah?"

"I think He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named was at the club." She physically shivers.

"RIP. I love you."

"Cecy!" She glares but then touches her hair, pretending everything is perfect. "But whatever, it doesn't matter."

Uh-huh.

"Point is, I'm so happy and excited for you. Jeremy better treat you right." She hugs me again, and I wrap my arms around her.

Maybe it's time I finally choose to be happy.

LATER THAT NIGHT, I DRIVE TO THE COTTAGE.

Jeremy and I didn’t really talk about whether or not our arrangement will remain the same, but there’s no reason it shouldn’t.

Not only is this place ours, but it also hides us from the world so that it’s only the two of us.

And maybe I like that a little.

Okay, *a lot.*

Ava stepped out of her room and waggled her brows at me when I attempted to sneak out.

I threw a fluffy pillow at her, then picked it up after she dodged it and let it fall to the floor.

She just danced excitedly, made me put on her favorite lipstick, and did some provocative gesturing, but she didn’t make a sound so she wouldn’t wake Glyn up.

Earlier tonight, we were at the pub with everyone else, including Glyn, Anni, and Creigh. Because, of course, Ava completely forgot about last night's epic hangover and chose to have fun again.

Creigh sort of dragged Anni out of the circle soon after we got there, and Remi spent the rest of the night being dramatic about how he lost his spawn and how fast children grow up.

I think he really believes himself to be his father sometimes.

Me, on the other hand? I was bubbling with energy, counting the hours until I could come here.

I have no idea when this place started to grow so close to my heart, but it’s managed to snag a place.

As I park the car in front of the house, I pause when I find no trace of Jeremy’s bike.

I look at my smartwatch, and it’s about one in the morning—the time we normally meet.

Jeremy is usually here first, but I did come a little early tonight.

Trying not to feel dejected, I grab the bag of groceries and cleaning supplies I brought with me, then step into the house.

I light the fireplace and cook some soup and casserole. While waiting, I do some cleaning.

Not that the place is dirty, but it could glow up a bit more. It has its charm with its cozy furniture and intimate structure, but you have to look past the gothic feeling first.

After the food is ready, I cover it so it stays warm, then I go upstairs for a shower.

Fifteen minutes later, I step out dressed in a bathrobe while drying my hair. My phone vibrates once on the side table and I basically jog over to check the text.

The name Jeremy doesn't appear on my screen, and I hate how my chest deflates.

It's about three in the morning, and there's still no sign of him or even a text.

Instead, it's my best friend, who should be sleeping by now.

So should you.

Ava: Sooo I know you're probably busy, but I just learned something weird. Like super weird. Remember the guys from last night? The ones Jeremy pummeled to the ground for coming near you?

I sit on the bed and type.

Cecily: What about them?

Ava: Snap! Why are you here?

Cecily: What about you, then? Shouldn't you be sleeping?

Ava: I was practicing. Anyway, back to the topic. My gossip antennas let me know that two TKU students were admitted to A&E today. One of whom is in the ICU. Guess who? They're Larry and Steven! The latter is in the ICU.

A shiver snakes beneath my skin and I swallow thickly. There's no way this is just some coincidence or an arbitrary incident.

Larry and Steven approached me and ended up in the hospital.

Steven touched me and said that weird sentence that threw me off, and he's in the ICU.

Ava: AND, you know what the strangest part is? Their friend, Donovan? The guy who was with me at the bar. He completely disappeared. That's just next-level scary.

I grip the phone tighter, my fingers unsteady as I reply.

Cecily: Are Steven and Larry okay?

Ava: They'll live. But with pain. I feel so sorry for them. Do you think Jeremy did it?

Even she thought of that.

That's the most logical answer, after all. It all lines up.

Cecily: I don't know.

I hope not, though I’m kind of sure he did.

My chest constricts at the thought that he hurt those people severely just because they talked to me or touched me.

And where the hell is he, anyway?

I click on his contact.

Cecily: I’m here. You’re not.

I wait for him to read it and reply.

And wait.

And wait.

Then I fall asleep while waiting.

I wake up feeling a shiver of cold. At first, I’m disoriented, then the events from last night rush back to my memory.

The first thing I notice is the empty spot by my side.

I grab my phone that has fallen to the floor because I might have slept with it in my hand.

It’s ten thirty. Holy hell. How did I sleep in?

My belly flutters when I find a text from him.

Jeremy: There was a situation. I’ll talk to you soon.

His words seem clipped, almost dismissive. Or I hope I’m reading too much into it.

Cecily: What type of situation?

Jeremy: Nothing you need to know about.

My blood boils, and the sense of dejection from last night rushes in at full force.

Cecily: You could have, I don’t know, let me know beforehand so I could’ve been with people who are actually considerate of me and my time instead of staying in this gothic house.

Jeremy: Drop the sarcasm and watch that mouth.

Cecily: Fuck you.

I pause, and I think he pauses, too, because there’s no typing on the other end.

Why the… Did I just *curse*? Okay. It doesn’t count since it’s in a text. It’s not like I said it out loud.

I startle when the phone vibrates in my hand again.

Jeremy: Next time I see you, I will be the one who holds you down and fucks you until you’re screaming while you’re bouncing off my cock.

A splash of heat slithers through me and I try—then fail—not to clench my legs.

It's not fair how much he can affect me with mere words.

Jeremy: I'm going home for a few days. There's a situation with Annika that I'm sure you're fully aware of.

I stiffen for a completely different reason.

He knows about Annika and Creigh.

Dammit.

Cecily: Are you taking her home? To your father? Why?

Jeremy: She wanted to convince him and I'll be there to prove that she can't.

Cecily: Don't do that to her.

Jeremy: Worry about yourself and don't even try to provoke me. Just because I'm not there doesn't mean I won't take action.

Cecily: Just like what you did to the guys from the other night?

Jeremy: They deserved more.

Cecily: Did you also hurt TKU's American football team because of me?

Jeremy: Maybe.

I pace the length of the room, feeling hot to the core and not in a good way.

He's not even going to deny it or offer excuses.

Cecily: You can't just beat people up because they talked to me, Jeremy. That's not how this works.

Jeremy: I don't give a fuck about whatever this is or how it fucking works. You let me deal with it when it comes to outside threats.

Cecily: You mean to let you beat up and eventually kill people? I will never get behind that.

Jeremy: You'll learn to. Didn't you ask for more of me? This is me, Cecily. I feel not an ounce of remorse for those fuckers. If anything, I'd do it again and again, until death transforms from dread to a luxury. I'll torture them until they can't recognize their own images in the mirror, and I'll do it often, repeatedly, and with gradual brutality, until there's nothing left of them.

The words start to blur due to the sting in my eyes. A powerful emotion snakes through me and leaves me breathless.

It's fear, I realize.

I’m scared of this part of Jeremy. The inhumane, ruthless side who wouldn’t blink before offing people. Though it shouldn’t come as a surprise considering his background, but it’s the first time I put him in a frame.

One in which I’ll probably suffer from incidents like these constantly. As long as I’m with him, he’ll find a reason to hurt others.

I need to leave this place.

After changing my clothes in record time, I grab my phone and storm out the front door but come to a halt on the threshold.

Ilya stands there, arms crossed in front of him. He’s dressed in casual clothing and a denim jacket that I think I saw a gun hidden beneath last night.

His face is a bit angular yet handsome, but his blank expression never changes. I don’t think I’ve seen any feelings on his face.

Sort of like Jeremy most of the time.

You know what they say about birds of a feather.

“Hi,” I say cautiously.

He nods in greeting.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

I know Ilya is Jeremy’s shadow, in a way, but I’ve never seen him at the cottage before.

“Boss said not to go inside the house if you’re in it.”

My eyes widen. “Don’t tell me you stayed out here all night?”

“I had to make sure you were safe.”

“Oh my God, but it’s freezing.”

“It’s okay. I’m Russian.”

“That’s bollocks. I bet you didn’t eat anything either.”

Not that I did. At the reminder, my stomach growls, and Ilya does a perfect job of maintaining his poker face.

I open the door wide. “Come in. I made some soup we can share.”

He shakes his head once. “You go eat.”

“If you don’t come with me, I won’t.”

He shakes his head again.

“If you don’t, I’ll tell Jeremy you came into the house.”

“I didn’t.”

“Try convincing him of that after he beats you up like he did the guys from the other night.” I narrow my eyes and he narrows his back before he finally steps in.

After I heat the soup, we sit around the table. It brings back memories of Jeremy and his crazy Russian roulette.

My skin gets goosebumps as I remember how the crazy bastard nearly killed us both.

I should've known he lacked limits after that happened.

Ilya eats in silence, definitely uncooperative in offering any insight into his overbearing boss.

"So." I clear my throat. "Why did you beat up those guys from the club?"

"Ask Boss," he says point-blank.

I purse my lips but force myself to remain calm. "He's not here, which is why I'm asking you."

"I can't tell you that."

"Okay, but can you tell me why you beat them up until they were in a critical condition?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Because they deserved it."

Of course he'd think they did.

"Where's the third guy? Why have you taken him away? He didn't even approach me."

"We didn't."

"But he disappeared."

"Wasn't our doing. We left the three of them together."

I frown. If it wasn't them, then who—

Eli.

Of course.

Not sure how Ava will feel about this tidbit.

I move the spoon in my bowl and only raise my head when I feel eyes on me.

Ilya. He's staring at me with that serial-killer gaze.

"What?"

"I know you're not like Boss and have no clue how dangerous and complicated his life is. So if you're not going to put the effort in understanding it, I suggest you leave."

Okay. That was direct and bold.

I think Ilya doesn't like me.

But it wasn't said with ill intent. He really thinks I'm not fit for Jeremy. I agree.

I place the spoon on the table, losing my appetite. “I can’t get behind his acts of violence. I might turn a blind eye once or twice, but it’ll kill me if it’s a recurring theme.”

“Boss only inflicts violence when it’s the last resort or if it’s personal, and only against individuals who’ve earned it. Have you tried to understand why he did that last night?”

“Because they talked to me and touched me and he needs to protect his ownership.”

“He did it because your safety and mental state are important to him. Do better. You have a long way to go.” He shakes his head, drinks straight from the bowl, then stands up and gets out.

Leaving me with a myriad of questions and emotions.

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CECILY

What started as a simple trip home so Annika could convince her father to accept Creighton turned into a nightmare.

Not only was she taken from here by force and coerced to relocate to New York indefinitely, but she also broke up with Creighton, and he was left to pay the price.

The past two weeks have been an exhausting mash of events and tragedies that none of us could keep up with.

I think we all wish we could rewind time to that night at the pub, where Creighton was being territorial of Anni, and Remi was giving him shit about it.

We were all laughing and having the time of our lives back then. We were a group, and now, we're broken up by Anni's absence.

Ava has been downright depressed since she left, despite clearly cutting her off and taking Creighton's side.

We all did.

We've known him since we were young and we're well aware of his bloody past prior to when he became a member of the King family.

So whenever the stitches of that wound open, we all feel obligated to take his side no matter what.

With everything that went down, everyone is exhausted both physically and mentally. We're pushing ourselves to study and try to heal together.

Papa told me that it might be a good idea to go home and recharge for a bit, but I can't leave everyone here alone. I'd be worried sick and wouldn't get any rest.

So I stayed and have tried to be there as much as I can for Glyn and Ava, who were hit by Annika's departure more than they've let on.

Sometimes, they call her name in the flat and either pause or curse themselves when they realize she's not there anymore.

Most of her stuff is still in her room, and none of us have dared to touch it or even open her door.

When I'm missing her, I like to believe she's in there listening to Tchaikovsky and practicing ballet.

At the shelter, the other volunteers, technicians, and even Dr. Stephanie miss her like crazy.

She was always the fun and cheerful soul who made sure everyone around her was content.

Now that she's gone, it's like she left a dark spot behind.

After telling the staff good night, I step out of the shelter, shoulders drooping and heart so heavy that it weighs me down.

I pause at the corner of the street in search of Ilya.

He's been following me around ever since that day at the cottage, acting like his boss's pseudo-stalker.

During the first week everything went down, I was so rattled and worried that I barely paid him any attention.

I lacked the capacity to think straight back then.

After that, I asked him to leave me alone, but he flat-out ignored me and continued his mission of shadowing my every move.

I haven't met up with Jeremy since that night at the club.

The first week, he was as busy as I was, considering Nikolai got hurt and Annika had to leave.

Then he traveled for a few days, probably to New York.

I only saw him a couple of days before Annika left—the encounter was brief and without any actual conversation.

Despite the dull ache that spreads through me at the reminder of him, I needed the space.

I needed to figure out whether or not I'm willing to try to understand him like Ilya told me that morning. If I'm willing to go down the rabbit hole with him and possibly never get out.

While I still haven't found the answer to that, one thing's for sure. I'm a bit hurt by the fact that he disappeared on me.

Not that I've gone out of my way to contact him. I haven't called or texted him.

I haven't known how after that loaded confession he sent me.

I feel that if I do, if I give in, then I'll have nothing left of me. That he'll suck me dry and leave me empty.

My chest gets tighter the longer I look for Ilya and find no sign of him. At my insistence, Ilya had started walking me from the shelter to the flat instead of following from afar.

And even though Ilya is more silent than the night, he was welcome company.

Not to mention a reminder of *him*.

But tonight, he's nowhere to be seen.

Maybe he decided that he was done with me, after all, and ordered his guard to stop following me.

That thought should make me joyful, but instead, I'm dragging my feet on the pavement.

It's all for the best anyway.

Hopefully.

Probably.

I start to pull my earbuds out of my backpack when I spot a shadow under a tree. Leaning against a bike.

A sudden flutter dips in my stomach as I watch him.

Black jeans mold against muscular thighs, a T-shirt outlines his sculpted chest that I know is inked full of tattoos, and a jacket strains against his broad shoulders.

Then, finally, I study his face that's shadowed by the darkness but still looks no different than that of a warlord who's on a mission to conquer everything in his path.

Starting with me.

His ankles are crossed, and his finger strokes the surface of his helmet, back and forth, in a controlled rhythm.

It's *him*.

The one who's been plaguing my nightmares more than that wanker Jonah. In a way, I should be thankful, but screw him.

If he thinks I'll go running to him with open arms, he must not know what he did wrong.

I cut off eye contact, shove the earbuds in my ears, and turn up the music to the max as I march down the empty street.

A few steps later, I'm wrenched back, and I gasp when I see a car speeding a few meters away.

I pull out the earbuds to be greeted by a shout from the driver.

The strong hand on my elbow spins me around so that I'm face-to-face with my savior, who might as well be my tormentor.

His lashes fall like shutters on his dark eyes as he shakes my arm. "What the fuck did I say about tuning out your outside world? Next time, when you cross the road, you look first. Is that understood?"

I flinch as if each word is a whip embedding itself into my skin.

It's probably because he's touching me after such a long time. Or because he's actually here. In person. After I thought I wouldn't see him again.

Those facts are definitely messing with my head, because I'm resisting the very illogical urge to wrap my arms around him and hug him.

I rotate my elbow, trying to free it from his grip, but I might as well be caught by metal.

His fingers dig into my flesh, firm, unmoving. "I said, is that fucking understood?"

"Screw you," I let out in a charged tone, surprised at the emotions that choke my voice. "You don't disappear for two weeks, then start ordering me around. Who the hell do you think you are, Jeremy? My owner? My keeper? A toy on your shelf that you believe you can grab when you're bored? Because I'm not. I try to be strong, but I get hurt, and I feel pain, *lots* of it. So if you're going to disappear, do it for good. Stop playing with my feelings!"

Thick silence permeates the air, intertwined with thick tension and simmering violence.

I can see it in his eyes. In the darkening gray that blends with the night. Even his body has stiffened, transforming into one block of lethal muscle trained to inflict pain.

That's precisely what I expect, and I wouldn't be surprised after my outburst. If we were alone, I have no doubt that he'd bend me over and fuck me.

Punish me.

Make me beg so he can do it all over again.

However, his grip doesn’t tighten around my elbow. In fact, he releases it, hesitantly, as if that’s the exact opposite of what he wants to do.

“You have feelings for me?” he speaks in an unaffected tone, one that’s filled with so much apathy, my spine jerks upright.

It’s like he’s preparing for the blow that will disintegrate me.

He steps forward, towering over me, but he doesn’t touch me. Only his warmth strangles me, and his scent pools at the bottom of my belly.

“Not anymore,” I say with confidence I don’t feel.

“If you don’t, why would you ask me not to play with them? Are you a liar, Cecily?” His chest rises and falls as if in dissatisfaction, in anger.

His muscles grow rigid, and every particle of his body seems to have gained a presence of its own.

He reaches out a hand that appears so large and intimidating. I flinch, but it’s too late.

He’s already wrapped it around my throat, his fingers digging in the flesh with a firmness that doesn’t allow me to breathe, let alone move.

“Responsible Cecily. Selfless, altruistic, sacrificial Cecily.” His voice has dipped, and so have his brows, but there’s a slight snarl in his upper lip. “You care so much about your friends, don’t you? Your family, your little circle of foolish jokes and empty nothingness. You’re the mother, no? The one who ensures everyone is home safe, that no one ends up with a random pregnancy, drinks too much, or is all alone.”

I swallow, but even that is constricted by his grip. I don’t like the tone of his voice or the darkness coating it.

It’s like I’m talking to that masked stranger in the forest that first time.

As if we’re back to square one.

“And yet, you dropped Annika off your list so easily. You know exactly how lonely she is, how ecstatic she was to make friends. I don’t give a fuck if anyone else removes her from their lives as if she were never there, but *you*, you’re a fucking liar, Cecily.”

He releases me with a jerk, and I stumble backward on shaky legs that barely hold me upright.

His words might as well be a knife slashing through my chest and lodging in my bones.

So this is what he’s been mad about. It’s probably why he cut me off completely, too.

I resist the need to massage where he gripped me. “I love Anni, I really do, but I don’t like what she did to Creigh.”

“Are you Creighton?”

“Huh?”

“I asked if you are Creighton. You’re not, so why the fuck are you acting on his behalf?”

“You don’t understand. Creigh has always been distant and silent, and we thought she brought him out of his shell, but then—”

“Don’t offer excuses,” he grinds out before he releases a breath. “Just admit that you jumped on the bandwagon, saw what everyone else did, and chose to act the same because you don’t like being left behind.”

“I’m not like that.”

“But you are. Didn’t you refuse to do what you craved because it’s frowned upon by others? Didn’t you cry when I said I’d tell them about your tendencies? You’re nothing but a heartless, coward liar. Did you say I was playing with your feelings? Good. That way, I can crush them.” He brushes past me. “I have no use for someone who’s disloyal.”

Then he leaves.

Without a look back.

As if he didn’t just smash my heart to pieces and leave me to flounder in its blood.

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CECILY

“Aaaand we lost her!”

I lift my head with a jerk that startles both Glyn and Ava, the latter being the one who caught my attention just now.

We’re having a girls’ night for the first time since Anni left about a month and a half ago.

This gathering includes a lot of drinking because none of us want to talk or think about the empty spot in our circle or the echoing sound of her absence.

We’re sitting on the sofa, dressed in fluffy pajamas, which was Ava’s idea. She said if we’re going to party at the house, we need to look like glam characters from black-and-white films.

So we’re all wearing her robes covered with feathers, faux fur, and everything uncomfortable.

“I was saying, have you heard the news?” Ava asks from her position on my right.

“What news?”

“Jonah turned himself in for drug acquisition and assaulting a minor.”

The bottle of beer tilts in my hand. I’m not drunk. Hell, I’ve just had this one, and it’s only halfway finished, so I can’t be imagining things.

“Did you just say Jonah turned himself in? The same Jonah we know?”

“Yeah, your ex.”

“Wow,” Glyn breathes out. “I didn’t know he was such a lowlife. You dodged a bullet there, Ces.”

My fingers tremble and shivers snake down my back and into the pit of my stomach.

“I guess Aunt Kim was right when she mentioned having a bad feeling about him,” Ava continues, oblivious to the sound that’s invading my head.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

“Yeah. This is so creepy. You really don’t know what people are hiding.” Glyn hugs herself. “But how did you hear about him turning himself in?”

“Uh, hello? It was all over the news. He’s the son of a higher-up in some ministry, and many are speculating that maybe his father is using his son as a scapegoat to hide his crimes. So he’s also under investigation. Following this whole charade is popcorn-worthy, I tell you.”

Mum and Papa probably saw the news, too. Is that why Mum told me she was there for me if I needed to talk about anything this morning?

“Cecy?” Ava grabs my arm, her voice spooked. “Oh my God, why are you crying?”

I pat at my eyes, only for my hand to be flooded with tears. Everything I’ve bottled up for years rushes to the surface like a tornado taking out everything in its wake.

My heart shrivels, my tears won’t stop flowing, and then everything just…*pops*.

“Ces.” Glyn’s eyes water as she grabs my arm. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I’m not,” I admit, my voice low and emotional. Usually, I would never show them this part of me. I hate being vulnerable, even with my closest friends, but I can’t fight it this time.

“Jonah…drugged me until I couldn’t move, but he made sure I was still aware of my surroundings so I’d feel it when he tried to assault me. The only thing that stopped him was his revulsion when I threw up all over him.”

Ava’s lips part. Glyn’s eyes water.

Both of them are caught in a state of shock, and I understand. There was a time when I honestly never thought the day would come where I’d talk about that experience out loud. I thought if I buried it deeper, if I dealt with it on my own, it’d be over.

Turns out, the exact opposite happened. That night devoured my spirit and consumed my life. It wasn't until Ava mentioned it the other time that I realized how much I changed after that incident. Yes, I was always an introvert, but it was only after that trauma that I closed in on myself. I quit wearing dresses and skirts and switched to jeans and sarcastic T-shirts because that could help drive attention away. Baggy, unflattering clothes. Just anything that didn't make me as pretty as that night.

I know it's a victim-blaming mentality, but the moment I realized that, it was too late. My soul had already darkened, and nothing was left to be salvaged.

"You know how sometimes I zone out?" I continue, staring at the TV, which is playing some Netflix film. "It's because of that. I also have severe sleep paralysis that's an imitation of that night. I feel everything around me, but I can't move. I scream for help, but no one can hear me. Before you ask, I couldn't report him, because he had nude pictures of me that he would've made public and sent to Papa. He would have used them to ruin my grandparents' political and diplomatic reputations. My mum's career. Everything. I just… I just didn't want them to see me like that."

I choke on my last word, and Ava envelops me in a hug.

"Oh, Cecy." She cries in my neck, her tears slipping down my skin.

Glyn wraps her arms around me, too, sniffling quietly. "I'm so sorry, Ces. I'm so sorry we weren't there."

"You didn't know. I made sure no one knew. Not even Papa or Mum. I thought I'd be fine, but I'm not. I thought everything would be okay, but I'm tired of pretending to be something I'm not. I'm *so* tired."

The three of us cry in unison as they hug me tightly, shaking against me, their hands unsteady, as if they can feel every burst of my pain.

I hate that I've turned them into this mess, that I've become a burden, but I still take every bit of their support and cooing words.

Ava pulls back, her eyes red, face a mess of tears and snot. A look she hasn't allowed anyone to see since she was a kid.

"I understand why you couldn't or didn't want to tell us, but if we had known, I would've killed that fucker with my bare hands."

"I wasn't ready to talk about it. I don't think I am now either, but talking about it is the first step to getting over it. Besides, I didn't want you guys to feel burdened by this."

“Bullshit.” Glyn sniffles at my side. “We’ve been together since we were in nappies, Ces. We’re sisters from different misters, meaning we’re there for each other for better or worse.”

“Why would we feel burdened by a situation in which you were a victim? That’s bollocks! He should be the one feeling all these emotions and worse. He should apologize for being a fucking subhuman.” Ava’s voice breaks. “I’m sorry we didn’t notice.”

“You couldn’t have. I spent that summer with my grandparents and Uncle Kirian to recharge, so neither you nor my parents noticed anything. Now that you mentioned he turned himself in, I felt a tinge of relief mixed with anger at myself because he assaulted someone else. If I’d reported him that first time, he wouldn’t have done it again.”

“He threatened you,” Glyn says in a firm voice. “It’s not your fault. It’s his.”

“And here I thought you hadn’t dated since him because you couldn’t get over him.” Ava hits the side of her head. “Stupid me.”

“You’re not wrong. He did scare me away from all relationships, sexual or not.”

“I’m so sorry.” Ava’s voice is all choked up as tears well in her eyes. “I always went with Remi’s jokes about you being a prude without knowing the truth. I feel so horrible. I should’ve been a better friend, but I wasn’t. I’m so, so sorry, Cecy. I’m willing to do anything so you’ll forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. It’s not like you knew and did it on purpose.” I release a deep, tortured sigh. “I wish I’d stayed a prude. That way, I wouldn’t have gotten hurt again.”

“Oh, Ces.” Glyn strokes my arm. “What happened?”

“Is it about Jeremy?” Ava asks cautiously.

“Jeremy?” Glyn asks.

“We had a thing,” I tell her. “I’m not sure what that thing was, but he was the first person who noticed something wrong behind my zoning out and forced me to tell him about the Jonah thing.”

He was also the first person who gave me courage not only to pursue my fantasy, but also to not be ashamed of it. He opened my heart, my world, and made me feel pretty again. I liked wearing some skirts, shorts, and revealing stuff when we were alone, because he looked at me like I was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

I used to be scared of relationships, but I wanted one with him.

Of course, I only realized all those things after I'd lost him.

"You and Jeremy?" Glyn repeats, incredulous. "The same Jeremy who's Killian's friend and Anni's brother?"

I nod.

"I thought you guys were getting along," Ava says hopefully. "You like him, right?"

"My feelings for him don't matter. He cut me off."

"That son of a bitch." Ava jerks up to a standing position. "Glyn, you have access to the Heathens' mansion, right? Tell your boyfriend to give us his best gun."

"I don't think he'll approve of us killing his friend." Glyn narrows her eyes. "But we can do it behind his back, because Jeremy is a prick who has no business hurting Ces's feelings."

"Let's decapitate him."

Glyn interlinks her arm with Ava's and shouts, "A la guillotine!"

I smile through the tears but shake my head, a deep sigh ripping out of me. "He's not entirely wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"He felt that I was being disloyal for cutting ties with Anni. He said he wouldn't have been surprised if it were anyone else, but coming from me was the worst since I usually care about everyone."

Their shoulders fall at the mention of Anni, and they lose their murderous moods as they crawl back onto the sofa on either side of me.

Since we were young, we've had this formation whenever we've needed time away from our troublemaker guy friends.

"Honestly?" Glyn starts. "I also don't think we should've done that to Anni, especially now that Creigh has come back but she never will. We knew how sheltered she was and how being here was her best shot at living her life."

"Yeah, but she hurt him." Ava's chin trembles. "Cray Cray is like our brother, and Jeremy should've considered that angle before he accused Cecy of being disloyal. I should have a word with him."

"I don't think you can even reach him," I say with a sad smile. "I know I can't."

"Sure as fuck can." Ava rolls up the fluffy sleeves of her robe. "You say the word, and I'll bring him to you. Well, not exactly. But Glyn can ask her boyfriend for help."

“Totally,” Glyn agrees. “Kill doesn’t really like talking about any of his friends and would get pettily jealous, but I have *ways* of convincing him to arrange a meeting with Jeremy.”

I shake my head, half because the prospect of seeing that harsh look in his eyes terrifies the hell out of me. Half because I wouldn’t know what to say.

I doubt he’ll accept any form of an apology I have to offer. Besides, what’s the point when everything is said and done?

Maybe he can explain why I feel like I’m being watched sometimes. Though I don’t have proof, because I haven’t caught sight of him or Ilya since that day he crushed my feelings.

Or maybe I’m just hoping that he might still be watching me. That maybe, just maybe, he’s not done with me, after all.

But that’s wishful thinking.

“You’re just being negative,” Ava says. “If you want, I can totally dress you up and make you completely irresistible like that night at the club when you drove him crazy.”

“Really?” Glyn stares between us. “How come I know nothing about this?”

“Oh, it’s a very long story.” Ava goes into excruciating detail about the last night I had with Jeremy before everything shattered.

Sometimes I wonder if I can change things. Or maybe it’s better that I don’t.

This is probably the way out that Ilya told me about. I have no place in his life if I can’t understand him and his ways.

And this isn’t about the chasing, rough sex, and blood play. Those are things I shamelessly love.

It’s about him as a person and his lack of limitations.

It's not who he is, it’s *what* he is, and I can’t change that about him. I can’t strip him of what makes him Jeremy Volkov.

But I also don’t want to be like him either.

I once thought there could be some sort of middle ground, but maybe that was too naive of me.

My phone vibrates, and I wipe my eyes before I check it out. I’m guessing it’s Landon bugging me again, and I’m ready to ignore him. Again.

But the name on the screen catches me by surprise.

Creighton: I need your help with something.

He recently got back to school, and even though he looks fine on the outside, everyone can tell he hasn't been the same since his permanent rift with Anni.

It's so rare for him to text, let alone ask for help.

Cecily: If I can do it, sure.

Creighton: Help me meet with Annika in the States.

My fingers pause.

Cecily: Are you sure that's a good idea? Her father, brother, and all their guards might kill you on sight.

Creighton: I need to talk to her, Cecily. Please.

This is the first time I've seen Creighton say please. He's so silent and somewhat cold that it feels like he's unable to show affection.

I mull over his request in my head. If it were any other time, I'd never entertain something so risky, both for his and my sake, but something's changed.

I don't want to be a coward or a liar. If I can make amends this way, then so be it. Besides, I really miss Annika.

So I type with confidence I haven't felt in some time.

Cecily: I'm in.

CREIGH LIED TO ME.

He didn't only want to talk to Annika. He meant to kidnap her all along.

And I helped him, though unknowingly.

I got her on a private plane and left so they could talk. I thought I needed to wait outside the plane for maybe half an hour—an hour max—before Creigh and I took that plane back home.

I thought wrong.

He totally stranded me in New York and left. Well, he did purchase me a ticket to go back to the island.

How very thoughtful.

For the past two days since he disappeared off the face of the earth, I've been on edge. Literally and figuratively.

Creigh told his friends and family that he's going on a holiday, which is why everyone is cool about his absence. They think he needs time off after everything.

I'm the only one who knows the truth about his pseudo-criminal activities. That I helped him with.

Annika's family must be searching all over the place for her whereabouts.

I contemplated telling them who she's with instead of keeping them in the dark, but that would mean exposing myself and possibly getting myself killed by her dad or something.

So I needed to find a way to let them know without getting involved.

My solution was to type out a letter, put it in an envelope, and tell Glyn to slip it underneath Jeremy's door. Because she thought it was a love letter, my friend was super excited, and promised to be discreet.

Annika is with Creighton. They're safe.

That's all I said since that's all I know. But I hope that much can soothe her family's worries.

Glyn said that Killian mentioned how weird Jeremy feels lately. He doesn't spend as much time with the others, and when he does, it's only so they can plot some anarchy against the Serpents or the Elites.

"It's like he's distracting himself by trying to stay busy," she said.

Glyn and the others don't know about Annika's disappearance, so either Jeremy didn't tell his closest circle or Killian kept the information to himself since he doesn't like worrying his girlfriend.

My vote goes to the second option.

While stacking bags of pet food at the shelter, I try to think of other ways I can help Jeremy and his parents find Annika, but the chances of doing that without hurting Creighton are zero.

I groan, hitting my head against the metal shelf. What the hell have I done?

Even when I try to help, I accidentally mess it all up.

"Trouble in paradise?"

I lift my head at the very familiar suave voice.

Landon stands in the doorway of the storeroom, looking as fashionable as ever in his black button-down, slacks, and luxurious loafers. His hair is styled, accentuating his angular, handsome features.

He has a white-and-gold masquerade mask in hand. Considering his looks, one would think he's going to a party, but it's probably one of his club's events where they'll instigate mayhem.

I push one sack of pet food in place. "What are you doing here?"

He strolls inside with his eternal boredom and big cat energy. Lazy, silent, and up to no good.

"I'm wounded in my little heart. No hi, how are you?"

"I don't think you came here for any *hi*s or *how are you*s. I'm surprised you even know this place exists."

He leans against the shelf by my side, pouting dramatically. "You've become so cold, Cecy."

I tilt my head to the side. "Doesn't feel good to be treated the way you treat people, does it?"

"Aww, you still mad about that other time? That happened centuries ago in human years."

"You might be able to hurt others and forget about it, but that's not me, Lan."

"They allowed themselves to be hurt. Who am I not to indulge them?"

"You're impossible, and there's no reasoning with you." I release a sigh. "I honestly don't know what I liked about you."

A Cheshire cat grin lifts his lips. "Oh? Is this a confession?"

"No, this is me calling myself daft. I think I liked the idea of you, but when I got close, I realized you're like your statues. Gorgeous on the outside." I tap his chest twice. "Empty on the inside."

"Did you say *gorgeous*?"

I shake my head. "Just leave, Lan. I have some work to finish up."

"Not so fast." He blocks my path, seeming to have gained height as he stares down his nose at me. "See, I know you swapped me for Jeremy, and while I'm wounded in my little black heart, I let it happen because you can help me bring him down."

"You…knew?"

"About your feelings for me?" He grins. "You couldn't more obvious, Ces."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"You didn't; why would I? Besides, it was only a phase, no? Because you somehow got on Jeremy's radar and you grew to like it. I rooted for you. I even encouraged it. In that fight, I noticed he was looking at you and

I wanted to test him, so I said, ‘How does it feel to fancy someone who loves me?’ Kind of got beaten up for it, but confirming he has feelings for you was worth it. The mighty Jeremy in *luuurve*. Isn’t that poetic?”

I gasp.

So that’s what happened that day. That’s why Jeremy was so mad.

“I don’t love you. I never did,” I say with determination.

It was only a crush. A stupid one that I shouldn’t have had, but I allowed myself to feel it so I could try and forget about the whole Jonah thing.

If I had secret crushes and attraction, then that meant I was alive, or at least, that’s how my brain categorized it.

“That’s what he thought, though.” Lan grins. “Sorry, I mean *thinks*.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I push past him to organize the opposite shelf. “We’re no longer together, and even if we were, I would never help you hurt him.”

“Are you sure? Because he has a blonde bombshell hanging off his arm and pasting herself to his side like superglue. There’s her mute clone, too.” His voice darkens at the last bit. “The Sokolov sisters are vying for his attention, and if you don’t do something about it, one of them will have him.”

My fingers tighten on the edge of the shelf, but I slowly release it. “He can do whatever he wants. And don’t call her a mute. That’s not nice.”

“I’m not nice.”

“Shocker.” I roll my eyes. “Also, Mia is only around to watch her sister. She didn’t look to be interested in Jeremy.”

“Or that’s what she wants you to think while she slithers around him like a snake.” His voice has lowered to a strange range I’ve never heard him use before.

Lan might look like a charming god, but he’s emotionless, cold, and calculating. This is the first time I’ve seen him show interest or change his tone at the mention of someone.

“Point is, get Jeremy back.” He grins. “This is the last courtesy I’ll offer you before I slice his throat open and sculpt him into the ugliest stone.”

“I’m not helping you, Lan.”

“I don’t want you to help me.” His voice lowers further. “Just take him off the market.”

“Oh. I get it. Is this about Maya? Maybe Mia? Both?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that and just resume whatever weird thing you had with Jeremy.”

I release a sigh. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“He’s not interested in me anymore.”

He stares at me as if I’ve grown an extra head. “Not interested in you? On what planet have you been living, Cecily? The guy stalks you like a creep and actually smiles while he does it—honest to fucking God thought he didn’t know how. He’s also developed some bizarre fetish about removing anyone who poses an obstacle to you. That teacher who was giving preferential treatment to his friend’s kid? Jeremy was the reason he asked to transfer. Those American football players who stole and slashed your textbooks? Jeremy eliminated them. Those guys at the club who danced with you? Jeremy beat them the fuck up and put one in a coma. Oh, and news fucking flash, he tortured Jonah to near death by waterboarding him and threatened to kill his parents, brothers, sisters, and everyone he cared about. Then he proceeded to tell his family about all the scandals he could get them into by airing some of their dirty laundry. That’s the only reason Jonah turned himself in. He still gets beaten up in prison every day because Jeremy and his whole fucked-up entourage have the ability to pay off people who can do it. Inside England’s prisons, which should be far away from their territory, but isn’t. You still think that’s not called interest?”

My jaw nearly meets the floor.

The onslaught of information swirls inside me, barely allowing me to absorb anything.

I frown. “How do you know all of that?”

“I have someone who follows him, just like he has someone who’s following me.”

“Following you?”

“Yeah. You think he knows by now that I’m here?”

“Lan, whatever you’re planning, stop it.”

“I need you with him, Ces. I’m not asking.” And then he grabs me by the cheek.

I know where this is going, what he’s planning, and I want to stop him, but my reaction is delayed.

His lips are reaching for mine, and I try to push at his chest, but before I can do that, Lan is shoved off me.

Not by one set of hands, but two.

Jeremy punches Landon in the face, and when he falls to the ground, a very angry, very beautiful blonde stares down at him with a murderous expression.

Then she kicks him in the nuts. With her giant boot.

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CECILY

I’ve never been more stunned than as I am at this moment.

The scene happens in slow motion, yet it’s so fast that I can’t keep up.

It’s like staring at the world through blurry lenses while riding a roller coaster.

Landon grunt, groans, then rolls onto his back, sporting a bloodied lip and a red jaw. However, he has the happiest, most genuine grin I’ve ever seen.

“Hi, mouse. Miss me?”

Mia continues glaring at him, and it looks anything but menacing, in view of her poufy dress, the ribbons intertwined in her hair like snakes, and her generally regal presence.

However, her kick was definitely painful considering the echoing sound. She flips him off and signs something to Jeremy. I don’t understand what she’s saying, but there’s a lot of energy behind it.

Mia strikes me as the type of person who simply can’t be defined by her disability, fashion sense, or spiky personality. It’s like she flows and flows, unable to put a halt to the flood of what’s inside her.

While she talks to the man who’s grabbing me from behind, a violent chill covers my skin as I glance back.

I’ve seen Jeremy exactly two times since he cruelly and indefinitely removed me from his life. Once when I drove by the cottage and saw him going inside.

The other time was when I allowed Ava to drag me to the fight club and watched him nearly be beaten to death by Killian.

It was one of those off-championship fights that happens every night, and it looked like he had a death wish.

I left before the fight was over.

Now, I regret looking at him, because nothing could've prepared me for being this close to him.

In a way, he hasn't changed. He still has sharp, masculine features that drip with savage intensity and the build of a warlord who gets off on conquering lands and people.

His broad shoulders eat up the horizon, filling my vision with the dazzling strength of his presence.

The black T-shirt tightens around his biceps, and the tattoos ripple with each flex of his muscles. As if, like him, they're on the edge.

My gaze flicks to where he's touching me. My elbow.

That's what he always grabs when he wants to put distance between us, when he treats me like nothing more than the object of his dirty fucks.

In fact, he's only held my hand about twice.

The place where his flesh meets mine burns, flares, and gains a life of its own. And that has less to do with how his fingers dig into my skin and more to do with the fact that he's touching me.

Those ash, cold-blooded eyes that should be mass-produced as weapons are concentrated on Mia's signing. Not once has he looked at me or acknowledged me, but the weight of their attention can be felt through the absence of it.

Mia has finished signing and is now waiting for Jeremy's reply with a hand on her hip.

"He's all yours," he tells her, obviously having understood her.

"Oh?" Landon jumps up to a standing position and straps his mask around his neck, appearing as cool as ever, short of the bruising and blood. "I'm going have to decline whatever deal you two have."

He grabs my other hand. "Cecy and I have a date."

No, we don't.

But before I can say that, merciless fingers dig further into the flesh surrounding my elbow and I wince.

"The only date you'll have is for a funeral." Jeremy tugs hard, wrenching me from Landon, or more like, my childhood friend lets go at

the last second.

“Necrophilia. Yum.” He grins with a suggestive lick of his lips. Mia lifts her leg to kick his crotch again, but he blocks her with a hand on her head, effectively immobilizing her in place. “Jesus fucking Christ, calm down, and stop acting like a rabid dog.”

That only makes her want to grab at him more as she struggles, punches, and kicks—mostly the air.

Lan effortlessly escapes her attempts at violence and stares at Jeremy with his provocative smile. “Let go of Cecily.”

“No.”

I pull my elbow free. “You have no right to touch me.”

He finally slides his gaze to me in the form of a glare. I glare right back.

Why does he get to act this way when he’s the one who ended us?

“What she said.” Lan tsks and shakes his head while Mia continues to struggle and exert herself for nothing. “How does it feel to be the second choice to me? In fact, you wouldn't have even been on her list if you hadn't stalked her.”

Jeremy strides over to him, but I jump between them. I know precisely what Landon is doing by making him jealous. He wants Jeremy to be with me again, but I won’t stand by and watch him claim ownership he doesn’t have.

I stare at Jeremy, even as my heart beats in my throat. “Stop it.”

“Step away.”

“I said, stop it.”

“And I said to step the fuck away.”

My whole body shivers at the lash of his words. I haven’t heard the gruff timbre of his voice for so long, and now that I do, it’s fills me with a myriad of chaotic colors and twisted emotions.

“We’re out of here.” Lan is dragging a struggling and obviously angry Mia out of the storeroom. “Remember, Ces. You loved me first.”

I can sense the destructive energy in Jeremy before he acts on it. If he’s stroking his fingers, that stops. And he usually stops breathing for one fraction of a second before he chooses violence.

Despite being scared shitless of this part of him, I don’t think about it as I block his path again.

Jeremy slams into me, my head bumps into his chest, and he steps on my foot, but he swiftly pulls back and actually stops.

That destructive energy that I'm sure is always thirsty for blood slowly lulls, tucking itself beneath the surface of his apparent calm.

He flexes his palm and remains still, probably realizing that Landon is already out of reach.

When he speaks, his voice shimmers with thick tension and unveiled anger. "Are you hurt?"

I touch my forehead as if that will somehow camouflage the trembling in my chin. Why does he have to ask that when he was the one who ripped my heart open.

"No thanks to you."

His hand reaches for me, and I go still for a second, waiting, imagining the impact of his flesh on mine.

He drops it back down as another presence appears at the doorway. Zayn. My colleague who's also been volunteering at the shelter.

"I heard a commotion. Is everything okay?" he asks in a careful tone.

Jeremy's savage attention slides to him and I can see that unbounded violent energy rearing its head. If I don't defuse this situation, he'll probably use poor Zayn as a punching bag and brutalize him. After all, he's still on a high from the whole Landon encounter.

"It's all good, Zayn," I say calmly.

His gaze flits between me and Jeremy, a frown etched between his brows. "Are you sure—"

"Fuck off." Jeremy's lethal tone booms around us.

Zayn straightens and I nod with an awkward smile in a desperate attempt to defuse the situation.

"Let me know if you need anything," my colleague says, then swiftly disappears out of sight.

I don't blame him. No one wants to be in Jeremy's orbit, especially when he's enraged.

His harsh eyes fall back on me. "And who the fuck was that?"

"None of your business."

"Cecily…don't piss me off any further."

"That statement should be directed at *you*! Why are you bothering me?"

"Why the fuck are you always in my way?"

"Why are you?"

"You're fucking infuriating."

"And you're like a wild animal."

“You didn’t seem to mind when I fucked you like an animal. In fact, you screamed and begged to be taken like my filthy little whore. But now that my mark has vanished from your flesh, you think you can let another man touch you?”

My starved body heats, but I force myself to remain calm. “Whether I let another man touch me, fuck me, take me like a filthy whore, or dirty me all up is none of your damn business. In fact, I might be tempted to take Lan up on his offer of taking me on a tour through the sex club.”

I won’t, and I really don’t know what’s come over me to speak like that, but I want revenge.

I want to hurt him for all the time he’s left me hanging.

He made me addicted to him and then forced me into the worst withdrawal.

And the best way to piss off a possessive man like Jeremy? Bring up other men. Especially Landon. He clearly has a beef with him.

“What did you just say?” he asks slowly, menacingly, and with enough tension to crumble a mountain.

“I said I’ll go to the club with Lan. Experiment a little and see what other men feel like. I’m sure they don’t all come with so much drama.”

One moment I’m standing there, and the next, he’s slamming me against the nearest wall with a tight grip on my neck.

The breath is knocked from my lungs for an entirely different reason.

I’m in a position where I’m overwhelmed by Jeremy’s power until it’s the only thing I inhale.

Until it’s the only beat that’s seeping into my lungs

“That was a rhetorical question, Cecily. You’re not supposed to fucking answer.”

My glare meets his fierce eyes.

I want to provoke him, anger him. I want him to feel an ounce of the pain he’s exerted on me.

“Why?” I strain. “You don’t like to imagine another man peeling my clothes off and sinking inside me while I moan for him?”

“Stop.”

“I’ll beg him to go faster, harder. I’ll say his name, too. Actually, I’ll *moan* it.”

“Shut the fuck up.” He pulls me forward by his grip on my neck, then slams me back again. “You don’t seem to understand this, so let me clarify

it for you. Any dick that comes near you will be cut off and you'll bathe in its blood. I might have given you space, but I still own your ass. And cunt. And mouth. Everything about you belongs to me. *You* belong to me. But if you're in the mood to test that, by all means, do. I will maim as many motherfuckers in front of you as you wish until you have your fill."

He means it.

I know he does.

Jeremy has never made a promise and not kept it.

And this helplessness, the feeling of being too caught in his web while he only has a sense of ownership over me makes me feel like a trapped animal.

"Is that why you sent those guys to the hospital, shipped my professor to another country, and even dealt with Jonah? Because I'm yours? An extension of your stupid ego and a projection of your twisted desires?"

"I did all that because no one gets to hurt you."

"Only *you* can?"

He tightens his grip. "Only I can."

My eyes burn, but I refuse to let the tears loose. I refuse to show him just how much of an effect his words have on me.

"What do you want from me, Jeremy? You already let me go."

"But you didn't go."

"Huh?"

He releases me, but only after he strokes the spot where his fingers pressed.

"Annika disappeared."

My chest constricts, more about the topic than the abrupt subject change.

"What?"

He gives me a side-eye that could bring the devil to his knees. "Don't fuck with me, Cecily. You were the last person she saw after your impromptu visit to New York. At first, I wanted to believe the two incidents were unrelated, but it turns out, you went on a private jet and returned on a commercial flight. Which means my sister left with your companion on that private jet. You all but shot yourself in the foot when you had Glyndon slip me that note today. Because A, Killian nearly killed me for it, thinking she was passing me notes; and B, she's a shit spy and confessed everything

when Kill started turning into an insufferable being. My question is, why would you let me know that?”

Blimey.

I should’ve considered Glyn’s personality and her tight bond with Killian.

Releasing a sigh, I tell him the truth. “I didn’t want you or your parents worried or thinking she ran away or something.”

“Why do you not want us worried?”

“Unlike what you said about me, I’m not heartless. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” A somber shadow covers his face before he tucks it away and asks in a colder tone, “Where is she? Where did he take her?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know or you don’t want to say?”

“I really don’t.” But I have a hunch. There’s only one faraway place where Creighton could remain off everyone’s radar and use his grandfather’s jet for it.

“You’re a terrible liar, Cecily. You never look me in the eye when you tell a lie.”

My gaze snaps to his when I realize I’ve been staring at my feet.

Instead of anger or blame, I find dejection. Disappointment, maybe.

And I don’t know why that tugs on my heartstrings until they bleed and overflow in my chest.

“I thought you didn’t want to hurt anyone,” he says with masked anger. “Do you have any idea how much this is hurting my parents? My mother thinks Annika did something to herself.”

“You…can set their minds at ease.”

“That will only happen if they see her again.”

“I can’t. If I do, you or your dad will hurt Creigh.”

“That *motherfucker*—” He stops and inhales deeply. “That slimy fucker has dug his own grave. Don’t make it deeper.”

“That’s not very encouraging.” I grab his hand that’s balled in a fist. It’s the first time I’ve done it, despite wanting to for a long time.

I slowly peel it open, and only after some tension leaves his body do I speak softly. “I know you think badly of Creigh because of what he’s done, and I understand that. I understand that Anni is your only sibling and

someone you consider to be under your protection. You love her, and have cared for her since she was born, so you feel the need to shield her whenever someone comes close, but you need to understand that she's old enough to make her own decisions now. You also need to understand that Creigh and I were raised together. He's like my brother, and I also feel the need to protect him."

"Do you share a parent?"

"Uh, no?"

"Then he's not your fucking brother." He purses his lips. "I'm asking you nicely for the last time, Cecily. Where did he take her?"

I shake my head.

"Very well. You leave me no choice but to use the not-so-nice way."

I shriek as he picks me up and carries me in his arms.

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JEREMY

I had every intention of letting Cecily go.

Yes, I told Ilya to continue keeping an eye on her, just in case some motherfucker thought it was a good idea to bother her.

And yes, maybe I took over his task most of the time and did a marvelous job at covering my tracks, so she didn't realize I was basically breathing down her neck.

But the fact remains, I did think I could let her go. Not permanently. Temporarily.

Until the demons disappeared and I was more in control of myself around her. I thought that if I kept my distance, didn't touch her, and wasn't so caught up in her pussy and body and her face when she sleeps, I would have more balance.

I'd be in control again.

Every single one of those thoughts scattered in the air the moment Mia texted me about her findings.

I was carefully planning how to make Cecily tell me where my sister is, but when I heard Landon was in the picture, I lost all that strategic thinking.

When I saw him grabbing her cheek, the same cheek that should only belong to me, and lowering his head to kiss her, malicious intent grabbed hold of me. I had this urge to slice his throat and bathe in his blood right in front of her so she'd be reminded that no other fucker is allowed to touch her.

Looks like I gave her too much space, and she's starting to get ideas in her head. Now, it's my mission to erase those ideas.

I stop in front of the cottage and Cecily hastily hops off the bike. She's tried to fight at the beginning, but as soon as I revved the engine and drove down the road, she held on to me as if her life depended on it.

And it did.

I might have driven faster than usual. One, it's imperative to get here as soon as possible. Two, I needed more of the warmth that radiated off her body when she was glued to me.

It's been a long time since I last touched her, had her softness molded all around me, and smelled the water lilies on her skin.

I was a grouchy, unapproachable fucker for the past month, and even I could tell the reason was thoroughly due to her absence from my life.

Though I do stalk her, as she likes to call it, that's not enough.

Nothing is enough when it comes to Cecily fucking Knight.

She studies her surroundings, the vast lawns, and the pitch-black night as if it's the first time she's been here.

Her skin has turned pale and her lips are slightly parted, accentuating the subtle teardrop in the upper one.

She crosses her arms, subconsciously pushing her round perky tits forward. And it's a cruel reminder that I haven't grabbed on, sucked, or marked those tits in a very long time.

Just like my life, this place has been hollow without her. So much so that I've only dropped by twice. The memory of her within the cottage's walls and all over the property haunted the fuck out of me.

After Cecily carefully inspects her surroundings, her eyes meet mine. Under the night sky, they're dark yet glittery. While they appear to be full of life, the fact is, like their owner, they're fighting to stay afloat. "Why are we here?"

I revel in the sound of her voice, in the gentle undertone that matches the breeze enveloping us. I try not to be affected by that, her presence, or the fact that she looks no different from a meal waiting to be devoured.

But my cock has other ideas.

He's developed singular tastes and has metaphorically tattooed her name all over his limited consciousness.

He's been twitching, stirring, demanding to be inside her since I touched her earlier at the shelter.

Cecily watches me carefully, like injured prey caught in a trap.

She realizes that her only way out is through the hunter—me. Only, I have no mercy to offer, and I certainly haven't brought her here just to let her leave.

I advance toward her, and she takes two steps back. She stumbles on the stairs leading to the patio, but then she grabs the railings and continues her climb up.

"Jeremy…don't…"

"Don't what?" I continue the cat-and-mouse game, enjoying the show of her futile attempts to escape. "And are you sure you want to speak breathily like that? Sounded like an invitation."

Her steps quicken, but she doesn't turn around and run, no. She knows better than to turn her back to me, because there will be no stopping me. That would be the actual invitation.

But I don't want to play a game right now. I have something more pressing in mind.

Cecily gasps when she crashes against the door. Her fingers latch onto the knob, frantically trying to turn it. The moment she does, I pounce on her.

My arm wraps around her waist, effectively binding her to me. As usual, she takes that as an opportunity to fight me. Her petite form thrashes against my larger one, hitting, slapping, scratching, clawing.

I still manage to carry her inside and to the sofa. Her face, neck, and ears have turned a deep shade of red.

"Let me go!" There's desperation in her voice, and it's not only due to our usual play. "Leave me alone, Jeremy."

"No."

It's one word, a single word, but it's enough to relay my decision concerning her.

There's no way I'll ever let Cecily go. No matter what she does, no matter what my demons say. No matter how the fuck it goes from then on.

I'll simply abduct her, keep her, and make her a part of me so that she's unable to leave.

Shiny moisture lines her eyes as she pushes at my arm. "Please, Jeremy. Just let me be."

"Save the begging for something more lucrative, because *this*," I tighten my hold around her waist, "will never change. You are mine, Cecily. Start acting like it."

And then I sink my fingers into her silver hair, my thumb digging into her cheek, and I claim her lips.

I kiss her with unbounded hunger. I kiss her as I've never kissed anyone before. Before her, any physical intimacy with the opposite sex was merely to satiate a need.

With Cecily, she *is* the need. It's not about fucking, owning, or release.

It's about her and her intoxicating scent. It's about how she melts in my arms when I kiss her.

I probe, she falls.

I tug on her lips, she whimpers.

I ravage her tongue, and she's all pliant against me, her hand trembling on my chest, and her body becoming one with mine.

My mouth devours hers for all the time I couldn't. For all the time she was out of reach because I was a rigid dick who only ever sees the world in black and white.

Cecily is neither. She's the gray. She's the colors. She's every rainbow I never thought to stop and watch.

I kiss her because this is the only way I can show her how much different she is for me and how much her absence affected me.

The moment I wrench my lips from hers, she releases a sound, a whine, a disappointment, or something in between.

Her skin has turned redder, and she's looking at me as if she can't understand me.

But she *wants* to.

Curiosity lingers in her big green eyes, in their depths, in that tinge of innocence and otherworldly fierceness that makes her Cecily.

"Why do you keep doing this?" Raw pain bleeds from her words. "Why do you keep playing with my feelings? I'm trying to get over you. Why don't you let me?"

"You're not allowed to get over me, Lisichka."

Her lips tremble. "Don't call me that when you already let me go."

"I didn't."

And then my lips find hers again. This time, I push her against the sofa, she falls onto her back with a gasp, and I follow right after.

Slowly but surely, her arms wrap around my neck, fingers splaying on the small hairs on my nape, touching, exploring.

Torturing.

Christ. This woman can turn me into a raging beast with a mere touch.

My fingers latch onto her jeans and push them down as far as possible.

It's impossible to keep myself in check when Cecily is in my arms. When I'm tugging on her lips and tasting her sweet abandonment on my tongue.

I release her mouth so that I can remove the rest of her clothes and mine. She stares at my muscles, tattoos, and cock as her chest rises and falls harshly.

Deep down, I love how she's attracted to me as much as I am to her. How she observes every slope of my body with a deranged hunger that mirrors mine.

No.

My need for her is much worse because I can't resist the need to sink my teeth into her translucent skin and draw blood.

Mark her.

Own her.

So no other fucker, especially Landon, will be able to come near her.

I touch her everywhere, pinching and biting her sensitive nipples, the creamy skin of her breasts, neck, stomach, and even her clit.

The moment I suck on her clit, she comes against my mouth. She gasps, shakes, and drenches my face with the distinctive scent of her arousal.

The sight and feel of her pleasure makes me unhinged. Slipping a hand behind her waist, I pull her up so we're sitting flesh-to-flesh, and her skyrocketing heartbeat thunders against my heightening one.

Her perky nipples brush against my chest and she whimpers, the sound stroking my libido in more ways than one.

My eyes never leave hers as I lift her up and then shove her down on my hard cock. Her head tips back in a moan, and her arms wrap around my neck.

Fuck. She feels so good.

Better than good. She feels custom-made for me. Her pussy tightens around me, strangling me, and she becomes so small and docile in my arms.

Usually, I'd up the rhythm, make her bounce on my cock and scream as I cut her with my knife. She'd cry and beg me to stop because it's too much as she shatters around me.

Not today.

I rotate my hips slowly but firmly. I allow her to adjust before I drive into her with a deep, moderate rhythm, letting her feel every stroke. Every up and down of her pussy around my cock. Every molecule of our joined bodies.

Her moans become throatier, her whimpers deeper, and her hips naturally fall into rhythm with mine.

The slap of flesh against flesh echoes in the air as I hold her by the waist to control the thrusts.

I'm not gentle. I go so deep that her eyes water and roll back.

But I am taking it slow, moving at a pace I've never tried.

"Oh, God, I…" she breathes out. "I can't take this."

"You've taken worse than this. You can handle me, Lisichka."

Her neck reddens as she stares at me again, using my face as an anchor while she grabs onto me.

"It feels new…"

Up.

Down.

"You feel different."

"How different?" I release one of her hips and grab her throat.

"I don't know. It's…just different."

"Bad different?"

A gasp falls out of her plump lips. "No… Good different."

My thumb ghosts near her mouth, and she swallows it into her wet warmth, sucking, kissing, and licking it as if it were my cock.

I grow harder inside her and nearly come right then and there.

"You can have different, but only with me." I up my rhythm and her nipples tighten further against my chest. "You won't let anyone else touch you or I swear to fuck, it'll be the last time they touch anything."

A moan rips from her, and she grabs onto me harder, her cunt clenching around me in faster intervals.

"I love how you take my cock and the way you look when you're being fucked by me. Your skin turns red, your lips part, and you try to match my rhythm. But do you know what I love the most?"

She shakes her head, breathing shallow as she chases her peak.

"How you look when you come apart while saying my name." I lift her up and then slam her back down on my cock.

A violent shiver rattles her as she spasms and clenches.

“Say my name, Cecily.”

She purses her lips, even as she chases the orgasm and holds on to me. Even as she’s hugging and squeezing me.

“Say my fucking name.”

She continues to gasp, but she doesn’t open her mouth and, instead, stares at me in pure defiance.

Just when she’s riding out her orgasm, I pull out of her, push her back against the sofa, and come all over her breasts.

A look of disappointment covers her face. She would never admit this, but Cecily loves it when I paint her pussy with my cum. And she loves it even more when I thrust it inside her, not allowing a drop to escape.

But she provoked me just now, so I did the same.

We’re both breathing harshly. Me, because I want to strangle the fuck out of her. Her, because of fuck knows what.

I grab her by the hair, wrenching her toward me. “Do you think a fucking rebellion will keep you safe from me, Cecily? You think I won’t purge it out of you?”

She doesn’t cower. If anything, her gaze becomes more defiant. “You’re using me for the wrong reasons. Why can’t I do the same?”

“*Wrong* reasons?”

“You think of me as property, don’t you? Someone you can own, control, and whose life you can dictate. Well, I think of you as a dick that somehow knows how to fuck me.”

This little…

I take a deep breath to stop myself from acting on my murderous thoughts.

“I do own you, Cecily. Every last fucking inch of you. Whether you get used to that or don’t. Whether you have a rebellion or not, the fact remains you’re a whore for my cock. You’re a whore for *me*.”

Her lips tremble, becoming a shade paler, and I don’t want to look at her. Not now, when she’s fighting demons that I’m part of.

That she already decided I’m part of.

I release her as gently as possible under the circumstances and stalk to the bathroom to clean up.

When I come back with a wet towel, she’s still on her back, legs splayed, thighs glistening with our release, her tits and stomach painted with my cum.

Instant erection.

Fuck.

Cecily doesn’t protest as I clean her. The whole time, her expression remains blank, and she acts as if she’s not interested in my touch as I flip her like a doll.

The involuntary shivers and pleased noises she makes now and again give her away, though.

However, she doesn’t look at me. Not when I start the fire, not when I pass her a bottle of water, and not when I bring us a blanket.

She thinks it’s for her and starts to take it, but I grab her by the arm and tug her toward me so that we’re both beneath it.

In her attempts to pull away, I get her closer to me so her naked body is snuggled into the crook of mine.

I can feel her stiffening, and I lift her chin to stare at her eyes. She frowns, and they’re filled with confusion, so that means she isn’t zoning out. She’s safe.

Reluctantly, I release her and watch the fire.

“What was that for?” she whispers in the silence. “Why did you look at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you were searching for…a ghost.”

A log crackles as it’s eaten by the flames and I offer her a small truth. “Maybe I was.”

She relaxes further into my hold, and I revel in the feeling of her lowering her resistance a little.

“Does it have to do with when I zone out?”

I nod.

“Do you know a lot of people like me?”

“Only one.” I remain silent as she stares at me with her inquisitive eyes, but I don’t look at her. I can’t. Not right now. “My mom.”

“What happened to her?” Her voice is softer than the silence, even as it disturbs it, stabs it, and refuses to leave its wound alone.

“What makes you think something happened?”

“Something always happens in these situations. People deal with trauma differently. Some internalize it, others express it, but the fact remains that the scars will always be there.”

“So you admit to having scars.”

“I never denied that I do.”

“You just hid them, then?”

A long breath heaves out of her. “I did in the past. Now, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Mum always told me that once I embrace my scars, I’ll feel more comfortable in my skin. I want to be comfortable in my skin more than anything. I want to stop my head from tormenting me with the past.”

A shiver goes through her and she snuggles closer to me, as if I’m her safety. I’m anything but fucking safety, but I want to be a haven for her right now.

“Anyway.” She clears her throat. “Your mum must’ve gone through certain circumstances to get to that point.”

“When I was young, she often struggled mentally. Sometimes, she’d be the best mother alive—teach me things, dance with me, play with me, dress me up, and even teach me things. Other times, she’d become a ghost. It wasn’t temporary, it didn’t last a few minutes or hours. It went on for days on end. She’d look at me and see straight through me. I’d call her and she wouldn’t hear me. She’d speak, but no words would come out. It was like she was trapped in a space I couldn’t reach.”

Cecily shifts closer, and the friction of her skin against mine makes me feel a deep sense of revolt. Not against her, but myself for never being able to forget those snippets of my childhood, even though it was a long time ago.

“Did she get better?” Cecily asks with easy compassion. Not pity.

“Eventually. I haven’t seen the ghost since she was pregnant with Annika. That was nineteen years ago. Isn’t it weird that I still have these vivid images of those times?”

“It’s not weird. In fact, it’s perfectly normal. You were what? Five? Six? You were a child, and any child exposed to that type of imagery would develop a strong reaction that would be reinforced the more they grow up. Our perception of the past depends greatly on our state of mind during that certain event. Any type of trauma can alter not only our memories but also our perspectives and personalities.”

“Are you psychoanalyzing me?” I smile down at her. “It’s a turn-on.”

She pushes at my chest playfully and shakes her head. “Everything is a turn-on according to your logic.”

“Only when it comes to you. Not my fault you’re the sexiest person alive.”

Red creeps up her face and she rubs the side of her nose before she clears her throat. “Point is, it’s not your fault you feel that way about what happened during your childhood. But it’s not your mother’s fault either.”

“How is it not her fault?” I slowly close my eyes and take a moment before I open them again. “She gave birth to a child she couldn’t care for.”

“That’s not true. You said she took care of you after learning how to cope with her mental health issues. Anni always said that your mum is the best and she sees her as a caring, affectionate figure, which means those episodes never happened with her. To say mental struggles are her fault is no different than victim blaming. I understand your issues, and the feelings of abandonment you must’ve had, but you also need to understand that she would’ve stopped it if she could. That, deep down, she was fighting her demons to be able to go back to you, and she eventually succeeded. That’s the part you should celebrate, because it takes a lot of willpower, energy, and strength to fight one’s demons.”

I stare at Cecily silently as if I’m looking at an extraterrestrial being.

I’ve always hidden that slight animosity for my mom from the whole world. Hell, I even hid it from myself sometimes because I was disgusted that I would be holding such emotions against her.

No matter what, I shouldn’t feel this conflicted about the woman who gave me life, but I do. I’ve sometimes thought of her as a ghost and had this idea that I wasn’t wanted.

Like Annika, I care for my mother, and I’ve never been able to imagine my life without her. However, I also haven’t been able erase that ghost version of her, no matter how much I’ve tried.

And yet, Cecily has managed to open my eyes to a different perspective. To the fact that maybe Mom wasn’t too far gone back then. That maybe she tried to fight for me, after all. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t want to speak about the first six years of my life and barely keeps any pictures from that time.

God-fucking-dammit.

Now I feel like the worst asshole to ever exist.

This woman is shuffling my cards into a mess and I wouldn’t stop it even if I could.

I lift her chin and kiss her, softly this time, with enough passion that she melts against me. Kisses me back. Fuses her body with mine.

For a moment, I forget that I must ask her about my sister's whereabouts. But I'll get to that later.

Because right now, I want to thank her in the only way I know how.

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CECILY

Things are…confusing, to say the least.

When everything with Annika and Creighton went down, I hadn't thought I would witness this side of Jeremy.

It's even different from before we had that rift.

He doesn't feel distant, like he's putting a wall between us and refusing to divulge anything about himself. In fact, in the last five days we've spent together, I've learned so much more about him than I did during all the months before that.

One, he's responsible to a fault about the people he considers to be under his wing. That includes his family, Nikolai, Killian, Gareth, Ilya, and even the guards.

Oh, and me. He definitely treats me like I belong on that list.

Two. He's protective despite the cold aloofness and is ready to unleash the beast side of him whenever he senses a spark of danger.

Three, and most importantly, he's an emotional vault. In the beginning, I thought he lacked feelings, and he does to an extent, but when I dug deeper and he allowed me to get closer, I found out that he just keeps them hidden well. He's also highly selective about which emotions to let slip from his armor.

The fact remains, Jeremy does see the world in black and white, which is why he barely trusts anyone, but when he does, it's for life.

That's the other thing about Jeremy. He truly has high regard for loyalty, which is why he got extremely mad when he thought I'd let Annika down.

And that’s the link that’s confusing me in this whole story. We still haven’t resolved what happened with Annika, yet every night, he picks me up from the shelter, the dorm, or the library, not caring that anyone can see him. He brings me to the cottage, where we cook, eat, and study together.

He fucks me, sometimes by chasing, other times by just taking me on the bed or the sofa in regular positions.

For some reason, I thought I’d never like that, that I was too defective to ever feel pleasure without some sort of thrill or feeling forced into it. Jeremy has taught me that I can enjoy ordinary sex.

Calling it ordinary is a bit of a stretch, though. He’s still rough, intense, and uses the knife sometimes. Not that I’m complaining.

Jeremy has awakened parts of me that were dormant before he came along. Parts that buzz to life around him, waiting for the moment he’ll touch me again.

Whether it’s chasing me or laying me down and fucking me doesn’t matter. I pant for more after every time.

I’m powerful despite handing over my power. He doesn’t abuse it and makes me feel safe in his arms.

I’ve come to the realization that I feel this way because it’s Jeremy. If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t have this level of desire and peaceful acceptance of my sexuality.

Every night, he cleans me or showers with me. He asks me about my day, and not in the small talk kind of way where people ask and then zone out.

Jeremy actually listens intently to everything I say. He makes me feel important and wanted, like I have someone to fall back on.

I still need to be careful about slandering anyone in front of him or mentioning even the slightest annoyance, because the other day, I told him that a colleague scratched my car unintentionally, and the following day, that colleague’s car paint was found wholly ruined.

When I asked Jeremy if he did it, he shrugged. “It must’ve happened unintentionally.”

I’m struggling to come to terms with that part of him, even though I know it would probably be impossible to stop him from being himself.

The parts that make up for it, though, are when he built me shelves in the cottage and continued to stuff them with mangas. Or when he listens to me talking nonstop about them without being bothered. Unless I actually

call a character hot or cute, then he definitely starts questioning if maybe he should get rid of them.

Jealous of a fictional character, *check*.

At night, he covers me and only allows me to sleep either in the cocoon of his body or on his lap.

Like right now.

I stare up at him, at the hard ridges of his face, the slickness of his abs, and the ink that flexes with his muscles while he types on his phone. His other hand lies nonchalantly on my chest, nearly covering it all.

It's past three in the morning. Even though I slept a few hours ago, I couldn't help waking up again.

This time, it's not because of sleep paralysis. In fact, I haven't had any in the past few days.

I couldn't sleep properly because of two things that have been bugging me. I think I just confirmed the most minor one.

"Do you not sleep?" I ask in a low voice.

Jeremy pulls the phone away from his face, throws it on the sofa, and lets his fingers get lost in my hair. The act has become so natural that I can't help closing my eyes briefly in response to his touch.

"I do. Just not often and not too much."

"Why not?"

"In my early teens, I avoided sleep because it brought nightmares of the less glamorous version of Mom, and it's become a habit since then."

I wrap my hand around the one on my chest, gently stroking the skin and the veins at the back. "I understand. I also preferred not to sleep when the sleep paralysis got to be too much. Whenever night fell, and the world was sleeping, the idea of closing my eyes and being assaulted by a replay of what happened brought me to tears. It terrified me."

His fingers pause in my hair before resuming their rhythm. It's a fraction of a second, but I feel the change and deduce his line of thinking.

"Jeremy, no."

He raises a brow. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to. I can see it in your eyes that you plan to torture Jonah some more in prison, maybe take it to the next level and kill him."

"He doesn't deserve death yet, and he won't for the following, say, thirty years. He'll wish for it, though, countless times a day."

I wince, and he notices, because his eyes narrow. “Do you have an objection?”

“I just…find all of this hard to get used to. You already got all my and the other girls’ photos from Jonah and burned them. He’s already been locked up for his crimes. He’s lost his reputation and freedom. Shouldn’t that suffice?”

“No. He’ll have to lose his dignity and his mind, and even that won’t be enough payment for how he made you suffer. He stripped away your power, so I’m confiscating his in return. He’ll be trapped in that prison for eternity without being able to fight his way out. Just like he made you feel trapped in your own body.”

The dark contrast of his revenge chills me, and my lips quiver when I speak. “Not sure if I should be touched or scared.”

“Probably both.”

I smile. “You should’ve said touched.”

His fingers thread with mine, splaying out on my chest so that he’s feeling my heartbeat. “I’m not a nice man, Cecily. I won’t pretend otherwise, or I’d be doing you and myself a disservice. What I am, however, is someone who’ll slaughter your demons one by one until you’re finally free of them. I’ll touch your scars until you normalize them and can live with them, because they’re what makes you who you are.”

Holy…

I’m surprised my heart doesn’t spill out onto the ground, crawl at his feet, and vanish right in front of those ethereal eyes.

No one has ever told me this, and the fact that it’s coming from a harsh man like Jeremy makes it tenfold worse for my health.

“I thought you hated me,” I murmur in a vulnerable voice that I loathe to the core.

Why is he able to tug, shove, and break my heartstrings with mere words?

Jeremy draws circles in my hair, soothing, gentle circles that trigger a map of shivers on my skin. It’s even more intense when he’s staring down at me with a dark look. “You hated me, too.”

“You gave me no choice.”

“Hate is a feeling. In fact, it’s probably the strongest of them all. The first time we met in that club, something had your panties in a twist.”

I narrow my eyes. “You were an overbearing, controlling prick, and I despised you to the core. You were at the top of my very short ‘I want to poke their eyes out’ list, knocking Remi from his spot.”

“Do you despise Remi?”

“Of course not, but he can be a provocative twat sometimes.” I sigh. “He’s the funniest ever, though, so he gets a pass.”

“Funniest ever,” he repeats with an edge to his voice, his movements losing their natural flow. “Is that an exaggeration?”

“If I say no, will you get any ideas about cutting off his tongue?” I make a face, and he narrows his eyes.

“*Is* it a no?”

“Jeremy!” I laugh. “Seriously, tone it down. Remi and I were basically raised together, and he’s like my brother.”

“You have an awful lot of non-biologically related brothers. Your heart is so big to fit *all* of these people.”

“Was that sarcasm?”

He glares.

“I’ll take that as a no. And really, we’ve been friends since we were, like, in nappies. Remi, Bran, and Creigh will always be brothers to me.”

“You skipped one on the list. Landon. Why isn’t he a brother, hmm?”

That chilling tone would’ve made me piss myself if this moment had happened some time ago, but now, I can handle Jeremy’s dark side. At least, I’m learning to.

“I actually skipped two. Eli and Landon. It’s hard to consider them brothers when they’re antisocial and lack humanity.”

“And yet, you fell for him.”

“Who? Eli?” I ask coyly, and he tightens his grip on my fingers until I wince.

“Don’t fuck with me, Cecily. Do I have to deal with Eli King, too?”

“No, no. Jeez no,” I blurt. It’s inconvenient enough that he thinks he should deal with Lan in the first place. Add Eli, and we’d have a disaster on our hands.

“You didn’t answer my question. How come someone as reserved, careful, and methodical as you fell for Landon, knowing full well he’s antisocial and lacks humanity?”

I stare at the fire crackling opposite us. It’s dwindled, almost dying down. “I fell for the idea of him, not his true self. I doubt anyone has

actually seen what his true nature is like. I realize that now that I know…” *what falling for someone is like.*

What the hell? I almost said that out loud.

I nearly divulged my deepest, darkest secret and allowed him to hurt me again, stomp on my barely beating heart, and leaving me stranded.

The last time still makes my eyes burn with tears whenever I think about it.

My gaze strays back to Jeremy, who’s never looked away from me. He’s watching me with a ferociousness that could disintegrate a fortress.

In this moment of careful peace, it hits me. I fell for Jeremy the exact opposite way I fell for Lan.

I liked the image Lan projected but was repulsed by his true anarchist, empty self.

I hated Jeremy at first sight. His otherworldly physique and handsome looks were a mere camouflage of a monster, but the more I got to know him, the harder I fell for the hidden parts of him.

Parts that he strategically hides from the world but voluntarily showed me.

“Now that you know what?” he asks when I remain silent.

“That he’s an empty shell,” I blurt. “He doesn’t matter right now. I don’t think he ever did.”

It’s subtle, almost too hidden to be noticed, but a slight twitch lifts Jeremy’s lips. “We finally agree on something.”

I smile, feeling lighthearted and a bit sleepy, too, but I grab his hand tighter and ask, “Hey, Jeremy?”

“Yes?”

“Are you aware of the rumors going around about you?”

His lips curve. “Which ones?”

“So you are aware.”

“More or less.”

“Are they true?”

“If you’re asking whether I’ve killed, tortured and driven people to the brink of death, then the answer is yes to all. I don’t do it for fun or to satisfy any sort of bloodlust, and usually I have people who do the job for me, but I won’t shy away from getting my hands dirty if need be.”

I go still as the dooming reality of his nature slams into me. Suspecting it is one thing but having the proof right here is entirely different.

“Are you scared of me?” His question stabs the careful silence.

“Not you. Your world,” I say after a while. “But I’ll try to understand, even though it will likely take me a long time.”

“Why would you do that?”

Because I care about you and I’d rather understand than let you go.

Instead of saying that, I smile. “I like being open-minded. Also, Jeremy?”

“Hmm?”

“Why aren’t you torturing me to reveal where Creighton has taken Annika? Isn’t that why you came to the shelter in the first place?”

“You said he wouldn’t hurt her, and while I’m skeptical, I choose to believe you. I don’t want to put you in a position where you must betray your friend’s trust, even if he’s a motherfucker. Besides, my father is working on it. If I don’t have to involve you, I won’t.”

A shiver snakes down my spine and leaves me trembling. How can he say things like that without any consideration to my slowly melting heart?

“Is…your mum okay?” I ask.

He shakes his head once. “The whole thing with Annika hit her hard. She’s always shared a deep connection with her, and now, she thinks she’s losing her for good… Hey, what’s wrong?”

It’s then I realize I’m shaking. I can’t do this. I can’t just keep shielding Creigh while knowing many people are suffering, including Annika, who I’m sure wouldn’t like being locked away from the outside world.

But I can’t have Jeremy hurt him either.

“If…” I trail off and clear the ball clogging my throat. “If I tell you where they are, will you promise not to hurt Creigh?”

A muscle works in his strong jaw. “He kidnapped my sister.”

“He loves her, Jeremy. I know you don’t want to believe it, but I’ve never seen Creighton attached to anyone the way he is to Anni. And no matter how much you deny it, you’re well aware that she loves him, too.”

His jaw clenches.

I get up and carefully wrap my arms around his neck, expecting him to push me away. Jeremy might let me hold on to him during sex, but he goes rigid whenever I touch him intimately outside of it.

It’s like he can’t get used to the emotions pouring out of him.

However, this time, not only does he let me, but he also doesn’t show any signs of discomfort. Maybe he’s getting used to me as much I’m getting

used to him.

“Please, Jeremy.” I stroke the hairs at his nape, knowing how much he likes that. “Do this for your parents and yourself. I’m sure you miss Anni, right?”

A grunt is all he offers.

“Do you promise you won’t hurt him?”

One second.

Two.

Three…

“Fine. I promise.”

I squeal and kiss him on the cheek. It’s so natural that both of us pause afterward.

“Thank you,” I whisper awkwardly.

“Don’t thank me yet. If he hurt my sister, I’ll chop his head off.”

I’m sure Creigh wouldn’t.

The fact remains, Jeremy’s inclination for violence is something I’ll need to eventually get used to.

He’s a beast, but he’s the beast who breathes life into me.

He’s the beast who’d slaughter the world to pieces just to protect me from it.

He’s my beast.

I just have no idea what I am to him.

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JEREMY

“What are we doing here?”

The sound of Cecily's spooked voice makes me smile. I don’t mean to. It just happens.

A lot of things about her make me smile. Whether it’s her silly psychoanalyzing of fictional characters, her attachment to said characters, or the expression she makes when she’s caught off guard.

Like right now.

I hop off my bike and throw the helmet into the hands of an awaiting Ilya. He nods at me, then at Cecily, whose brows have lifted to nearly touch her hairline.

She doesn’t blink or react as I grab her hand and start to guide her into the mansion. It isn’t until we’re at the threshold that she physically shakes her head and draws us to a stop.

“Seriously. What are we doing here?”

“Didn’t you ask the other day why I never bring you here?”

Her throat works with a swallow and her hand grows slack in mine. She’s so close that I can see the tiny freckles dusting her cheeks, the smudge of darker roots in her silver hair, and breathe in her scent.

Fucking water lilies. I never thought I’d be as entranced by a scent as I am with Cecily’s.

I’ve never liked anyone enough to focus on them, to want to learn more about them, to engrave myself so deep beneath their skin that they can’t remove me unless they cut themselves open and bleed.

And yet, those are the exact thoughts I've been having about this woman.

"That was…just a figurative question." She stares at Ilya, who's following close behind. "Does he take everything so literally?"

My guard nods. "When it comes to you, I'm afraid yes."

"We need to fix that about him."

"Stop talking about me as if I'm not here." I grab her chin and rotate her attention back to me. "Do not speak to Ilya when you can ask me."

"Oh, please. You need help."

My fingers flex on her throat and she shivers, going slightly up on her tiptoes, which is usually an invitation for me to fuck her brains out.

"Behave." I groan deep in my throat, then I take her hand in mine again, because if I don't stop touching her throat, I'll be tempted to throw away whatever I'm trying to do and eat her out for dinner.

We're not two steps in when she stops again. "I was only wondering. We don't have to be here."

"I don't see why we shouldn't be, and you weren't only wondering. You felt left out of an important part of my life, the Heathens, and you're here because you're not my dirty little secret."

Her lips part the slightest bit, like whenever I do something unusual and she's stunned into silence.

I use that chance to drag her in with me.

She's still shocked about my words and actions during these past two weeks. Ever since Annika and Creighton came back without either of them being hurt, I've found time to focus on more important things.

Like getting to know Cecily more. Yes, there's still more to find out about her, despite all the snooping around and reading her journal.

I stopped doing that after I found an entry about me. Whatever her feelings for me are, I prefer to hear them from her instead of cheating and having access to thoughts she keeps for herself.

We still spend our nights at the cottage, but we go out, too. Once, I took her to a restaurant, and another time, she planned a mini-date on the beach. But mostly, we prefer our alone time at the cottage, where no one can interrupt us.

The other day, I convinced her to swim in the lake, and she held on to me for dear life the whole time, afraid of the monsters in the water.

Little does she know that I'm the worst monster in her life. She might be starting to understand me and get used to me, but I always have this feeling that I'll fuck it up in some way. Maybe I'll do something that will make her hate me, become insufferable about it, and then everything will go to hell.

Because the truth remains, Cecily is still scared of me sometimes. She still views me as the one who stalked her, coerced her, and barged into her life without leaving her a choice.

She's choosing her battles by being this accepting. Deep down, if she was given the choice, she'd never choose me.

Which is why she'll never fucking have that choice.

We part from Ilya at the entrance, and I take Cecily on a tour through the Heathens' mansion. Little by little, her apprehension subsides, and she studies her surroundings intently, her hand going slack in mine.

"This place is huge," she comments after we walk around for a while.

"You say that as if it's the first time you've been here. Didn't you sneak in with Anni a few times?"

"We didn't go through the whole mansion, and to my defense, I didn't want to. Anni and Ava are a bad influence." She rubs the side of her nose, looking so adorably embarrassed. "Did you see me back then?"

"I have always seen you."

Her hand grows hot in mine before she clears her throat and, in a desperate attempt to change the subject, she points at the door we've stopped in front of. "Is this your room?"

I nod, opening it, and she releases my hand to explore the place, her inquisitive eyes sparkling like every time she learns something about me.

She's had the same reaction whenever I've offered her a tidbit about my past, my parents, and my vision. Anything about me, really.

A part of me wants to believe she's genuinely interested in me, but that would be foolish, considering all the subtle pulling-back gestures.

Such as not saying my name during sex or keeping her distance in public as if not wanting to be associated with me.

We'll work on those one at a time until she's well aware that there's no way out that doesn't lead back to me.

That her rebellions are futile and she'll only belong to me.

After looking around the minimalistic room, her shoulders hunch. "There's nothing here."

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I motion to her right. “There’s a bed.”

She smiles, but she shakes her head while fingering one of my college books. “You have a crazy sex drive, you know.”

I come behind her and wrap my arms around her middle, reveling in how she trembles in my hold. I’ll never get used to the feeling of her having this reaction whenever I touch her.

“That doesn’t seem to be a problem when you beg for it,” I whisper near her ear and I’m rewarded with another shudder.

Her fingers flip through the pages in an uncoordinated rhythm, her neck tilting to the side slightly, baring the translucent skin of her throat. I can’t resist the need to mark that skin, to suck on her blood so she’s flowing inside me.

But before I can lower my head, Cecily slaps a hand on that spot and spins around. “No, nope. I told you I’m visiting my parents tomorrow, and if I do that with a visible mark the size of the ocean, my father will probably conduct a search and seize.”

My hand splays out on her lower back as I push against her so that she’s trapped between me and the desk. “Is he that scary?”

“No. Well, maybe a little. We were always so close, and he doesn’t respond well to guys touching me.”

“Looks like I have my work cut out for me.”

“Don’t do anything.” She flattens her palms on my chest, touching, exploring, imploring.

Her advances have become a bit more daring in the last couple of weeks, but still not sure or confident enough. She only touches me when she’s either holding on to me or wants to stop me. No time in between.

“I really would rather not piss off Papa.”

“Take me with you, and I’ll change his mind.”

“No way in hell,” she blurts. Then, seeming to think better of it, she says more calmly, “He just needs time before I can tell him all about it.”

My jaw clenches and it takes everything in me not to tighten my hold on her waist. “Are you sure he’s the one who needs time and not you?”

She swallows, her touch growing unsteady. “I just don’t know how to explain your background to my parents.”

“Did you have to explain Annika’s?”

“She’s different. She won’t be inheriting a mafia empire and she never really liked that part of your lives.”

“And I do.”

“Isn’t that true?”

“My background and who I am changes nothing, Cecily. If you think you can use that as an excuse to leave me, then you have no fucking clue who you’re dealing with.”

“Seems that I perfectly do, considering your threats whenever something doesn’t go your way.” Her lips purse. “You need to stop doing that. This isn’t how relationships work.”

“Then how *do* they work? By hiding me from your parents like *I am* the dirty little secret?”

“I never said that.”

“You don’t have to. Your actions speak louder than your words.”

“Can’t you understand my perspective? This is new to me, like I’m sure it’s new to you. Would *you* take me to see your parents?”

“Tomorrow if you like.”

Awe and surprise mix and clash on her face. “You…would?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“But aren’t you supposed to marry a Russian? Someone like Maya?”

“That’s a preference and in no way mandatory.”

“Wow. You really would introduce me to your parents.”

“As I said, you’re not my dirty little secret. I’m not embarrassed of you, which can’t be said about you.”

“I’m not embarrassed by you, Jeremy. I just…need to come to terms with all of this on my own before I involve other people.”

“Is that what you truly believe or are you just too scared to admit to what we have?”

Her face blanches, and it’s all the answer I need. I release her and step back, forcing her to let go of me.

She takes a step forward, but whatever she has to say is interrupted when the door barges open and hits the wall from the force of it.

Nikolai strolls inside, followed closely by his cousin Gareth.

“Ever heard of knocking?” I say in a tone that doesn’t hide my displeasure.

“You zip it.” He holds up a hand that will be fucking broken in about a second, along with his ribs because he’s shirtless again.

Gareth remains at the door, watching the scene intently while his unhinged cousin circles us with the aura of a lion. “What do we have here?

I placed a bet and called the guards liars when they said you brought a girl—who isn't your sister—over. Looks like I lost a few bills, but this shit is worth it. I say, why her, Jer? You said she was dull and more boring than a nun."

This motherfucker.

Cecily's face goes red, a different shade from the color that covered her cheeks when these two came in. That one was embarrassment mixed with discomfort. This one is anger.

And yes, I did say she was dull and fucking boring, but only to deflect Gareth's and especially Nikolai's interest from her. This asshole likes to fuck around a lot, and Cecily was simply not going to find a way onto his list.

That incident happened long before I chased her in the woods and metaphorically staked a claim on her.

"You were duped, Niko," Gareth says with a knowing smile. "You can be really slow sometimes."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" He glares back at his cousin, who's still nonchalantly studying the scene, probably sensing that I'm approaching the point of an explosion the more Nikolai keeps talking, or even existing, near her.

Not getting a reply, my friend, who'll soon lose those friendship privileges, slides closer to Cecily. "Your name is Cecilia, right?"

The red has slowly disappeared from her face, but she's turned cold both in expression and voice. "Cecily."

"Tomayto, tomahto." He stares at her funnily. "You're close with lotus flower, aren't you? You have this whole shared love of unicorns, cakes, and saving animals."

"Lotus what?"

"Brandon," he says as if the correlation is a given.

It's subtle, but I notice the exact moment Cecily's body goes rigid and the way her expression changes from discomfort to mama bear mode.

Nikolai has always given a bad impression. *Always.* Not only is he violence on steroids, but he's so deranged that he gets a bad rep wherever he goes. Cecily, like everyone else on the island, has heard of his brutish, merciless methods and his knack for beating up people for sport.

Generally, no one aside from us feels comfortable in his company, which is the reason for her unease ever since he barged in.

However, the moment he brought up her friend, fucker Landon's twin brother, she slid seamlessly from fear to protectiveness. This girl isn't afraid when it comes to her life, and she'd do anything for those she considers family.

"What about him?" she asks with a tinge of stiffness.

Nikolai is oblivious to the change in her, because he grins. "We can exchange information. I'll give you shit on Jeremy and you do the same about lotus flower."

She pauses, her gaze sliding to me with a full-blown glare as if she's seriously contemplating the option, but then she shakes her head. "I have nothing to tell you about Bran."

Nikolai stands in front of her and tilts his head to the side, as if meaning to stare into her soul and peel off the information he needs. "Not even a tiny bit? Think again, because I have all the deets about the girls Jeremy's dated."

I fling him back by his nape and throw him against his cousin. "Take him and leave."

"Why?" Gareth pushes him back inside. "This is getting fun."

I'm about to grab Nikolai again, but he slips away last second. "Stop throwing me as if I'm a ball, motherfuckers."

"We have no time for you. Fuck off."

"Actually." Cecily steps forward and stands beside me. "We do. Didn't you bring me here to meet your friends?"

No, I fucking didn't.

In fact, I kept her away from this place so she wouldn't see these assholes.

"What she said." Gareth smiles at her. "We're having dinner in a bit. Will you join?"

"No," I say.

"Sure," she says at the same time.

I glare at her, and she glares right back. I lean over to whisper, "We only have dinner, just the two of us."

"Not today," she whispers back.

"Don't fuck with me, Cecily. We're leaving."

"No, we're not. I thought I was more boring than a nun." She flips her silver hair and strides in Gareth's direction. "Did you mention dinner?"

“Yeah. We can have the chef add any dishes you want. Wait till Kill sees you.” Gareth smirks. “RIP, Jer.”

I flip him the bird, and he merely grins as he walks beside Cecily and Nikolai occupies the other side, hounding her for answers to his earlier question.

She doesn’t answer him, but she doesn’t shoot him down either. Instead, she engages the bastard by divulging some harmless information about Brandon.

I follow close behind them, contemplating who to kill first and whether there should be blood or not.

Who am I kidding? Of course there will be blood. Now, I just have to make sure it’ll pour out from all their orifices.

I start by shoving them away and gluing her to my side during the whole evening, but that barely lasts when she starts drinking with them and Killian joins in with his girlfriend.

Cecily flat-out refuses to leave once Glyndon gets here, despite my and Kill’s joint effort to take our girls and disappear into the night.

“Why the fuck did you bring her here? Now, Glyn won’t budge,” Kill asks me as the two of them play some stupid card game with Nikolai and Gareth.

“I honestly have no fucking clue why.” I sip on my vodka and shoot glares in her direction that she subtly ignores.

Killian slides his drink across the table. “I’m going to teach those motherfuckers a lesson.”

Then he stalks over to the game, kicks Nikolai away from his girlfriend’s side, and glues himself to her. Killian’s idea of teaching them a lesson is cheating, not even bothering to cover his tracks.

Both Gareth and Glyndon call him on his shit, but he remains completely calm and even accuses them of cheating.

Cecily merely laughs at the circus, her shoulders shaking and her eyes gleaming.

Me? I’m fuming.

Not only because there’s no alone time tonight, but also because everyone else gets to see her half drunk, smiling, and happy.

Maybe I’m sick, but I want to trap all those emotions so they only belong to me.

While Kill is busy stealing cards and arguing with Gareth and Glyndon, Nikolai throws back one shot after the other and offers one to Cecily.

She drinks some of it, wincing, then grins wide. “Wow. This is strong.”

“My specialty, babe.”

That’s it.

I stand, not caring about how crazed I seem, and haul her up by the elbow. She’s slightly lethargic from all the drinking and sways, then lands against my chest.

“We’re leaving.”

“Noooo, I still want to play,” she slurs, her words barely coherent.

“Yeah, let her play, Jer. Don’t be a bore— Fuck!” Nikolai rolls on the floor when I kick him in the ribs. He’s had it coming since earlier.

“What the fuck was that for?” he yells, gripping his side.

“My leg slipped.”

“You lying fuck!”

I shrug, and when Cecily continues squirming, trying to slip out of my hold, I pick her up in my arms and carry her toward the stairs.

“Why did you do that? Nikolai is nice.”

“Shut up, or he’d look nicer in a casket.”

She groans. “Ugh. You caveman.”

Her head falls against my chest and her breathing evens out. She’s started to go to sleep at healthy hours lately. And even I have started to let myself sleep for more than two hours a night.

Once we’re in my room, I lock it with the key, then remove her shoes and cover her. I’m about to search for a remedy for her hangover when her hand grabs mine and pulls me down abruptly.

I nearly crash into her, but I hold myself back at the last second.

Her eyes open, green and glittery, and then slowly, too slowly, she asks in a vulnerable voice, “Am I as dull as a nun?”

That motherfucker Nikolai will die in his sleep for daring to hurt her, even with words.

I stroke her hair away from her forehead. “You’re not. You’re the most entertaining person I know.”

“But you said I’m dull.”

“That’s because I don’t want others' attention on you.”

She blushes, her drunken face becoming all red. “But we didn’t know each other back then.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“If I hadn’t applied to that site, would you have found another girl to chase? Like one of the girls you dated?”

“I didn’t date anyone before you.”

“But Nikolai said—”

“Nikolai was baiting you to get the information he wants. Don’t believe everything he says.”

She grins so delicately and elegantly that I want to pause this moment and tuck it in my heart where no one but me can revisit it over and over.

“What if…what if…we’d never met?”

“We would’ve sooner or later.”

“How do you know?”

“You were always meant to be mine, Cecily.” Nothing else could explain this raging need to own her, keep her, and never let her leave me, even if I have to sacrifice a limb for it.

Even if she hates me because of it.

She calms the beast I spent years hiding beneath the surface. She tames and placates him like no one else has been able to.

I’ve always been shackled by an inheritance to one of the most powerful organizations and that means I’ve needed to count every step. Strategize every plan. Plot every decision.

Not with her.

She’s the only person whose company I feel free in. There’s no sense of duty nor a weight on my shoulders.

There’s just me and her.

Cecily Knight is the calm in a loud, chaotic world.

A glittery look covers her eyes, and I think she’ll fall asleep, but she lifts her head and brushes her lips against mine, softly, slowly, as if it’s the first time she’s done it.

“I’m going to miss you when I’m in London.” Her drunken voice floats around me like a gentle breeze.

And then she closes her eyes, and her chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm.

I remain frozen in place for what seems like an hour.

Fuck me.

How can a mere chaste kiss and those words affect me this much?

Looks like I won’t let her do this, after all.

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CECILY

My attempts to stop the dull ache in my chest have been an utter failure.

I still try to enjoy my visit home in peace, though. Or as much peace as there can be, considering the circumstances.

Mum and I are preparing dinner together, something we've done since I was a child. Uncle Kirian—my mother's younger brother—would usually join us, but he's traveling. Hopefully, I'll be able to see him before I go back to school.

I'm sitting at the prep table while Mum is behind me, stirring ingredients on the stove.

"Pass me the salt, sweet pea," she says, distracted.

Her hair is pulled up in a messy chignon with green highlights peeking out from everywhere. For as long as I've known her, she's always had some green in her hair. Sometimes, it's fully green. Other times, like now, it's brown with green streaks.

She's wearing a knee-length floral dress, and, you guessed it, a green apron.

Papa remodeled the kitchen into a chef's dream when I was a toddler. It's full of stainless-steel equipment, a large food-prep area, and it's green-themed like Mum.

This is where I've often dabbled in internet recipes with Mum while Papa joins in just to annoy us, makes a mess out of the kitchen, and then stays to watch with a massive grin on his face.

The only reason he’s not doing that right now is because Mum sent him to get us a few things we’re missing.

I place the salt cellar in her hand, and she starts to put some in, then stops. “Cecy, hon, this is pepper.”

“Bollocks. Sorry.” I snap out of it and give her the appropriate cellar.

She shakes her head with a smile and adds the salt as I sit down again and get busy chopping the vegetables. I’m thankful she’s busy and can’t see my expression that I’m sure would give me away.

Mum always makes sure we do mother-daughter activities together. We cook, do yoga, watch movies, and shop. Though I’m not a big fan of the latter. She also plays the perfect role of my solicitor whenever Papa kicks up the overprotectiveness a notch and forbids me from doing things because they’re ‘dangerous’ for me.

It means a lot to me that we’ve always been so close, but not when she can read me. I really hate that part.

“Is everything okay back there?” she asks, glancing at me over her shoulder.

“Grand, yeah.”

“Is there anything you want to tell me, hon?”

“What? No, of course not.” I certainly don’t want to tell her about a certain guy who’s flipping my world upside down while I’m along for the ride.

I last saw Jeremy yesterday after I got embarrassingly drunk, kissed him, and told him I’d miss him, then crashed in his bed. I snuck out of his room like a thief, then mistakenly walked in on Killian and Glyn making out in the game room and on Nikolai floating in the pool wearing nothing but boxers. I thought he was dead, so I frantically called Ilya, but it turns out, the incident was normal for the guy.

All in all, my sneaking-out session ended up with me seeing almost everyone in the Heathens’ compound before leaving. But hey, at least Jeremy didn’t catch me.

Now, I’m not sure if that was such a great idea. Because what I said is true. I do miss him. And I only got here yesterday.

“Cecy!”

“W-what?” I jump up and wince when I realize I’ve cut myself, and blood is dripping on the cutting board and some of the vegetables.

Mum snatches a tissue and presses it on my bleeding finger, her hand shaking. She's always had this overboard reaction whenever I'm bleeding, even if it's a minor cut. Papa, too. I think it has to do with the scars on her wrists, which is why I've never blamed them for being too overprotective.

"I'm fine, Mum." I remove the tissue, showing her that the bleeding has stopped. "See? It's nothing."

She flips my hand back and forth and only releases a breath when she ensures the cut is minor. "You need to be careful with the knife, hon."

She'd faint if she found out what Jeremy does to me with the knife, and that I actually enjoy it.

Mum gets me a plaster from the cupboard and puts it on my finger. After she's done, I throw away the dirtied vegetables and get new ones, then I climb on the chair to start anew. Mum puts the stove on the lowest temperature, gets her own knife, and settles across from me.

"I can do it on my own," I tell her.

"It'll get done faster if I help. At least I'm not distracted."

"Who says I am?"

"You've zoned out a few times and you keep checking your phone in an unhealthy way. Are you waiting for a text or a call?"

"No," I say with an awkward smile that she must read right through.

"Uh-huh." She fixates me with that 'I'm your mother, and I know everything about you' look. "Your aunt Silver was here the other day and told me something interesting."

"And what is that?"

"Ava told her you were seeing some American boy, and she asked Silver to start picking her bridesmaid dress."

That little snitch.

I know Ava is tight with her mum and basically tells her everything, but this is different. She knows I haven't come to terms with this. According to her, I'm just delaying the inevitable, but semantics.

"Is it true?" Mum stares at me.

I place the knife on the table to avoid accidentally cutting myself again. "It's…complicated."

"How complicated?" Her voice softens. "You know you can tell me anything, right? I'm always on your side."

"Even if he…he's not the conventional type?"

“You’re a very responsible girl, Cecy. You always were, even as a child. So much so that I was worried you wanted to get older prematurely without living your life. But that’s also why I trust you to make the right choice.”

My chest twists, and I stare at the cutting board, at the half-slaughtered vegetables, and everywhere else but at Mum’s face.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, it’s completely fine.” She pats my hand. “Just know I’m here for you whenever you’re ready.”

She releases me and stands up to check on the food. She often does that whenever she feels like she’s pushed too much or shoved me out of my comfort zone.

Mum knows when she’s started to poke my demons and always, without doubt, steps back and gives me time to recuperate.

She hopes I’ll come to her when I’m ready, but I’ve always used that time to escape from her, to drown further into myself, and try to fix my fuck-ups on my own.

This is the first time I’ve gathered the courage so that I can use the chance she’s given me.

“I haven’t always made the right choice, Mum.” My voice is so low, lower than the water boiling on the stove and the sound of stirring she makes.

She starts to turn around, and I blurt, “Please don’t look at me. I can’t say this if you’re looking at me.”

I’m too ashamed to meet her eyes.

“Okay,” she says in an affectionate tone and remains in place.

“Remember when you told me you had a bad feeling about Jonah? You were right, Mum.”

“Is this about how he recently got arrested for assault and drugs?”

“That was the end of it. The actual story started a long time ago.”

I don’t know how I find the courage to tell her everything that happened. I tell her about that night, the sleep paralysis—which is why I locked my room so no one could see me in that state—the fear of the opposite sex, relationships, and my lack of trust in everything.

The words flow naturally, without any effort, as if they’ve been waiting all this time for me to tell Mum the truth that’s been festering inside me for so long.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Mum.” My voice is raw and brittle. “I was just so scared about those pictures becoming public and ruining your

reputation. I was also terrified that you'd remind me that you'd never liked him and had encouraged me to leave him. It would've killed me if you'd blamed me for it or said I told you so."

She starts to whirl around again.

"No, Mum, please. Don't look at me when I'm like this."

Her fingers are unsteady as she turns off the stove and faces me, eyes shining with tears, and her features as pale as I imagine mine are.

Then she comes to my side, slowly, with measured steps, and stops a few breaths away. Her chest rises and falls hard, as hard as mine, as if she can snatch my feelings and mold them into her own.

She wipes the tears sliding down my cheeks. "Why can't I look at you like this? If the world refuses to see this version of you and the pain you went through, I will. All day. Every day."

"You won't say none of this would've happened if I'd listened to you?"

"No, because no one can be sure of what would've happened. He could've found other ways." She strokes my cheek, my tears, and my anguish. "I want you to know and believe it wasn't your fault, honey. None of it was."

"But—"

"No buts, Cecily." She's crying, too, as much as I am, until tears stain her cheeks. "I was a victim, too, once, and the perpetrator was the one person who should've been protecting me."

"Your mother?" I've only met her once, when she showed up at our door when I was seven, and I hated that woman at first sight. She's a world-famous artist and had a haughty expression that rubbed me the wrong way.

She spoke to Mum as if she owned her. Papa and Uncle Kirian were there, and they kicked her out. Mum cried so much that night, and she told me that my estranged grandmother reminded her of her painful past.

Mum nods. "Yeah, so I know exactly what it means to be a victim, and if you push that energy inward, it'll only lead to self-destruction, Cecy. You're our little miracle, the one Xan and I had after a long journey of healing, and I know we can be very overprotective, but it's only because we love you so much and don't want you to go through what we did. So please don't blame it on yourself. Take this as if I'm begging you. Blame it on us being horrible parents who didn't see the signs."

"No, Mum." I jump up from my seat. "I didn't let you see the signs. I dealt with them on my own because I thought the wound would eventually

heal, but it only festered. This is not your fault.”

“It’s not yours either, Cecy.”

“I know.”

Hope blossoms between the tears like a newly planted flower. “You do?”

I nod. “It’s why I can talk about it now, you know. It took me a long time to come to terms with it, but I’ve met someone who convinced me not to deflect the blame inward. Ever since then, my own head doesn’t torture me as much and I’ve started to feel safe. I no longer have panic attacks and the instances of sleep paralysis have become few and far between.”

Mum’s hand falls from my cheek to my shoulder, and a warm smile peeks through. “Is that someone the American boy?”

I rub the side of my nose and nod. “His name is Jeremy.”

“Oh, look at you being so embarrassed at the mere mention of him.”

“Am not.”

“You just stroked your nose, which is an obvious habit you do whenever you’re embarrassed. I wonder what this Jeremy looks like. Is he handsome? Does he treat you well?”

“Yes to both.”

“Aw, why didn’t you bring him home with you?”

“He wanted to come, but I said no.”

She retrieves a tissue and wipes my tears, then frowns. “Why?”

“Remember Annika?”

“Your cute new friend?”

“Yeah, the one who’s a mafia princess.”

“Of course I do. She was so well-mannered.”

“Jeremy is her older brother.”

I pause, waiting for her to connect the links together.

“And what about it? Oh. Is Annika against this?”

“No. She doesn’t know yet. It’s…their background. Russian mafia. He’s the heir to his father’s empire. The same father who nearly killed Creigh for being with Annika?”

“I see.”

“Finally. But why do you sound so casual about it, Mum?”

“Well, to be honest, I still can’t find anything off with that. Your father certainly would, but I want to hug this Jeremy for being there for you during a difficult time and even convincing you not to think like a victim.”

“But his family is dangerous.”

“The world is dangerous, hon. But we don’t hide from it. We don’t bury our heads in the sand and pretend all is well. If you want something, either you fight for it, or you let it go so someone else can.”

“I don’t want to let him go.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love him.”

Mum smiles and I pause at the words that left my mouth so easily, so naturally, without my even having to think about it.

It’s true. I *love* Jeremy.

If I wasn’t sure before, all the time we’ve spent together recently has made me certain.

“There you have it, your answer.” Mum kisses the top of my head.

“But…but what if he doesn’t love me?”

“Who wouldn’t love my beautiful baby?”

“The world isn’t you and Papa, Mum.”

“All your friends, aunts and uncles, and grandfathers love you to death. You’re a sweetheart.”

“They…they don’t count either.”

She raises a brow. “Is Jeremy the only one who does?”

“No…I mean, it’s not like that…”

Mum smiles and glides her fingers through my hair. “Believe it or not, a long time ago, I also thought your father didn’t love me.”

“No way.” He basically worships the ground she walks on.

“I *know*. He was a real wanker when we were young, which is why he’s making it up to me for the rest of our lives.” She smiles nostalgically. “Those times feel so distant now. Guess how I knew he loved me.”

“How?”

“He fought for me. He slaughtered his demons to be with me, and that’s when I knew he didn’t only love me, but I was also the love of his life.”

My heart squeezes with both awe and admiration.

I’ve always had a huge crush on the way my parents love, appreciate, and respect one other. I’ve felt blessed to be the product of their love, despite their overprotectiveness. Now, I’m even more certain I have the best parents in the world.

“Thanks, Mum.” I hug her, and she wraps her arms around me, letting me bask in her warmth.

“No, thank *you* for trusting me with what happened, Cecy. I’m so proud of your strength.”

I could cry right now, but I don’t, because she’d start crying, too, and Papa might start drama if he finds out I made his wife cry.

As if sensing I’m thinking of him, Papa’s voice comes from the entrance.

“Kim, love, where’s my grandfather’s hunting shotgun? I found some bastard on our doorstep who claims to be our daughter’s boyfriend… Oh, here it is. Be right back. I’ll shoot him and come back in time for dinner.”

Mum and I pull apart to stare at each other.

Holy shit.

Please don’t tell me Jeremy followed me here.

Most importantly, did Papa say he’s going to shoot him?

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XANDER

There's some lizard in front of my house.

One with a repulsive look in his eyes, an unwelcome presence, and presumptuous words coming out of his mouth. He has no business being here, so I'll hastily get rid of him, throw him in the nearest ditch, then join my beautiful wife and daughter.

It's only taken me a minute to grab my grandfather's hunting shotgun, and when I storm back to the door, the lizard has let himself in and even locked the door behind him.

He stands by the entry table, tall, disgustingly well-built, and well-dressed in black trousers and a matching button-down. Some tattoos peek out from the collar of his shirt as if he's some fucking gangster.

The late afternoon sun slips through the tall French windows, casting a shadow on his dark features, hair, and expression. He looks like a brutish version of my friend Aiden, which says something, considering he's the epitome of savage fuckery among us.

I point the gun in his direction. "Get off my property before I paint the walls with your brains."

He doesn't even flinch, blink, or move. His expression remains the same—blank, unreadable, definitely what a bloody lizard would look like.

"I can't leave without doing what I came here for, sir." He speaks with ease, too comfortable in his own skin for someone who looks no older than twenty-five. Oh, and he's definitely assertive.

That's what the unchanging glance in his eyes translates to. He's so assertive and confident that it can be seen from a mile away. That's what

pissed me off about him at first glance. The second the driver stopped the car in front of my gate, I found this guy waiting there like a serial killer with some creeper tendencies.

A rush of familiar footsteps reaches me, followed by distinctive gasps and my daughter's soft voice. "Papa, what are you doing?"

"Stay back, Cecy. I'm going to drive this intruder out and come join you. Kim, call the police."

A gentle hand wraps around my bicep, and I'm enveloped by my favorite type of warmth as my wife says calmly, "Put the shotgun down first, Xan. We can talk about this."

"I'll talk to the intruder's corpse after I put it to rest."

"Papa!"

To my horror, Cecily all but runs to the American's side, grabs his hand in hers as if it's an everyday occurrence, and meets my gaze carefully, shyly, and then she strokes the side of her nose.

Fuck me.

No.

I'll pretend I didn't see her being embarrassed for simply being in his company.

And why the bloody hell is the fucking bastard looking at her with those heated eyes as if he will devour her?

I'll kill him first. That's it. The solution for this situation can only be murder.

"This is Jeremy, and he's…my boyfriend."

"You'll be boy dead if you don't step away from my daughter. Now."

"That museum-looking thing isn't even loaded," he comments dryly.

"Doesn't need to be loaded if I hit you upside the head with it." I storm in his direction to do just that, but Kim holds me back, and my traitor daughter has subtly stood in front of serial killer/gangster/lizard Jeremy.

The top of her head barely reaches his collarbone, so the fact that she thinks she can protect him is comical at best.

Or would've been if the wanker wasn't in the process of stealing my only daughter. She's never stood up to me before. The last time she brought a boyfriend home, that fucking Jonah, she merely smiled and shook her head when I threatened him with bodily harm.

I might have opened a bottle of champagne when she told us she broke up with the tool during her last year of secondary school.

What? No one deserves my baby daughter.

But even I knew there would be a day when she'd have another relationship. It did take longer than I thought. Almost two years—not that I'm complaining. Still, I thought perhaps Cecily had also realized that no one is good for her and would decide to spend the rest of her life with her mother and me.

Wishful thinking.

Because my worst nightmare has come true, and she has a boyfriend. No. I refuse to address him as such. I'll make sure he'll leave my house as her ex-boyfriend.

"Papa, can you please put the shotgun down?" she implores, and the fucker subtly moves in front of her so that he's the one shielding her instead of the other way around.

"Depends. Can the slimy fucker stop touching you and leave?"

"With all due respect, that won't be happening." The more he talks, the deeper my hate grows for the cunt.

Not to mention, he's still touching my fucking daughter.

During my moment of glaring and plotting the best way to throw the fucker into a ditch and dispose of his corpse, the shotgun is sneakily removed from my hands.

I stare at my wife, who's smiling victoriously while holding the gun at her side. She's more beautiful than the world and everyone in it, and there's nothing I want to do other than hug and kiss her. Maybe carry her to our bedroom and make her forget the world exists.

But that can wait until we get rid of the intruder.

Kim narrows her eyes at me, mouths, "Be good," then walks…in their direction.

Maybe she decided to shoot him for me, after all.

Right. Kim also doesn't think anyone deserves the miracle we were blessed with after so many struggles. In fact, she was opposed to that fucker Jonah more than I was.

She stops in front of them with a smile on her lips, soft, genuine, and so warm that the temperature in the room goes up a notch.

"Hi, Jeremy."

His expression changes to that of complete politeness like a fucking psychopath. "Hello, Mrs. Knight."

“Oh, there’s no need for formalities. Kimberly or just Kim is fine. It’s nice to meet you. Cecy was just telling me so much about you.”

He raises a brow, glides his attention to my daughter, then back to my wife. “She was?”

“Why yes. The way she talked about you made me look forward to meeting you.”

“Mum!” Cecily shakes her head.

“I’m curious about what she said.” The fucker sneakily strokes my daughter’s hand. “If it’s not too much of an intrusion, might I stay? I’ve always wanted to know about Cecily’s home.”

“It is an intrusion.” I barge into their circle and wrench my daughter to my side, forcing him to let her go. “And what’s with wanting to know about her home? You a stalker, boy?”

Cecily tugs on my arm and stares up at me with big, pleading eyes. I swear to fuck she got this expression from that *Puss in Boots* film and decided it’s how she’s going to get everything she wants.

It doesn’t help that she inherited the color of her mother’s eyes. I’ve always been weak to my wife’s everything.

Kim places the shotgun back in its place on the wall and then grabs my free hand. “Jeremy, this is Xander, Cecy’s very overprotective father. Try to tolerate him. He’ll come around.”

“I will most certainly not. Unless he leaves the property and never shows his face near my daughter again.”

“Like I said. Overprotective.” Kim smiles at him and pinches my side. Hard.

Bloody fucking hell.

“Please join us for dinner.” My wife actually leaves my side to usher the arsehole into the dining room. I follow after, still holding on to Cecily because I don’t trust him in my house and can’t allow him to be in the company of the two most important women in my life.

“You can freshen up,” Kim speaks to him in her affectionate, motherly tone. “Did you just arrive?”

“I landed in London half an hour ago.”

“You must be tired then. You can rest upstairs until dinner if you prefer?”

“I’m not, actually. It wasn’t a long flight.” The bastard has the audacity to smile at my wife with straight white teeth that I’ll knock right out of his

mouth. “I’d rather help if that’s okay.”

“Why, of course! Cecily wasn’t much of a help in cutting vegetables and sliced her finger instead.”

“Yeah, she does that sometimes.” He throws a knowing glance at my daughter, then promptly focuses on my wife after he briefly meets my gaze.

“You guys cook together?” Kim asks with a dreamy grin as if this is some happy occasion.

“Most of the time, we do, yeah.”

“That’s so sweet. Hear that, Xan?”

“I see nothing sweet about him exploiting my daughter to fill his stomach. That’s called free labor.”

“Oh, please. Is it free labor if I cook for you?”

“That’s different. You don’t have to.”

“I don’t have to either, Papa.” Cecily strokes my arm. “I just like cooking with him.”

“That’s called Stockholm syndrome.”

Cecily laughs as if I’m being ridiculous. “He didn’t kidnap me.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. He looks like the type. Also, there doesn’t need to be a kidnapping for the syndrome to happen.”

My daughter shakes her head, Kim rolls her eyes, and the fucker pretends like he didn’t hear a word I said.

I take a deep breath and try to remain calm when Kim fawns over him, shows him where he can wash up, and even gives him one of her green aprons that only Cecily and Kirian have had the honor to wear.

She even has the boldness to whisper, “Would you please stop with the long face and be a bit more understanding?” to me after I change my clothes and sit opposite their workspace in the kitchen, glaring the fucker down.

He doesn’t take the hint to piss off and takes his job as Kim’s sous-chef very seriously.

“Papa.” My daughter touches my arm, forcing me to slide my attention from the soon-to-be ex-boyfriend to her. She’s sitting beside me on the cozy kitchen bench, since I was deemed not helpful by her mother. Or maybe she sent her on a mission to keep an eye on me so I don’t start any funny business. “Don’t you watch the economic news at this time?”

“I can see a recap later.” I take her hand in mine so that we’re facing each other. “Honeybee, you know you can tell me if he hurt you, right? Is

he blackmailing you? Forcing you to do anything? I know boys like him well. They're little twats wrapped in sophisticated charm, and I'll be damned if I let him play around with you."

Her eyes slide to him, and they widen, brighten, and explode in a rainbow of fucking colors that burn in my chest. She looks at him like her mother looks at me sometimes, and I know, because I've been searching for this type of expression in her eyes for years. Whether when she was with Jonah or when I thought she had a crush on that tool Landon—thank fuck that was a false alarm. Captain, Levi, is my friend, but that son of his should've been in a mental institute along with Aiden's son, Eli, the moment they were born.

Point is, this is the first time she's looked at someone like this, with warmth and adoration. Respect, even.

Is it too late to execute my plan B which consists of murdering the fucker in his sleep, hiding his body, and pretending he left in the middle of the night?

"He's not playing around with me, Papa." Cecily finally looks at me, this time with a blush on her cheeks. "Also, you raised me better than that. I wouldn't allow anyone to ridicule me or step on my pride."

"That's my girl." Though I'm fucking gutted at the prospect that whatever shit she has with her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend is actually real and could be unstoppable. "You can still have someone better than him."

Having no one at all would be much more preferable, but I can try to tolerate someone other than this insolent tool.

Who am I kidding? I won't. But I can convince her and her mother that I would. Under certain circumstances.

"Jeremy makes me the best version of myself. He cares about my well-being, makes sure my comfort comes before his, built me a bookshelf in his house and filled it with my mangas, and even lets me sleep on his lap. So no, I don't want someone better."

"Wait. Go back. He lets you sleep on his lap, as in, you spend nights with him. As in, *with* him?"

Her face turns a deep shape of red, and a sense of nausea mounts in my chest. The thought that my little girl has already grown up so much that she does that stuff is enough to give me a midlife crisis.

Yes, I've thought about this moment countless times since she was born, but reality is a very different beast.

That’s it. I’m going to kill the motherfucker.

Cecily opens her mouth, and I hold up a hand. “Don’t answer that question.”

My daughter wraps her arms around my waist and lays her chin on my shoulder, as if knowing the exact type of distress I’m going through.

“I know this is hard for you to accept, but it’d mean so much to me if you would.” She nuzzles her nose in my shoulder. “No matter what, you’ll always be my number one hero. No one will ever take your place, Papa.”

I groan when she bats her lashes at me. I swear she’s doing this on purpose, knowing exactly how I’d rather gut myself open than hurt her.

So despite my murder plans, I force myself to not glare at the bastard too much. At least not when Kim and Cecily are looking.

By the time we sit down for dinner, I’ve cooled down. But only a bit and just enough to change tactics about shaking the pest away and removing whatever rosy binoculars my wife is looking at him with.

I take a bite of my steak and stare at him. I made sure my wife and daughter are on my right while he’s all alone on my left.

“How old are you, Jeremy?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Aren’t you too old for university?”

“He’s finishing his master’s degree and getting his PhD, Papa,” Cecily answers on his behalf. “Like Eli.”

I don’t cut eye contact with him. “What do you study?”

“Business.”

“What do you plan to do after university?”

“Take over the family business.”

“Which is?”

It’s subtle, but I feel Cecily’s posture stiffen beside her mother before she beams at me. “Do you want wine?”

“I don’t drink, remember?”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

I narrow my eyes on her, and she lowers her head. Something’s fishy. Cecily knows I stopped drinking way before she was born. I did sometimes in the past, on special occasions, and only when my wife was holding my hand, but I stopped drinking altogether years ago.

My attention falls on Jeremy, who’s wearing his blank expression like a second skin.

“What did you say your family business was?”

“I still didn’t say.”

“Go on then. Get on with it.”

“My father is one of the biggest shareholders in a corporation. We have countless subsidiaries in every field, including but not limited to imports and exports, electronics, medical research, cars, and investment.”

Cecily slowly relaxes, and Kim smiles. “That sounds huge.”

“It is. As my father’s heir, I’m expected to take over those responsibilities sooner rather than later.”

“But you’re still so young,” Kim says. “Don’t you want to live your life first?”

“Age is just a number. I’ve been ready to serve this role since I was a child.”

My wife strokes our daughter’s hand. “Cecy has also wanted to enter the field of psychology since she was a kid. She said she wanted to be able to listen properly to those who have no one who listens to them and to be able to give them the help they need but don’t know how to ask for. I guess being responsible is something both of you have in common.”

“I know.” He stares at my daughter, whose eyes glitter at her mother’s words. “She listened to me like no one else has.”

Cecily lifts her head and they maintain eye contact for a disgusting amount of time before I slam my glass of water on the table.

“You’re just shamelessly exploiting my daughter, aren’t you?”

“Papa!” Cecily chastises me with that pleading look in her eyes, and Kim strokes the back of my hand, asking me without words to stop being an arsehole.

The fact is, these two know all too well that I can’t say no to them.

Not even if they ask me for the impossible.

So I try to keep my scathing remarks to a minimum as I watch him effortlessly bewitch my girls.

I’m going to unmask this psychopath so they’ll see him for his true self, even if it’s the last thing I do.

After dinner, they show him around the house, play a board game. Not only does he subtly lose like some chivalrous bastard, but he also welcomes and answers any questions Kim has for him.

My wife is officially a lost cause when it comes to this Jeremy. Maybe he brought some mojo with him and put it in her drink.

That’s the only explanation for why she’s fawning over him when she’s never been a big fan of Cecily being in relationships.

She stays by his side until I nearly throw her over my shoulder and take her to our bedroom.

But first, I escort the wanker to his room because, despite my objections, he’s spending the night. Kim said it’s nonsense to send him to a hotel when we have plenty of space, and that traitor Cecily naturally agreed.

So I had the housekeeper put his backpack in the farthest room from Cecily.

He steps inside ahead of me, casting a fleeting glance at the place before he looks at me. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“I’d rather you were on the streets, so let’s spare each other the bullshit.”

He physically forces his body to relax, and I know there’s forcing involved, because he’s always stood like an erect wall.

“I understand that you find it hard to accept me, considering your tight relationship with Cecily, but I mean her no harm, so for her sake, can we compromise?”

“I’ll compromise you to hell is what I’ll do.” I make an ‘I’m watching you’ motion. “If I see you near my daughter’s room, I’ll bring my shotgun, loaded this time.”

He nods, and I start to leave but then slide back in. “I’m watching you, boy. Any funny business and you’re out, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

I finally leave but remain in the hallway to test the arsehole. I even sit on the classical sofa at the end, across from his room, to keep an eye on him.

In fact, I don’t mind sleeping here tonight.

Yes, they’re probably at that stage in their relationship, which I don’t want to think about, but nothing will be happening under my bloody roof.

After some time of glaring at his closed door, I retrieve my phone and text in the group chat I have with my friends.

Xander: Cecily brought some fucker home.

Levi: I told you this day would happen. I lost Glyn to some arsehole, and now, you’re losing Cecy.

Xander: I didn’t lose her. By the time he leaves my house, he’ll be her ex-boyfriend.

Levi: That’s what I said, too, about Glyn’s tool of a boyfriend, but he’s more pasted to her side than superglue.

Aiden: The fuck is wrong with you two? It’s time to stop treating your girls like they’re nine-year-olds.

Levi: No daughter. No opinion.

Cole: What Captain said, King.

Aiden: I’m here with the popcorn for the double trouble both your daughters will bring you, Nash.

Cole: There will be no trouble if you keep Eli away from my Ava. One of these days, I’ll get something on him. I have people working on it.

Aiden: Good luck trying, you poor cunt.

Xander: Hello? I’m telling you that I’m losing my daughter, and her mother, too, since she’s team arsehole, and you’re joking?

Ronan: Wait a fucking minute. Cecy is really not going to be my daughter-in-law? Aw, I thought she was always meant to be with Remi.

Levi: No ‘one’ is meant to be with Remi. He needs a harem.

Xander: The Remi who fucks every girl in a skirt like his father once upon a time? No, thanks.

Ronan: Don’t act high and mighty when you were the same, Xan.

Cole: He was not.

Aiden: Yeah, Astor. Remember that human rights violation case? Oh, wait, you were the last to know.

Ronan: Very funny. Not. I’m still revoking friendship rights for that.

Levi: My condolences, Xan. It’ll only get worse going forward.

Like fuck it will.

I’m about to reply back before the chat is buried in Ronan’s dramatics when I feel a soft, warming presence.

Kim sits beside me, a dark green sleeping robe tied around her middle and her hair falling to her shoulders. “You’re not going to sleep?”

“I’ll do it right here, so the little twat doesn’t try anything funny.”

“Oh, Xan.” She strokes my cheek. “You need to let her go. She’s not so little or under your protection anymore.”

“She’ll always be under my protection.”

“Okay, okay, she will. But you must let her fall in love and do what she wants. Our baby is a responsible adult, and we need to trust her choice.”

“That wasn’t what you said about Jonah. I don’t understand how you can change your mind like this.”

“Jonah was a fucker who’s locked up for it.” Her voice hardens before it lowers to her usual melodic tone. “Jeremy is the man who helped Cecily fight her demons.”

“What demons?”

“You’re well aware of how much she changed after secondary school. She hasn’t laughed this openly or smiled this freely in a long time. Our dads even suggested we take her to therapy due to her zoning out episodes, but she refused and waved us off. We should be glad that she found someone who can help her heal.”

“You and I could’ve done that just fine.”

“Sometimes, we’re not enough, and that’s okay, Xan. Letting her go is okay.”

I close my eyes and release a long sigh. “I don’t know how. It took so much in me to even let her study at a faraway university and now this. It’s like we’re losing her.”

“We’re not. We’re just letting her spread her wings and be her own person.” She kisses my cheeks. “Besides, we’ll always have each other.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, considering how the bastard easily seduced you.”

“Aw, are you jealous of a twenty-four-year-old who happens to be your daughter’s boyfriend?”

I wrap my arm around her waist and she gasps as I slam her to my side. “You know I don’t like it when you’re close to any other man.”

“Aside from our dads and Kir.”

“Even they get on my nerves when they confiscate your time.”

“Xan!” She laughs, running her fingers over my stubbled chin. “You will never change, will you?”

“Not in this lifetime, Green.”

“Good. Because I love you just the way you are.”

I groan, each of her touches causing a zip of pleasure that ends in my cock.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re seducing me to distract me from the unwanted presence under our roof.”

She bites her lower lip and brushes a kiss against my mouth, then whispers, “Is it working?”

“You know it is.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” She leans over, her voice dropping to a seductive drawl. “Take me to our bedroom, husband.”

“You’re killing me, Green.”

I fall straight into her trap and carry her to bed. Not only will I never be able to resist this woman, but I’ll also never get enough of her.

Even though I still can’t come to terms with losing my daughter, Kim will eventually make me see reason.

She always does.

She’s been my home, my peace, and the love of my life ever since we were children.

Not everyone gets to call their childhood friend the love of their life, but I do, and I’ll spend the rest of my days showing her exactly how lucky I am that she’s my Green.

Once upon a time, she picked me as her knight, and I chose her as my queen.

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CECILY

I can’t sleep.

After what seems like hours of tossing and turning, I throw off the covers and jump out of bed.

My visit home has been entirely hijacked by Jeremy, and despite the initial shock, having him here, seeing him with my mum, and actually taking Papa’s non-subtle threats has made my heart so full.

I never thought things would go like this, but a part of me is rejoicing at the sudden turn of events. The part that’s been squeezed to death for missing him since I left him and only started breathing correctly when I saw him standing in our house.

Instead of going straight to the door, I smooth my sleeping shirt, pat my cheeks, and spray on some perfume from my vanity.

I stare at my face in the mirror, and for the first time in years, I don’t look away in disgust. I don’t see my reflection sulking back.

In fact, I feel pretty and I smile, and that appears soft under my side lamp’s light. My room is the inspiration for the one on Brighton Island. Manga pages cover the walls and the ceiling, torn in places from when Papa wasn’t careful. We didn’t have outside help when we decorated my room. One weekend, Mum and Papa wore their goofy overalls, posed at the door like wannabe decorators, and said we’d do this shit.

We spent the whole day rearranging and pasting pages. Mum giggled at some clichéd scenes and said I take loving romance stories after her. Papa frowned at some of my manga choices.

That’s one of my favorite memories.

After making sure I’m presentable enough, I head to my door. It’s late, so hopefully, Papa is asleep. If he’s not and is watching over Jeremy’s room, I’ll just pretend that I need something from the kitchen.

Jeez. Who knew sneaking about in your own home would be this nerve-racking?

I’m about to open the door when a dark shadow slips in from the open balcony. I’m frozen in place for a fraction of a second before I run toward the door.

I haven’t made it two steps when a large hand wraps around my mouth, and the familiar voice drops near my ear.

“Shh. Don’t fight me tonight. As much as I would love to chase the fuck out of you and make you scream as I tear through your pussy, your father wouldn’t appreciate it.”

I breathe him in for a minute, trying to calm the sudden spike of nerves.

His warmth envelops me as he slides his hand from my mouth to my middle. The weight of his presence surrounding mine coupled with his leather scent drives my body into hyperaware mode.

He licks my earlobe, and I shiver as his groan vibrates off my skin. “Did you put on perfume? You smell so good I could eat you up. Fucking water lilies.”

I’m glad I did spray some.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” says me, who was planning to sneak into his room not two seconds ago.

“I know.”

“You’re not even supposed to be in London.”

“I know.”

“You could’ve at least told me you were coming so I’d be mentally prepared.”

“I know.”

“Do you have anything to say aside from I know?”

“You’ll never be out of my sight again, Cecily.”

The possessive finality in his tone causes my mouth to go dry, and I swallow a few times. “What if I have to be out of your sight?”

“That won’t happen.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Hmm. That’s right. I had to see and touch you properly for all the times I couldn’t today.” His hand sneaks under my shirt, then stops over my

bare pussy, and a gruff sound vibrates off his vocal cords. “Fuck, you’re ready and soaking wet for me. Such a good girl, my Cecily.”

My head falls back against his chest as he slides two fingers inside me. His touch is firm and he easily finds my sensitive spot and strokes it with command.

His other hand glides beneath my shirt, over my stomach, and then grabs a breast and pinches my engorged nipples. “I love your tits, so round, perky, and they fit perfectly in my palm.”

He rolls the nipple between his fingers, pinching, stimulating, torturing. He adds another finger to my pussy, pushing, curling, thrusting, and matching the rhythm on my breasts.

I can’t control the moans that slip out of my mouth, and it’s not for lack of trying. My parents’ bedroom is down the hall, and they could come to check on me any second, but that seems to be the least of my worries right now.

Jeremy has always been intense during sex. The type of intense that has you begging and coming back for more. But this is the first time he’s taken it slow, as if meaning to drive me insane with the rhythm alone.

“Tell me, Lisichka, do you always sleep with nothing beneath your shirt in your house?” He accentuates his words by pumping his fingers against my G-spot.

“N-no…”

“Then why did you today?”

“I…felt hot.”

He pinches my nipple and drives into me with a savage rhythm. “Your tight little cunt is swallowing my fingers and messing up my hand, so maybe it’s horny instead of hot. I bet she wants to be fucked so good, until you’re begging me to stop in that sexy little voice of yours.”

“S-stop talking like that.”

“But I love it when you’re horny for me.” He rotates his hips, and a huge erection bumps against the crack of my arse. “I love how your body melts into mine, how every part of you comes to life at my touch. I love how you clench around my fingers and cock as if refusing to let me go.”

His lips fall on my throat and feast on the thin flesh, then he’s biting down on my collarbone.

I jerk in his grip, the multitude of stimulation flashing through me all at once. I don’t know if it’s his words, his touch, or the fact that it’s him, but I

can’t stop the flood that washes over me.

My chest quakes, and my legs shake from the force of the orgasm. Even my moan is broken up by the successive contractions in my lower belly.

“Fuck.” He bites my earlobe, my cheek, and my lip. “You look so beautiful when you come.”

I’m breathing heavily, feeling no different than a doll in his hold. I love being the subject of his desire. I love how he can’t touch me enough or get his hands on every part of me enough.

He releases me but only so he can do a quick job of tugging his shirt free and kicking away his shorts. He also went commando, and for some reason, that causes my temperature to rise.

I can’t help raking my gaze over the inked ridges of his biceps, the rippling of his chest muscles, and the pulsing of his hard, thick cock.

A sense of apprehension goes through me. It doesn’t matter how many times I see it, touch it, suck it, or am fucked into oblivion by it. Jeremy has a huge cock that hurts every time it’s inside me. The good type. The pleasurable type.

But I still have that moment of doubt anyway.

A minute of silence stakes its claim between us and he looks at me like he’ll feast on my flesh. Under the dim light of my side table lamp, his eyes appear nearly black, hungry with lust and other raw emotions.

Desire.

Possessiveness.

Obsessiveness.

Adoration.

The last is merely a hint, but I see it. I saw it earlier, too, at the dinner table when he told Mum that I listened to him like no one else has.

I saw a feeling I’d never dreamed of associating with a hard, cold man like Jeremy. A feeling that I would sell my left kidney for at the prospect of witnessing it again.

And here it is once more, so soon and under different circumstances.

The moment of silence comes to a crashing halt when he removes my shirt with one savage tug and throws it aside. His fingers splay out on the back of my neck and he kisses me.

No, he *claims* me.

His kiss is both of adoration and possessiveness. A flickering emotion that alternates between softness and harshness. He slams the front of my

body against his, crushing my breasts with his chest and stabbing my stomach with his cock.

It's not pretty. It's not nice. It's animalistic and intense. It's a clashing of teeth, a stamp of ownership, and proof to the changing of our dynamics.

When we started with sex, chasing, and kinks, he never kissed me. We merely used each other for our sexual needs. We fed off one another's depraved tendencies and drew each other's blood. We both ran—me to be chased, him to hunt. But maybe that's not the only reason. Maybe we were also running from the feelings we saw in each other's eyes.

What we shared all those months ago couldn't have been only physical. At least, it wasn't for me.

Maybe it wasn't for him either, because ever since we got back together, Jeremy always kisses me before, during, and after fucking me. Sometimes, he kisses me for the duration of it.

He, too, is probably telling me that it's never been physical for him either. He couldn't have gotten those releases and satisfaction if it were anyone else but me.

Or that's what I hope.

He wrenches his lips from mine but speaks against them as he grabs my arse, fingers digging in the flesh. "I'm going to claim this hole tonight, Lisichka. It's going to be mine, too, like your cunt, your mouth. *You*."

That sense of apprehension about his size returns. He's always played with and fingered my back hole, but he's never gone beyond that. It's hard when he fucks me in the pussy. I don't think I'm physically able to take him in the arse.

But, on the other hand, I want him to own every part of me, too.

Sometimes I wish he was chasing me, taking me against my will in our twisted play. That way, my busy brain wouldn't have a say in it.

"A-are you going to hurt me?"

His fingers thread in my hair, pulling, twisting, keeping me in place. "Probably."

I shudder, my heart nearly falling to my feet from the nerves. "Take it by force."

"By force?"

"Like when you chase me. That way, I won't be able to think about it."

A slight smirk lifts his lips. It doesn't matter how civil Jeremy tries to be. He's first and foremost a monster, and he gets off on the chase.

On scaring me.

Of having me be completely his.

“You’re my perfect little whore, but you’re also my good girl. I’m going to fuck you like you’re both.” His fingers unclench from my hair and he releases me. “Now, run.”

I stumble from the lack of his touch, catching myself before I hit the wall. He remains in place, arms crossed, and his chest rising and falling in a controlled rhythm.

His outside demeanor doesn’t fool me, though.

If anything, my muscles lock, and every fiber of my being rises to the surface at the promise of being chased.

Of being thrown down and taken.

I’m absolutely sick in the head, but as he stares at me with a fire that matches my own, I don’t care.

I run to the only other place available—the bathroom.

The moment I fling the door open, he’s behind me, the sound of his steps barely audible compared to my raging heartbeat and the roaring in my ears.

I throw something at him, a towel, but he merely ducks, letting a cruel smirk paint his sinful lips.

“You’re trapped, Lisichka, so how about you give up?”

I run behind the bathtub, grabbing my breasts to stop their jiggling, but my plan to go back to the room is put to an abrupt halt when I find him standing at the door.

My harsh breathing fills the bathroom as I stare at his dispassionate eyes, at the promise of pain behind them. I make the snap decision to go right.

He goes left, meeting me in the middle.

I squeal when he reaches out to catch me, but I manage to duck, then sprint forward.

Before I can celebrate escaping him, a strong hand sinks into my hair, wraps around my nape, and knocks me against the shower glass. My whole body glues to the cold surface, and my eyes zero in on the mirror opposite us.

Jeremy looks like a giant beast behind me, his muscular tanned thighs visible on each side of my pale ones as he pins me in place. The tattoos undulate and revolt on his abs, biceps, and chest with each intake of air.

I try to fight and push against him, but he pulls me back and slams me against the glass again, knocking my breath out of my lungs.

“Shhh. I’m going to need you to be real quiet for me when I fuck your ass.” He slides his hand to my stomach and exerts force so that my arse cheeks press against his groin.

A low grunt rips from him, and I don’t know if it’s due to the friction or the fact that I’m downright shaking against him.

He glides his fingers from my pussy to my back hole. “Mmm. Such a dirty little slut. The chase made you so wet, you’re dripping with it.”

He does it again, smearing my wetness over my back hole, but this time, he thrusts a finger inside and I gasp. He’s often played around with it, even drove a knife handle in it once, and I had an intense orgasm.

But this is the first time that he’s actually fucking me here.

He adds another finger, filling me until I’m unable to breathe. I glue myself against the glass door as if that will be able to save me from the clutches of his man.

No, not a man.

He’s a beast now.

He fucks me with his fingers in a savage rhythm, but when I start to adapt, he seamlessly removes them and spits on my back hole. I go up on my tiptoes at the sudden act and how erotic it feels.

Just when I think I’ll come because of it alone, he thrusts his cock inside. My palms slam against the glass door for balance. Only the crown is in, but it’s so tight that it burns and hurts.

Despite the chase, arousal, and the spit just now, I don’t think I can do this.

He slaps my arse cheek, and I gasp, so he does it again.

And again.

“You can take me.” He adds another inch, more easily this time. “Don’t push me out. Swallow my cock like you’re asking for it.”

Another inch. Another agonizing moan coated by a ripple of painful pleasure.

His hand wraps around my hair, holding it in a ponytail, and he pulls my head up, making me stare at us in the mirror.

I don’t recognize myself.

Tears stream down my cheeks, sweat coats my neck and breasts, and an angry hickey from earlier decorates my collarbone.

My body is flushed, my hands are quivering, but my hard nipples are stabbing the glass, and my arousal is dirtying it all up as my hips rock back and forth the more he thrusts his length inside me.

Jeremy's face is tight with both pleasure and his beastly need. I'm looking at the beast of a man who's claiming the last bit of me right now.

Once he's fully sheathed inside me, he doesn't give me time to adjust, doesn't take it easy on me, and he certainly isn't gentle.

His speed picks up and he fucks me like my custom-made animal. Roughly, violently, like we both want it.

He fucks me like he hates me, wants me, and is obsessed with me. He fucks me with long, harsh strokes, so deep and firm that I bump against the glass with each one.

His eyes never leave mine through the mirror, maintaining a connection so primal and raw that it eviscerates me.

The look in his eyes burns me alive more than his unforgiving touch.

When I attempt to lower my head, he forces it up with his grip on my hair. "Don't hide. Look at your face when I fuck you like an animal. That's what you look like when you're being ripped apart by my cock, Cecily. When you're milking me and taking all of me like a good girl. You look so ecstatic and pleased, you look like fucking mine."

He accentuates his words with ruthless thrusts that trigger my pleasure. I'm panting, crying, and begging all at once.

A sharp sensation tightens the bottom of my belly. My muscles clench and my pussy contracts as the orgasm washes over me.

I'm thankful I'm sandwiched between Jeremy and the shower glass or I'd drop in a heap on the floor.

His teeth nibble on the lobe of my ear and then he orders in dark words, "Say my name."

"Jeremy," I moan and repeat it again and again, in sync with his rhythm.

He goes mad.

Absolutely and utterly unhinged.

He fucks me with abandon, still holding my hair, forcing me to see my orgasm face, shedding each and every apprehension I had about sex.

I look beautifully ravaged by him.

He looks ethereal while in his beast mode.

Every mode, really.

The sounds of slapping, groaning, and moaning echo around us like a twisted lullaby.

He grips my hair harsher and speaks near my ear in hot, low words, “This is how I look when I fuck you, Cecily. Not a man, not a beast, but both at the same time. I look so fucking mad about you that I can’t get enough of fucking and owning you.”

My heart nearly spills at his feet and a rush of emotions flood my system. The only way I can express it is by calling his name, so I do, repeatedly, and he rewards me by emptying his load inside me.

Jeremy is a sight to behold when he’s in the throes of pleasure. His muscles go rigid, his face tightens, and his teeth clench in what resembles a snarl. He looks no different than a sex god, and I can’t help the tinge of pride I feel for being the one who puts that expression on his face.

He covers my back with his wide chest, lifts my chin, and grunts near my mouth, “Mine.”

We remain like that for a minute, sticky, messy, and smelling of one another.

After a few moments of peaceful silence, he pulls out, wrenching a whimper out of me. I can feel his cum trickling down my thigh to my ankle. I can see him watching the show in the mirror, yet I can’t look away.

Jeremy disappears behind me, gathers his cum at the tip of his finger, then fucks it back into my arse. “You look so fucking beautiful when you’re covered with my cum, Lisichka.”

I stand on my tiptoes, quivering, moaning, and clenching my legs for any bit of friction.

To my disappointment, he stops playing with me and carries me to the shower he just fucked me against. At first, he cleans us all up, then slides into my pussy and fucks me slower against the wall.

Only when I come again, calling his name, and begging him to stop does he finally dry me off and carry me to the bedroom, both of us stark naked.

He lays me on the mattress the covers me with the sheet, but instead of leaving, he lifts the cover.

I touch his arm. “You should probably go. If Papa finds you here, he might kill you.”

“I know,” he says, but he still slides beneath the sheets beside me.

Not only do I not protest, but I also bury my head in his chest and wrap my arm around his waist. As much as I love the intense sex only Jeremy can bring, I also can't live without these small moments of nothingness right afterward.

I love how he washes me up, how he dries my hair and covers me, but most of all, I can't live without the way he hugs me, how his fingers stroke my shoulder, or how he kisses the top of my head. Like right now.

It's unfair how the mere act of his lips on my head is enough to melt me.

"You should really go," I say, sounding half asleep.

"You're digging your fingers into my side, Lisichka."

"I like it."

"You like what?"

"You. Me. Like this. You can stay just a little, and then you go. Okay?"

"Okay." He lifts my chin with two lean fingers and kisses me so deeply, I melt all over again.

I lick my lips long after he releases me. "Hey, Jeremy."

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For getting me out of my comfort zone. I wouldn't have done it if you hadn't pushed me at first."

He smiles, and I really need him to stop doing things that can endanger the well-being of my heart.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"I'm sure you would, sadist." I stroke my fingers over his tattoos. "Is there anything you'd do differently about us?"

"I would find you before Jonah and before you developed a crush on that motherfucker Landon."

"I don't think that's a good idea." I kiss his chest. "I think we were supposed to meet when we were both jaded so we could help one another."

Then I fall asleep with a smile on my face. I think I'm dreaming when I hear his voice whisper, "No one will hurt you anymore, Cecily. You have my word."

But the beautiful dream slowly transforms into a nightmare where a cruel voice laughs at me for believing that Jeremy and I could ever be normal.

"You're disgusting."

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JEREMY

"Stop glaring."

A soft voice whispers near my ear, and I'm surprised I've suppressed the urge to grab her by the hand and haul her the fuck out of this place.

At Cecily's request, I'm here to meet her 'friends' at the pub they gather in. I'd rather have her all to myself. Meeting her parents two weeks ago and allowing her father to be a dick without any retaliation—aside from promising him that I'd take 'good care' of her in a suggestive tone—was the extent of my altruism.

However, I also needed to stake a claim on her in public, and what better place than among her group of friends?

That entailed actually telling my sister about my relationship with her friend. A few days ago, I invited my sister and her boyfriend, who I'm reluctantly accepting, for dinner at the Heathens' mansion. While we were eating, Cecily joined us, and we broke the news.

Or I did by openly kissing her in front of a frowning Annika and a surprisingly calm Creighton.

There was a lot of shouting from Annika's side. She also said things like 'I knew it' and 'I'm so happy. You guys are an unlikely couple but look so perfect together.' I was proud of raising that little hellion right, but that only lasted until she told Cecily to be careful because our lives are dangerous.

While that's true, the warning was needless. Especially since Cecily has always been wary of that side of my life. She was even thankful I omitted that part when I spoke to her father about what Dad does for a living.

Back to the current meeting. Sorry, *gathering*. We're sitting around a large table that has apparently been reserved for these guys. I have two allies. Annika—who can't stop beaming and nudging Cecily—and Killian—who only showed up because he likes to think that he's joined to his girlfriend at the hip.

Everyone else is just not a fan.

It's mutual since I believe they're annoying, too. Just saying. Especially that motherfucker clown Remi, whom Cecily caught me plotting the murder of for the sole reason that he makes her laugh.

I grab her hand in mine and place it on my lap under the table, then take a sip of my vodka with my free one. "I'm not glaring."

"You are," Killian says needlessly from my left.

"Whose side are you on, motherfucker?" I whisper under my breath.

"What type of question is that? No one's, of course." He leans in so only I can hear him. "I also think Remington is an overrated, annoying asshole, and I had the same murder plots you do, but remember that they actually like him, and any offensive action on our part will backfire, so whatever gratification we'll get from erasing him is not worth it."

"I know that. Which is why I'm only glaring."

"See?" Cecily latches onto the last word. "You *are* glaring."

"That's his default," Killian offers with an amicable grin that could land him a movie role or on a serial killer poster.

"Yeah," Annika says from the other side of the table, all smiles, sunshine, and rainbows. I'm glad my sister is back. "Jer doesn't mean to glare. That's just his expression, I guess."

"You're his sister and due to a clear conflict of interest, you don't get opinion rights, Anni." Ava points her bottle of beer at her, then directs it at me with a narrowing of her eyes. "I still don't trust you to treat my Cecy right."

"That's where you're wrong. She's *my* Cecy. Not yours."

The table grows silent as Ava upgrades her expression to a full-on glare. "I've known her since we were like babies, and she's been my bestie for two decades. That makes her *my* Cecy. Discussion closed."

"Don't you have a lot of *besties*?" I taunt her with the information I've gathered about her. "In fact, you might call that bartender you met today a bestie, so your sense of that word is skewed and doesn't count in this argument."

“Jeremy.” Cecily pokes me, softening her tone, imploring, but I keep my unwavering attention on Ava.

“He’s not wrong about that.” Remi grins and dunks an olive in his mouth.

“Shut it, Rems.” Ava gives him the side-eye, then directs her malicious stare at me. “It’s different with Cecily. She’s my number one best friend.”

“You mean the one who takes care of your problems and tucks you to bed when you’re drunk,” I say. “That won’t be happening going forward.”

Ava’s expression falls downward. “That’s not all. We…go to places together, and have a lot of sleepovers, and we talk and…and…she’s the only person who gets me.”

“Sounds toxic. You’re too dependent on her and offer nothing in return.”

“That’s not true. Also, I came first and know more about her than you.”

“Doubt it.”

“Then do you know her middle name?” Ava’s voice has turned defensive, realizing that she’s losing. A decent person would’ve backed off, but I’m nowhere on that spectrum so I’ll happily crush the arrogant shit.

“Annabelle,” I say.

Ava purses her lips. “Her comfort food.”

“Waffles and mint gum.”

“Her…her favorite film, then! I bet you don’t know this one.”

“It’s Japanese. *Rashomon*.”

Ava’s lips part and she eyes Cecily. “You told him that? I thought it was our secret because only a few understand the psychology of it. You even made me watch it a few times to get it.”

“She didn’t have to tell me,” I cut Cecily off before she can reply and continue focusing on her friend. “Why don’t you admit you feed off her and offer little to nothing in return?”

Moisture rims Ava’s eyes and she stares at Cecily, but then she lowers her head without saying anything and slurps from her drink.

“Jeremy!” Cecily hisses under her breath. “If you make her cry, I’ll spend the night in the dorm. Think of that before you say anything else.”

I slide my attention to her. So she did figure out that my purpose is to break Ava and eliminate her as competition. I can think of a thousand ways to make her cry, but it’s not worth it if I have to lose access to Cecily for a whole night.

Maybe some other time. When she’s not around.

Cecily stares at me with an expression of both pleading and simmering anger. I resist the urge to stroke the freckles beneath her eyes. The one hundred fifty-three of them. And yes, I counted them.

I’ve always loved how, despite having her feelings tucked beneath the surface, she doesn’t trap them or allow them to fester and devour her from the inside out.

At least, not anymore.

When we first started out, she was too closed in on herself, too scared of her own demons, and too cautious. But it’s different now.

My Cecily, *not* Ava’s, has been slowly but surely growing into the beautiful woman she was always meant to be. She started going to therapy with one of her professors she trusts and tells me all about their sessions.

She told me she shouldn’t be trusted with people’s traumas until she finally resolves her own.

Tonight, she’s wearing a dress—one of the few occasions she’s willingly gotten into one. It’s a simple little black dress, but it molds against her curves and has spaghetti straps, one of which keeps falling off her shoulder, creating the most torturous tease.

It doesn’t matter how often, where, or how I fuck her. It doesn’t matter whether I take her as a man or a beast; there will never be a day where I will look at Cecily and not feel the need to sink into her heat, own her, and tuck her as close to me as possible. I want to trap her in that small nook between my heart and rib cage so that she’ll never find a way out.

Until one day, she wakes up and realizes that she was always supposed to be mine.

Not fucker Jonah’s. Not Landon’s.

Mine.

“So, I’m curious.” Remington nearly jumps on top of the table, but the one by his side, Landon’s fucking clone, grabs him and pulls him back down. “How did you un-prude Ces, Jeremy?”

“That’s not even a word,” she tells him, her voice heated.

“Oh, I’m sorry, vocabulary police. The question remains, how did you stop being a prude?”

“Stop calling her a prude, Remi!” Ava throws a napkin at him, appearing angry on Cecily’s behalf.

“She was never a prude,” I say, and Cecily’s hand quivers in mine, her body goes softer, and her lips slightly part whether it’s in awe or admiration, I don’t know.

“You must be talking about a different Cecily, because this one,” Remington points a thumb at her, “is a certified prude who goes all red at the mention of sex. Look! Ladies and gentlemen, the evidence is right here.”

Sure enough, Cecily’s ears and cheeks are changing color. I stroke her hand in mine, and she mutters, “I’m going to kill you, Remi.”

“Me, too.” Ava throws something else at him. An olive.

“You can try, but succeeding will be impossible.” He grabs Creighton by the shoulder. “Protect me from these crazy cougars, spawn!”

His cousin merely removes Remi’s hand to focus back on my sister. He’s been effectively pretending, or actually thinking, that she’s the only person at the table, despite Annika’s subtle attempts to stay engaged in the conversation.

“What the fuck? What the actual fuck?” Remington stares incredulously at Creighton. “Did you just brush me off, spawn? I can’t believe this. I spend all my time raising you, but now that you have Anni, you completely dumped me?”

“Cut it out,” Brandon tells him with a somber expression.

Ava and Cecily then gang up on Remington. Creighton is still ignoring him. Glyndon tries to break up the fight.

Killian and I lean back in our chairs to watch the freak show while I simultaneously plan to get her the hell out of here sooner rather than later.

“What a circus,” I mutter under my breath.

“Welcome to whatever shit the Brits like to do,” Kill says with a grin. “It’s entertaining.”

For him because he likes to see chaos unfold. I prefer to control it, choke it off and not allow it to breathe unless absolutely necessary.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out as Kill simultaneously retrieves his.

It’s a text in the group chat.

Nikolai: Where the fuck is everyone? The house is empty.

Gareth: We actually have lives aside from entertaining you, Niko.

Nikolai: Oh, fuck off, you’re probably studying like a nerd.

Gareth: As I said. Life.

Killian snaps a picture of the scene, or more accurately, of Brandon, who's ignoring the chaos unfolding around him, elbow on the table and his chin leaning on his hand. He's checking his phone with a bored expression plastered all over his face.

A Cheshire cat grin lifts Killian's lips as he sends the picture to the group chat.

Only a second pass before the reply comes.

Nikolai: Where the fuck are you, Satan's heir?

Killian: Expanding my options?

Nikolai: Fuck you right the fuck off. Don't get on my nerves or I'll cut your dick off while you sleep.

Killian: I also told you not to get on my nerves, but you went ahead and had that drink with Glyndon.

Nikolai: That was weeks ago.

Killian: Still counts.

Nikolai: You know what is also counting? The number of your days.

Jeremy: Tone it down.

Nikolai: Jer! Have you seen the shit he's spouting?

Jeremy: He has a point.

Nikolai: The fuck? How can you take his side over mine?

Jeremy: I want you to think very carefully about what you've done the last couple of weeks, Niko.

Nikolai: You can't be fucking serious. I can't even talk to Cecily now?

Jeremy: Not if you can help it.

I snap a picture of the table, Brandon included, and send it to the group chat.

Nikolai: I'm wounded, Jer. Why didn't you take me with you?

Jeremy: I thought you were busy…with what again? Oh, sleeping to preserve your energy for violence.

Nikolai: I would've sacrificed that for you, Jer. What are bros for?

Jeremy: Uh-huh. You dodged a bullet anyway. The Brits are boring except for Cecily.

Killian: And Glyndon. @Nikolai Sokolov I asked you if you wanted me to take you on a stroll, but you said no.

Nikolai: I'm not your fucking dog, motherfucker. Also, I just found out where that place is. Prepare to meet your maker in fifteen.

Kill snickers. I turn off the screen of my phone. Cecily and I should leave before Nikolai shows up and starts drama that's of a more significant scope than Remington's, because, unlike him, my friend actually talks with his fists.

"Be right back," Cecily whispers, then slips her hand from mine and heads toward the bathroom.

I keep watching her back, eyes narrowing the slightest bit. Even though I was distracted by Nikolai and his antics, I notice that she's reading a text out of sight now.

I also don't like the expression she had when she just left. There was a tinge of nervousness and, more importantly, guilt. What the fuck does she feel so guilty about?

The noise and movements around the table swirl, mix, and explode in tones of black and gray until I'm unable to see straight.

No matter what I do, how much progress I think I've made with Cecily, how deeply I think I've claimed her, it always feels like she's gatekeeping a part of herself.

The one I can't reach. The one I'm not allowed access to.

When I meet Annika's gaze, I find that she's watching me carefully. She must see the change in my expression and even the demons floating around my head like a halo.

Despite my calm demeanor, the façade is nothing more than a camouflage of the need for violence that ripples through me.

I stand up and, without a word, I follow Cecily's steps. The asphyxiating feeling I've had ever since she left my side turns from bad to fucking disastrous when I don't find her in the long line.

Judging by the time she left, she should be here somewhere, but she isn't.

I stride down the hall to the back entrance. The air slaps my face the moment I'm outside, but it's not as jarring as the feeling that slams against my chest when I catch a glimpse of a very familiar fucking car.

A damn flashy McLaren.

Cecily stands in front of it, talking to the car owner while rubbing her arms. Up and down.

Her expression is solemn, her face is caught in its ethereal calm, and her cheeks are flushed.

I try to imagine that it’s only because of the chilly night, that it’s not because she’s talking to that fucker Landon.

After leaving me inside.

It takes me a few moments to regulate my breathing. If I act right now, I’ll kill him and choke the fuck out of her.

Calm the fuck down.

Easier said than done when my muscles are tightening, demanding I pummel the fucker to the ground and claim her in his blood as I promised to.

I wait in the shadows for a beat. Two. *Ten.*

Then I stalk in their direction. I wouldn’t say I’m in complete control of my physical power, but I know exactly where my priorities are.

“Can’t you just stop?” Her words reach me first, soft, imploring, like whenever she’s trying to convince me of something.

The fact that she’s using it on that motherfucker Landon smashes all my attempts to remain calm.

“I’ll stop when I’m dead.” He grins and reaches a hand out to her.

I grab it before he can touch her, then twist it, and I’m about to break his wrist, but he follows my movements and slips away at the last second.

“Hi there, Jeremy. I see you’re a brute as always.” He flings his wrist in the air. “I need my beautiful hands to sculpt, you uncultured swine.”

“One more reason to break your fucking fingers.” I advance toward him, and he curls his hands that he was just bitching about into fists.

Landon is the only art student I know who’s into violence while knowing full well that he could lose his sculpting future in a freak incident at any time, like tonight.

“Jeremy, stop it.” Cecily comes to my side, her body shaking and her voice choked up, probably knowing exactly how much she fucked up.

“Shut up.” I glare at her over my shoulder. “I’ll deal with you in a bit.”

Gentle fingers grab my bicep and effortlessly try to pull me back. I whirl around, grab her by the shoulders, and shake her so hard that she gasps, her entire body going into shock.

“Stop fucking defending him,” I roar, and she freezes, then blinks, a shine gathering in her bottom lids. “The more you take his side, the more adamant I’ll become about finishing his miserable life.”

Cecily trembles in my hold and a loathsome expression I thought would never appear on her face again slowly materializes in front of me.

Fear.

She's scared of me. We're back to square one, where she counts her breaths and words around me. Where she doesn't trust me.

And it's all because of this motherfucker—

"This has been nice and all, but I have other matters more important than brawling with you, Heathen." He grins at me through the open window of his car. "Take it easy on our Cecy. She can be sensitive. Remember, I'm always the better choice, love."

And then his car revs down the road before I can snatch him out and make him one with the ground.

Cecily shrugs her shoulder, using my distraction to free herself of my hold. "I'm going back inside."

I grab her by the elbow and wrench her around to face me. "Why don't you tell me what type of rendezvous you had with Landon first?"

"There was no rendezvous. But if I'd told you he wanted to talk, you wouldn't have believed me."

"Why does he have to talk to you in the back of an alley? If there was really nothing, why did you have to sneak around?"

"Because of this!" She throws her hands in the air. "You become unhinged whenever his name is brought up, and I would rather not provoke this side of you if I can help it."

"Meeting him in secret isn't a solution, Cecily."

"Would you rather I meet him in public?"

"I'd rather you don't meet the fucker at all."

She flinches at my harsh tone and I take a few calming breaths. "Would you like it if I met Maya behind your back?"

Her lips purse. "No."

"See? Just like your mind goes to the worst at the thought of her, mine does, too, but ten times worse because you actually had feelings for him!"

Her lips twitch and her face becomes paler than her hair. "I… I didn't mean to."

"That doesn't change the result." I step forward, softening my tone as much as possible. "Is there something you're hiding from me, Cecily?"

She gulps, a gentle hue covering her cheeks. "Why would you think that?"

"I just feel it." I don't have her fully, even in moments where she feels like she's mine, it's not complete somehow. I tried to ignore it at first, to

trust her and *compromise,* as she likes to remind me.

But it's impossible now.

A shard broke the reminder of my trust the moment I found out she was sneaking around to see Landon. Has it happened before?

Will it happen again?

Will I wake up one day and find out everything we have pales in comparison to the feelings she has for her precious fucking prince?

Cecily stares up at me with those big, bright eyes. "Do you promise not to be angry if I tell you?"

"Depends on what you tell me."

"I can't say it if you're being like this."

"So you'd rather keep me in the dark?"

"No. Hiding this bit of information has been eating me alive. I can't hide it from you any longer."

"Is it about Landon?"

She nods once. My blood goes icy cold.

"Are you cheating on me, Cecily?"

"What? No! You think I would have the mind to entertain being with anyone else after you came into my life?"

That should appease the frigidness inside me, but it doesn't. Not even close. "Then what is it?"

"You look so scary right now."

"Spell it out, Cecily."

She swallows a few times, then stares at her feet before she focuses on me. "Remember that first time in the initiation?"

I nod.

"You asked me why I was there, and I never really gave you an answer. Back then, eh, you know I had a crush on Lan, right?"

"Who the fuck doesn't?"

She takes my hand in hers, touching, stroking, soothing. "It was meaningless, I know that now, but back then, I didn't, so when he asked me to go to the initiation on behalf of Creigh and get as much information about your mansion as I could, I did."

I narrow my eyes. "So you're his spy?"

"Were. Only that once, and I regretted it deeply after I knew he, well, used the information I gave him to start that fire. I swear I didn't know or

want to. I thought he only needed it for defense purposes. If he'd told me about his plan, I would've never helped him."

I slide my forefinger against my thigh, up and down, up and down in a slow rhythm. My muscles lock and I feel so frigid, I'm surprised the blood doesn't freeze in my veins.

"But you did help him. Is that why you showed up at the gate that day? Out of a sense of guilt?"

She shakes her head frantically. "I was worried about you. I really didn't want you or anyone else to get hurt."

"Guilt then." I pull my hand from hers, my voice ice-cold. "What else have you done? What did you help your precious Landon with? Did he plant you as a spy by my side?"

"No! I would never do that to you."

"But you did help him burn the mansion while I was inside it. That didn't work, so maybe you decided to take this further. Did he train you for a game of seduction? Did he teach you to use vulnerability to get to me? Did he tell you to be like my mom, to use my weakness against me?"

Her body jerks, but I only see that as another lie. Another act.

Another fucking deception.

"No, please stop it, Jeremy. It was never like that."

"How would I know? Everything you said and did could be part of his careful scheme. Were you always with him, and he told you to use me for his greater plan? Did he teach you how to open your legs for me?"

She raises her hand and slaps me across the face, tears sliding down her cheeks. I could almost believe they're real.

Almost.

Despite the crying and the sniffling, she raises her chin. "I won't allow you to disrespect me like that."

I clutch her hands, then slam her against the nearest wall. "Disrespect? What the fuck do you know about that word when you've been using me all along?"

"I wasn't…" More tears, more sniffles. "I don't know what I have to do so you'll believe me, but I promise that I cut ties with Lan after that fire."

"Obviously. All the times I saw you with him after, even now, clearly testify to that fact."

"Jeremy…" Her voice softens, becoming gentle. "You need to let go of your illogical fixation that something is going on between me and Landon.

There never was and never will be. I…I love you. Not him. *You*."

A muscle tics in my jaw. "Is that what he also taught you to tell me?"

"No! What is wrong with you?" She cries harder. "I just told you that I love you and you still think this is a game?"

I wrap my fingers around her throat and squeeze. "I should've ended it the first time you called me by his name. I should've either fucking killed you or him."

Her face reddens as she convulses against me, unable to free herself, and I can tell I'm going to snuff the life out of her.

That in a minute, she'll be dead.

She chose him, not me.

What the fuck is wrong with me? When did I become an animal in every sense of the word?

How could I inflict such pain on her just because I'm being cut open by the truth I refused to see all this time?

Still, my demons thrash and revolt, demanding retribution. They screech and claw. They scream and chant.

She chose him, not me.

She chose him, not me.

She. Chose. Him.

I release her with a jerk, and just like that, my demons quiet down and all the fight leaves my limbs. My obsession bleeds out until it's floundering in its own blood on the ground.

Cecily remains in place, breathing harshly, crying, sniffling, her eyes look so hurt, so scared, I want to stab myself.

"Run," I whisper. "This time, don't let me find you."

"Jeremy…"

"Run!" I roar.

She flinches, looks at me as if I were a manifestation of her nightmares, her eyes blurred out with tears, then she turns around and runs.

This time, I don't follow.

This time, I do what I should've done that first time.

I let her go.

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JEREMY

I sit in the control room of the mansion, nursing a bottle of alcohol and staring at the security footage of the initiation that changed everything.

Or, more accurately, I watch the sequence of when Cecily ran off the property on repeat. She probably thought she was out of the cameras' range, because she removed her wig and mask as she sprinted away.

The scene is oddly reminiscent of earlier, when she finally managed to slip through my fingers.

Like sand.

This was probably how it was supposed to be long before she barged into my space.

The first time I actually 'met' Cecily was at the fight club when Annika decided it was a good idea to sneak in with her new friends. That was exactly one night before the initiation.

I throw my head back as images from that first meeting flow to consciousness.

NIKOLAI IS BORED.

It's downright unsettling whenever he's bored. He spirals into a vicious cycle of self-sabotage, over-the-top violence, and destructive paths.

For that reason, it's imperative to keep him on a leash, which is why I'm at the fight club.

Noise and excited energy hover in the packed building. Crowds mingle, chatter, and place bets on who will come out as the winner tonight.

I pay no attention to the whole scene. It'd be ideal if I could grab Nikolai by the back of the neck and leave, but something tells me my unhinged friend would be opposed to the idea.

Killian walks beside me, his nonchalant mood matching mine. We don't have to push through the people since most of them automatically scatter upon seeing us. A reputation like ours precedes us whenever we go.

He comes to a slow halt, and a rare gleam sneaks into his otherwise grim eyes as he stares ahead. If I didn't know Kill lacked emotions, I'd say he appears spellbound.

He nods at me and then ahead. I follow his line of vision and find a group of girls. I narrow my eyes upon seeing a very familiar person in her signature purple dress. Annika.

Who is definitely not supposed to be here.

I side-eye Kill, ready to have his balls on a platter if my sister is the subject of his attention. However, I find him snapping pictures of the one on the far right. Landon's sister, Glyndon. I know her name because I did a background check on the Elites' leader, also known as a slimy fuck.

In fact, I know everyone in that group of girls ever since Annika decided to move in with them.

The loud blonde is Ava Nash and the silver-haired one is Cecily Knight.

They all come from prestigious families in the UK and Dad agreed to let Annika live with them. I still don't.

I stroll toward them silently, Killian in tow. Once we're near them, I hear Annika saying, "You…you're right. Jer can't do anything to me."

"Sure about that, Anoushka?" I whisper from behind and she goes still.

"Oh, hi, Jer." She speaks in a high-pitched awkward tone. "I didn't really mean to come here. I was just taking a tour with my new friends."

My attention doesn't waver from her, and I raise a brow. "Taking a tour in a place you're not supposed to be?"

"I was just—"

"Leaving. Now."

"Hey." The silver-haired one steps in front of my sister with a raised chin.

Not only does she look me in the eye, but she also glares down her nose at me, completely disregarding the height difference or the fact that I could squash her petite body in a fraction of a second if I chose to.

But the insolence doesn't stop there, because she says, "She can decide whether to leave or stay on her own because oh, I think we're at an age where women don't get told what to do."

The audacity of this little fucking minx.

Though my expression doesn't change, I stare at her through a different lens.

Despite her bizarre silver hair, Cecily is a beautiful girl. High cheekbones, petite nose and lips, almond-shaped green eyes, pale skin that would look exquisite with marks, and a body that's begging to be fucked.

If I'd run into her under different circumstances, I would have fucked her while grabbing onto that white hair and trailing my knife over her flesh. I would've bloodied her the fuck up while she writhed and screamed.

The keyword being if.

However, she's too uptight and would probably run at the first sight of my brand of fuckery and disturbed sexual tastes.

Annika pales, realizing her friend is in immediate danger of falling victim to my wrath, and pushes her away. "It's okay. I'll go back."

Cecily finally slides her attention away from me to focus on my sister. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I want to, really. It's not worth it."

"Walk in front of me, Anoushka." We're done here.

For more reasons than one.

If this Cecily takes my leniency as approval and keeps provoking me, she'll get my attention, and no one wants that.

Annika bows her head and murmurs, "I'm sorry."

Then she falls in step beside me. Killian stays behind, seeming too interested in Glyndon to have actually paid attention to the whole ordeal.

I'm only starting to cool down when Cecily catches up to us and interlinks her arm with Annika's. I cast her a fleeting glance that she returns with a glare.

This fucking…

"I'm going back with you, Anni," she tells my sister.

"You don't have to. I'm fine to be on my own." Her voice lowers. "I'm used to this."

"Well, I'm not. This is highly oppressive behavior." She stares at me. Again.

“I’ll ask for your opinion when I find any fucks to give,” I tell her point-blank.

She’s about to speak, but Annika slaps a hand over her mouth, putting whatever retort she had to an abrupt end.

I usher my sister into the car, and Cecily follows her into the back seat. She glares at me through the rearview mirror during the entire car ride, even as Annika tries to change the subject and drive away the tension.

Me?

I want to see how those glittery green eyes would look when she’s being pounded into within an inch of her life.

The hassle isn’t worth it, though.

I slide my finger up and down the steering wheel, summoning patience I don’t usually need in situations like these.

When we reach the dorm, Annika jumps out of the car and Cecily follows.

I roll down the window and say, “No more roaming around in dangerous places, Anoushka.”

“Okay!” she says and practically runs inside.

Cecily, however, faces me and crosses her arms, causing her breasts to perk and strain against the fabric of her T-shirt.

“I suggest you tone down the patriarchal tone. Doesn’t look good in this day and age.”

“I suggest you mind your own business. Busybody is a horrible description to have.”

She narrows her eyes. “You—”

“Don’t.”

She swallows, and the translucent skin of her throat works up and down with the motion. “You didn’t even hear what I have to say.”

“No need to. If you keep talking, I’ll take it personally, and believe me, you don’t want that.”

Her body stiffens, and I’m not sure if it’s because of my nonnegotiable tone or the look she must see written all over my face, but she doesn’t push it.

What she does do, however, is throw me a condescending glare, then slip into the dorm.

My lips curve because I’m so tempted to drag her into my lair.

Kicking.

Screaming.
And everything in between.

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ADRIAN

I realize something is wrong the moment I land at the airport.

People often say there's no such thing as a sixth sense and that having the ability to predict danger is a mere myth invented by superstitious, evil-spirit believers.

However, that sixth sense is what alerted me to something being amiss and enabled me to take countermeasures. That, and my tight grip on critical information and the enemy's sore, weak spots.

There's no such thing as a perfect defense. Not even fort-like houses, encrypted security, or armies of guards. The only way to eliminate hazards and protect those who matter is to gather as much intel as possible about the right people.

The people who wouldn't dare to cross me. Because they're afraid they have a spy in their ranks who'll slice their throat before they can reach me.

This is how I've managed to effectively protect my family for decades. I've lost count of the number of times I've uncovered a plot way before its execution and swiftly put an end to it before it happened.

No one but my senior guards knows about these attempts. Certainly not my wife. As much as she's integrated into my lifestyle, I don't want to worry her over pests that I've already taken care of.

And because information is essential, I taught my children from a young age to acquire as much intel as possible, not only about their enemies but also their friends, entourage, and guards.

Basically, anyone who crosses their paths.

If they know the people they're dealing with, they'll be able to avoid any malicious intent and even destroy the conflict before it arises.

That talent comes naturally to my son. He's fully aware of everything in his surroundings and goes the extra mile to implement that principle in his everyday life.

Annika might have been sheltered, but she can also get any information she sets out to obtain through her people skills. It's how she's managed to survive in our world all this time.

I trust my children's survival skills, even when I'm not around. I still wish they depended on me for protection, but I knew there would be a day when they'd take their own paths in life.

Despite that trust, I can sense that something has gone awry during the time I was on my way here from the States.

I share a look with my senior guard, Kolya, and he nods, probably getting the same feeling as me.

"Sir."

I stop at the entrance of the mansion in which my son stays. A younger man, probably a few years younger than Jeremy, greets us at the door. He has a muscular build, light blond hair, small blue eyes, and angular features.

He's not one of the guards I sent with Jeremy when he first came to this bleak island that shares England's irritating weather and the English's bland manners.

There's no need for questioning, because I know exactly who he is. Kolya and I have been keeping an eye on him ever since Jeremy informed me of his existence.

"Ilya Levitsky," I say his name with an edge to my calm voice.

His body stiffens in an erect position, probably realizing that all the rumors he's heard about me are true.

"Sir, yes, sir."

Kolya circles him like a giant cat who's about to devour a cub and asks him in a rough Russian accent, "Age."

"Twenty-one, sir."

"Parents' occupations."

"They're both dead."

"Place of birth."

"Saint Petersburg."

"How did you get onto this island?"

“Scholarship.”

“Why did you join the Serpents?”

“I didn’t want to go back to my previous life in Russia, and I thought if I joined the New York Bratva, then I’d secure my future.”

“Reasons for defecting and choosing Jeremy.”

“He saved my life when he didn’t have to. He also taught me that I can take my fate into my own hands, and if I fail, so be it. I can always try again.”

“Military experience.”

“One year.”

“Too little.” Kolya tsks. “That might as well be considered nothing.”

“I’m open to enrolling again after college.”

“Special Forces?” Kolya asks with a raised brow.

“If that’s what the boss wants.”

“Even if that’s not what he wants, you will go.” I step forward. “You’re supposed to be the first line of defense for my son, and if I can’t trust you to protect him, I can and will eliminate you.”

He swallows, but he doesn’t cut eye contact. “Yes, sir.”

“You seem like a good kid, Ilya, but I’ll watch you until the day you die.” I grab him by the nape and stare straight into his eyes. “If I smell a hint of betrayal, incompetence, or even misjudgment, Kolya and I will see you again under less pleasant circumstances. And mark my words, death will be everything you wish for. Be loyal, and you’ll be compensated. Anything else will be punished.”

“I am loyal, but not to you, sir. My loyalty lies with Jeremy.” He doesn’t miss a beat as he says the words.

“How dare you.” Kolya reaches for him, but I raise a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

After a moment of staring at the kid, I casually release him.

He doesn’t take a step back, doesn’t flinch, or even release a breath of relief.

I still don’t entirely trust this kid, but I like him. He might be able to broaden Jeremy’s tunnel vision.

“Where is he?” I stroll inside with both Ilya and Kolya in tow.

“Control room. Let me take you there.”

“No need. You can stay here with Kolya.” I smile when my guard gives me a ‘really?’ look. “The kid needs to learn some hard facts. Think of him

as Yan.”

“Can’t. At least Yan was in Special Forces.”

“Don’t be a snob, Kolya.” I smile to myself and head to the control room on the second story.

I’ve paid Jeremy a few visits through the years he’s been here, mainly because my wife misses him and doesn’t want to bug him about coming home often. For that reason, I learned the ins and outs of this mansion by heart. In fact, I knew everything about this place before Jeremy even set foot here.

After all, I couldn’t send him here without ensuring it was well-secured.

I push the door to the room open and stop at the threshold.

Jeremy sits in front of the countless monitors, alone, elbows on the table, chin leaning on his hand as he watches a sequence in a loop.

On the screen, a girl runs from the property while removing a wig and revealing her hair before she disappears out of the camera’s range.

On and on, the sequence repeats as if it’s a broken record.

I stride to behind Jeremy and cast a glance at what’s in front of him. A half-empty bottle of vodka, his phone flipped upside down on the table, and…a comic book? He never even read those when he was young.

Kids look up to superheroes; he looked up to me.

And clowns. He loved those fuckers for reasons unknown, and since Lia had a slight phobia of them, I often took him out to see those things.

Even from this view, he looks so much like me. My wife often hated that, especially when he was born. She was sad that he didn’t look like her in the slightest, but she eventually came to accept it.

I grab the back of his chair. “Is that the girl who helped that motherfucker Creighton kidnap your sister?”

My son finally notices I’m there, his slightly droopy eyes focused on me, his reaction delayed, probably due to being drunk—or getting there.

“Dad? What are you doing here?”

“Seriously? I take an eight-hour flight to this godforsaken island, and that’s the first thing you ask?”

“I…didn’t mean it like that. I’m surprised is all. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“Last-minute business meeting.”

“Are you sure it’s not so you can turn Creighton’s life into a living hell for daring to be with Anoushka?”

“There’s also that. I like multitasking.” I smile, then narrow my eyes on him. “You’re supposed to be helping me on that mission.”

“Sorry, Dad. I’m not in the mood to make her hate me.”

“Then what are you in the mood for?” I motion at the girl on the screen. “Revenge?”

His eyes, a replica of mine, to my wife’s chagrin, slide to the repeating video. He watches it for a silent beat, takes a sip from the bottle of vodka, then says, “She thought Creighton only wanted to talk to Annika and was completely unaware of the kidnapping plot.”

“Is that so?”

He nods.

“I assume you didn’t need to get the location out of her by torture as I initially thought?”

He shakes his head. “She freely offered it because she felt guilty about how you and Mom must have felt. She also helped Creighton because she felt guilty about how she and everyone else cut Annika off.” A humorless smile paints his lips. “She does a lot of things out of guilt, Cecily.”

“Cecily Knight. An only child. Her parents are Xander and Kimberly Knight. A businessman and a higher-up social worker, respectively. She has a grandfather who’s an ex-minister and an ex-prime minister. Another one is a retired diplomat. Her maternal uncle is taking after his diplomat father and has become an activist. She’s close with all of the above and belongs to the posh, rich British people’s inner circle, thanks to her parents. This means they’re close to many influential figures, including but not exclusive to Creighton’s parents, namely his fucker of a father.”

My son stares at me for a silent beat. “How do you know all that?”

I raise a brow but remain silent.

“I know you can get any information you want, but why did you do a background check on her?”

“She’s friends with Anoushka. I did a background check on all of them, but maybe I need to expand my intel since you’re so awfully interested in her.”

“There’s no need.” He takes another swig of his drink and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I let her go.”

“You sure? The repeating footage you’ve been watching for who knows how long suggests otherwise.”

He clicks a few buttons, letting the live feed of the cameras fill the screen, and then he goes silent.

Typical Jeremy.

Sometimes, I hate how much he's like me. Unless we're poked and provoked, we'll never act. Unless we're pushed to the limit, we'll never talk. Usually, I'd give him time to recuperate on his own since that's what I would need.

However, Jeremy isn't on his own. Unlike my useless father, he has me, and I can tell when my son needs a father.

After a few moments of silence, I pull up a chair and sit beside him. "What's going on?"

He throws a dismissive hand in the air. "Nothing you need to worry about. I just need tonight, and I'll pull myself together and get on with it."

"Bullshit." I tap my finger in front of him. "Not everything can be brushed over and forgotten. Some things rot in your mind with every intention of destroying you from the inside out unless you do something about it."

He pauses drinking and tilts his head in my direction. He looks at me like I'm still his hero. No. His father. And I couldn't be more grateful.

"And…how do I do that?"

"It depends heavily on the situation. First, tell me about this Cecily. Has she been in your path since everything that happened with Annika and Creighton?"

"No. She was mine way before."

Interesting.

He never mentioned her and probably didn't tell Annika or my wife about her either. And I would've known, because our daughter is the exact opposite of her brother. While he keeps everything buried, she lets it all out.

"And?" I push him a bit further. "Why did you let her go?"

Another sip of vodka, and another.

And another.

"She liked another guy, but I unapologetically stole her from him. I thought I could have her fully. That with time, she'd forget about him." His fingers tighten around the neck of the bottle. "I thought wrong."

"Did you look at it from all angles before you came to that conclusion?"

"That footage." He points at the screen. "That was during the initiation that she took part in just to spy for him. And he happens to be the leader of

a rival group. How do I know she hasn't been a spy for him ever since?"

"I don't think she's capable of that."

"I didn't think so either, Dad, but the quiet ones are the most conniving, after all."

"She volunteers and believes in everything righteous. Not to mention that she acts like a mother figure in Annika's little group. A person like that is physically unable to commit any harm unless backed into a corner. Did *you* back her into a corner?"

He shakes his head.

"Then how can you be so sure of your allegations?"

"She told me herself that she spied for him. All this time, she was stabbing me in the back while asking for my trust."

"Did that confession happen under duress?"

"No."

"Then that should be a good sign."

"Or an attempt to deceive me further."

"Jeremy." I grab him by the shoulder, forcing the chair to swivel so that he's facing me. "Son. You and I have a pesky problem called lack of trust. We always think people are either out to get us or will eventually do so, and while that's a good trait to survive and rule the Bratva, it's bothersome in our personal lives. A long time ago, I didn't trust your mother either, and as a response, she pulled away from me until I almost lost her. So if this Cecily means to you even a sliver of what your mother means to me, don't repeat my mistake."

"How can I trust her when I know that she has another man in her heart? No matter what I do, I'll always be her second choice."

The pain that drips from his voice does unpleasant things to me. Jeremy isn't only my son, my blood, and my pride. He's a part of me. He's the chance I had to prove that I'm nothing like my father. So to see him in this much anguish makes me wish I could slaughter his demons for him.

But I can't and I won't.

"I don't have the answer to that. *You* do. Any external intervention will only provide a temporary reprieve. If you don't look inward, you won't be able to loosen the knot."

He slides his hand through his hair. "I don't want to lose her, but right now, I can't trust her either."

“Then take your time. Not too much, though, or else she might slip between your fingers. Unless that’s what you want?”

“That’s not what I want.” He slides his hand over the comic book. “At first, she reminded me of Mom. She had these moments when she’d grow lethargic and escape into her mind, eventually turning into a ghost. I couldn’t help Mom when she was in that state, but I wanted to help Cecily. Now that I think about it, that was the first time I’ve taken so much interest in someone who isn’t family. I just wanted to make it better and own her at the same time. That plan backfired, but I was still able to take care of the reason for those blackouts. With time, it became so much more. I thought I was saving her, but it turns out, she was saving me from my own unresolved issues.”

I listen to every word carefully, watch every expression and every glide of his fingers on the comic book.

Despite becoming the perfect, responsible adult, I’m not foolish enough to think Jeremy has erased everything that happened while he was growing up. He wasn’t young enough to be able to forget all about his ‘Ghost Mommy.’

And I know that memories of that version of his mother were still fresh in his head when he was seven, eight, and nine, because he sometimes asked me if ‘Ghost Mommy’ was ever coming back.

However, he hasn’t mentioned it since Lia found balance again, and this is actually the first time he’s voluntarily spoken about it. “Saved you how?” I ask in a low voice to keep him talking.

“Growing up, I resented Mom a little for erasing you and me. For not recognizing us for days on end. For being so out of it that I often found her spasming in her sleep. For looking at us yet not seeing us.”

“Jeremy. Your mother has mental issues…”

“I know, but I still hated her sometimes. You didn’t?”

“I wanted to shake the fuck out of her, and she hates me sometimes, too, but that’s normal. We can’t be full of love and understanding all our lives.”

“Cecily told me that. She also told me not to blame Mom, because if she’d had the choice, she wouldn’t have become a ghost. And she loved us enough to fight her demons and return to us.”

Huh.

I think I like this girl.

“Is that why you’ve been calling your mother so often lately?”

He nods.

“I learned to let go. To see Mom as the best version of herself instead of that horrible version from when I was a kid.”

I pat his shoulder twice before releasing him. “I’m proud of you, son.”

“I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like myself right now. I should be trying to get over her, but here I am being her advocate and thinking of ways to get her back.”

“If you want her back, do it. Or else you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

“What if it backfires again?”

“Talk to her and listen. *Really* listen, Jeremy. Not with your mind, but with your heart and your soul. Listen to her with parts of you that she helped heal. And if you still can’t trust her, so be it.”

He starts to take a sip of the vodka, then decides against it and leaves the bottle on the table. “I’ll do it when I’m sober.”

“I agree. And, Jeremy?”

“Yes?”

“The talk we just had about your mother will remain our secret. She can’t under any circumstances find out about it or she’ll feel horrible, and we don’t want that.”

“I wasn’t going to tell her.”

“Good.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“What for?”

“Listening to me just now, but also for being there for both me and Mom all those years ago. Thank you for not giving up on her or me, no matter how hard it got.”

I smile. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat, Malysh.”

This time, I’m the one who takes a sip from his bottle of vodka, and then I point it at him. “Once you get your girl, bring her home to meet us. Your mother will love her.”

“That is, if she wants to be with me.”

“There’s an easy solution for that, son.”

“Which is?”

“Don’t give up until she does. That’s what I did with your mother.”

Speaking of my beautiful wife, I better finish my business in this godforsaken country so I can get back to her side.

Being physically away from Lia is no different than breathing through a straw and biding my time for the moment I'll have her in my arms again.

Jeremy thanked me for not giving up on her, but I'm the one who's thankful that she never gave up on me either.

My son and daughter were always meant to leave, but Lia is the only constant in my life.

My wife.

My obsession.

Mine.

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CECILY

I can't stop crying.

Every time I try to, my heart squeezes, and my eyes fill with tears until I think I have none left.

But I do.

I've been roaming the streets aimlessly for a few hours. My feet hurt, my muscles scream, but I don't stop. If I do, then I'll think of what happened tonight.

Of the pain that's breaking my heart real slow, wreaking havoc from the inside out.

I don't want to think about the cause of that pain. How Jeremy looked at me or the words he said to me.

Most importantly, I don't want to think about how he seemed like he was going to kill me.

I'm the foolish one for laying my heart on the ground for him just so he could stomp all over it and leave me as this empty shell.

My feet come to a halt in front of the shelter. It's closed, and no one is here besides the security inside.

Unable to walk anymore, I lower myself to the front step, wrap my arms around myself for some comfort, and lay my head against the cold wall.

I should probably call an Uber to take me back to the dorm, but I don't want Ava and the others to see me like this. Hell, *I* don't want to see me like this—broken, stupid, and desperate for someone who will never trust me.

For someone who hurt me so badly, I can't find the pieces he broke.

I fetch my phone and stare at it through my blurry vision, but the battery dies and it goes black.

With a groan, I hold my head between my hands. I have a headache that's been made worse by the throbbing emotional pain from tonight.

Jeremy and I were doing so well. After the few days we spent with my parents, I was sure he was it for me, that no one else would be able to stimulate my mind, body, and soul the way he does.

People repress their animalistic needs, but Jeremy nurtured them in me. He encouraged me to go after what I want, to ask for it, and fall deeper into it.

While he seemed refined, cold, and composed on the outside, a beast lurked inside him that called out to the animalistic part of me. Yes, he can be overbearing sometimes, but he was everything I didn't think I wanted in a man.

He was the person whose company I found peace in after a long day.

Until earlier.

Until he showed me just how mercilessly he could hurt me.

Maybe if I hadn't gone out to talk to Landon, none of this would've happened. In hindsight, I shouldn't have, but Lan said he would barge in and ruin our party and I thought meeting him outside would be better than letting him clash with Jeremy, Killian, and even Bran.

I thought wrong.

But then again, it was only a matter of time before Jeremy let that part of himself loose. Whether it happens now or a few weeks from now doesn't matter.

All I can do is think about where to go from here. The way he asked me to run, how he told me not to let him catch me was no different than ending our relationship.

It wasn't enough that he hurt me, but now, he's done with me, too.

And why do I sound pathetic in my own head?

Jeremy never promised me anything beyond the physical. I just imagined things myself, and now, I'm paying the price for it.

A shadow falls over me, and the heart I thought was burned beyond repair resurrects from the ashes with the glory of a phoenix.

I knew Jeremy would catch me. He always does.

The moment I lift my head, the hope that bloomed in my chest withers and dies.

It’s not Jeremy who stares down at me. It’s not even his pseudo-stalker Ilya.

The one in front of me, in his pristine trousers, button-down, and designer shoes, is none other than Zayn. My colleague from school and another volunteer at the shelter.

“Cecily?” He raises a brow. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I just needed to rest.” I manage an awkward smile. “What about you?”

“I’m on night duty. Want to come inside instead of staying out in the cold?”

“Sure.”

Being inside the shelter is better than going back to the dorm and actually talking about this. Besides, knowing Ava, she probably convinced the others to stay up late drinking.

I’m worried about her deteriorating state. Now that Glyn and Anni spend most their nights with their boyfriends, no one keeps an eye on her.

Not that I’ve been any better, but maybe I’ll go back to keeping her out of trouble.

Zayn opens the door with his key and I follow him in.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him, then go to the bathroom to freshen up, where I end up crying for ten minutes before I wash my face.

I’m such a mess.

If I call Papa or Mum right now, they’ll be worried to death, so even though I want to, I don’t.

After finishing my business, I step out and stop when I find Zayn waiting for me and holding a bottle of water.

“I thought you might need something to drink, so I got you this from the vending machine.”

“Thanks.” I take it from his hand and pause when I turn the lid and find that it’s not sealed.

This is the second time this has happened. The first was back at that hotel.

I’m a bit out of sorts, but not enough to ignore the red flags the second time around. Yes, I’m probably overthinking it, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

It takes some effort to plaster a smile on my face. “I’m going to call an Uber. Thanks for this.”

“You should drink.” His voice drops and has an uncomfortable edge. “You look dehydrated.”

My fingers tighten around the bottle, but I try my hardest not to let it show on my face. “Will do. Night.”

I brush past him and quicken my steps toward the exit. Maybe I can get to the security guard up front.

Now that I think about it, I didn’t see him earlier. Does that mean he left his post? Is this intentional?

The bottle of water burns in my hand, but I don’t dare throw it away in case he’s watching. Please tell me he’s gone.

“Hey, Cecily.”

My spine jerks upright at the tone of his voice. It’s like that night. Like Jonah’s.

Was it only Jonah?

I don’t think about it as I run. I don’t care if I’m being paranoid or if everything seems surreal. Everything will be okay as long as I get out of here.

A giant mass slams into me from behind, and I crash to the floor with a shriek. I kick and fight, my head turning with the force of the impact.

“Stupid little bitch.” Zayn sits on my back, nearly breaking it.

He looks like a demon right now, and his features have morphed into fluid lines reeking of evil.

I try to push at him, to turn, but it’s impossible with him sitting on me as if I’m a chair. He reaches for the water bottle that rolled across the floor due to the impact and opens it.

“You should’ve drunk when I asked you nicely.”

My pulse roars in my ears, but I force myself to calm down and speak as neutrally as possible. “What…what are you doing, Zayn?”

“Aren’t you so smart? Don’t act dumb when you know exactly what I’m doing.” He grabs my face, closes my nose, and the moment I gasp through my mouth, he pours the water into it.

I splutter and choke, but he keeps pouring and pouring, until I swallow half of it, and the other half drenches my face and neck

My hand falls to the floor, unable to move no matter how much I try to lift it.

Every molecule in my body grows lethargic. My limbs go slack, and my breathing slows to a frightening rhythm. As if I’m falling asleep.

But I’m not.

This is way worse.

The body of a demon mounts me like in my sleep paralysis, and I groan, tears gathering in my eyes.

I scream, but no sound comes out.

I thrash, but my arms and legs don’t move.

No.

No…

“Shh.” He strokes my cheek. “Be good, Cecily, and I won’t hurt you. *Much.* Don’t you hate how we have unfinished business? Jonah should’ve stayed and done what we agreed on that day, but he was repulsed by some vomit and let you go. I would’ve gone through with the plan, but somehow, you got out of the room first and were seen by a few people, so I was a gentleman and even stopped a taxi for you in front of the hotel.”

That was him?

His hand is hot and heavy as he slides the strap of my dress off my shoulder. Or maybe I’m the one who’s hot and drowsy.

“Jonah should’ve left you to me once he was finished. That’s what we always did. He was the charmer, and I was the one with the plans to trap the girls. Most of the time, they didn’t even remember what had happened to them come morning. Like magic, it’d be *poof*, gone,” he muses, stroking his hand over my shoulder. “But you, Cecily, are the only one who got away. Left a sour fucking taste in my mouth. So I stayed close, waiting for a chance to have you properly this time. But you became too careful and even got yourself a stalker who’s been hindering my plans. See, I’m a perfectionist. I couldn’t just rush and do a sloppy job. I waited and waited, and *waited,* until I could finally have you without his interference. Aren’t I a good sport? I’m better than Jonah, too. That fool doesn’t know how to plan, and he got locked up for it. Me? You’ll probably forget about me in the morning. Except for, well, the pain. I suppose that’ll be there to stay.”

Unintelligible sounds leave my lips as I try to move, fight, lift my head, hand, leg—anything. It’s like my body has given up on me.

But I haven’t.

I might not have full access to my brain, but I know if I don’t try to stop this, if I don’t at least attempt to, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.

“Shh. Don’t bother. I put in more drugs than usual. Special treatment for a special girl.” He pulls the other strap down. “Let’s see if your cunt is

special. Actually, since you're facedown, I'll start with your arse."

Tears cascade down my cheeks, hot and heavy. I might not be able to move, but I feel every touch of his hand over my back. I feel the repulsion mounting in my throat, threatening to explode in my mouth.

I'm going to throw up.

I'm going to—

Hot liquid spills on my back, and the sounds of gurgles echo in the air. At first, I think they're mine. I think I'm choking on my spit or vomit, but then the weight disappears from my back.

It falls to the floor in front of me with a thud. I catch a glimpse of a convulsing body, a pool of blood beneath him, and those god-awful haunting gurgles keep filling my ears.

A large shadow blocks the view and then I'm turned and fully cocooned against the familiar warmth. The warmth I thought I would never feel again.

The scent of his cologne envelops me like a second hug—leather, pine, and warmth.

"Cecily…fuck. Cecily! Can you hear me?"

A broken moan leaves my throat the moment I see his face, all hard, dark, and murderous. I try to open my lips to say something, but they won't move.

And neither do my hands or limbs.

I'm still paralyzed, at someone else's mercy, but I don't feel threatened.

If anything, I'm finally safe.

I've never felt as safe in my life as I do in these arms.

Slowly, too slowly, I close my eyes, letting a tear escape down the side of my face.

Safe.

"Cecily!"

Safe.

I. Am. Safe.

I WAKE UP IN THE HOSPITAL A DAY LATER.

Lethargic. Tired. Sad.

I cry when I open my eyes and Mum hugs me, then Papa, then Ava.

But I don’t stop crying. There’s this ache in my chest that won’t go away no matter how much I cry. As if I’m back to when I was roaming the streets before I found myself at that shelter.

Everyone fawns over me, including Remi, who says he won’t annoy me for a month and that if I dare getting hurt again, he’ll kick my arse.

The girls, Ava, Glyn, and Anni, remain by my side the most, bringing snacks behind the nurse’s back and staying around so we can watch films together.

This time I made a report to the police, both for the recent incident and two years ago. It was hard, and the more I talked about the events, the more nauseated I got, but I had my parents’ and friends’ support. Papa let me cry against his chest the first night, told me he was sorry he didn’t know and that he’d make sure Jonah pays.

Zayn, too, when they catch him.

But they won’t.

I might have been drugged, but I know what that gurgling sound I heard meant and that the liquid that covered my back was blood.

Jeremy killed him. No doubt about it. He sliced his throat open, left him spasming on the floor and then took me to the hospital.

Ilya or one of his guards probably took care of the corpse and the cleaning, because Annika told me they found nothing in the shelter, and the surveillance camera footage was erased.

Despite knowing that Jeremy is the type of unhinged to send people to the A&E and prison, I thought I would feel disgusted that he killed someone.

I’m not.

Not in the slightest.

Zayn was a serial rapist, even worse than Jonah, and he hurt so many other girls aside from me—girls who probably have it harder than me because they don’t remember. I can’t imagine the pain they went through if they woke up and found out they’d been raped.

People like him don’t deserve human rights or the regulated justice system. They deserve brutal execution that only someone like Jeremy would deliver.

I’ve spent three days in the hospital. They’re keeping me under surveillance in case of a concussion since my head hit the floor, and I’ll probably leave tomorrow.

Jeremy hasn’t come to my room at all during these three days.

Ilya did once. I asked him how Jeremy knew I was at the shelter, and he bluntly said that they have a tracker on my phone and that was the last location it sent them before it was turned off.

I wasn’t even surprised. There were often instances in the past when Jeremy found me without having to call me.

When I keep staring at the door, Annika says Jeremy’s always outside. Not once has he come into my room, and I doubt that has to do with the fact that Papa is constantly by my side.

At times, I think it’s a good thing that he’s not here. At least this way, I can gather my thoughts and process the pain. Other times, I’m angry at him for not wanting to see me.

And I’ve had enough of this stupid in-between.

So tonight, after Ava and Mum fall asleep beside me, I sneak out of the room and quietly close the door behind me.

“What are you doing out here? Go back inside.”

My spine jerks at the very familiar rough voice, and I carefully turn around to be crushed by Jeremy’s handsome looks.

He’s wearing jeans and a black T-shirt that tightens around his muscular biceps. His hair is a mess, and his face looks tired, but his gray eyes are as dark and intense as ever.

He’s really right by the door, where Papa totally sees him whenever he goes in and out of my room.

And that pisses me off even more.

I cross my arms over my chest. “If you’re here, why haven’t you visited?”

A purse of his lips, a tightening of his jaw, a stroke of his finger against his thigh. “I thought you might need some time.”

“Some time for what? Oh, right, you let me go, didn’t you? You told me to run and never come back. Right before I was assaulted.”

He takes a step toward me, and I can feel my insides crumbling and smashing on the ground. “Cecily…”

I hold up a hand. “Don’t come any closer.”

Jeremy stops dead in his tracks, his hand balling into a fist by his side before he forces it open. The hall's silence beats between us like another being for several long seconds, nearly suffocating us.

I mean to organize my thoughts before I say them, but everything is so raw that it's impossible to make sense of the chaos. So I let it all out. Emotions, desperation, and pain.

Everything.

"Do you have any idea how much you hurt me that night? How much you stomped all over my feelings as if they meant nothing?"

"I—"

"No, don't talk. Right now, you'll listen. I told you time and again that I'm over my crush on Landon. In fact, I remember saying that I realized it wasn't even a crush in the first place and that he didn't matter."

"You called his name," he says in a clipped tone.

"What?"

"That first night I fucked you on the deck, you called me by his name."

"No, I didn't."

"I know what I fucking heard, Cecily."

"And I know what I was fucking thinking!" I take a few breaths, then speak in a more composed tone. "I was going to say that he didn't matter at that moment. In fact, that's when I realized my crush on him was shallow. I never chose him over you, Jeremy. And except for that foolish mistake at the initiation, I never helped him. You can choose to believe me or not, but I've regretted spying for him every day since. I thought we were at a point in our relationship where we didn't keep secrets from each other, which is why I told you about that incident when I could've chosen not to. I wanted to start with a clean slate with you, tell you everything, and do whatever it would take to gain your trust. I was wrong. While I didn't expect you to forgive me immediately, I didn't expect you to disrespect me and ridicule my feelings."

He slowly closes his eyes, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he was in pain. But that's only me projecting my feelings and principles onto an unfeeling man.

I'm crying again, tears streaming down my cheeks and blurring my vision until he becomes distorted lines and shadows.

When he opens his eyes again, they're clearer and almost remorseful. "I'm sorry. I was in pain thinking you'd never choose me, and I took it out on you."

"If you trusted me even a little, you'd know I'd never do that to you. But you chose to stomp on my feelings, on the confession it took me so

much courage to make. I told you I loved you, but you chose your anger and trust issues over me."

"Fuck, Lisichka. I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you." He grabs my hand in his.

The skin where his fingers spread burns and it takes everything in me to ignore the effect his physical touch has on me.

"You nearly killed me in that alley."

"I would never do that. I'd hurt myself before hurting you."

"You already did, Jeremy! Maybe not physically, but you pierced my heart open with your rejection. And I can't do this anymore. I can't forgive you when I'm scared of what you'll do to my feelings at the slightest hint of trouble or if you see Lan near me again. You know, when I was lying on the floor, feeling the nightmare restart all over again, my heart was heavy with the pain you inflicted. I can't live in fear for the rest of my life, Jeremy. I just can't."

His face hardens with each of my words as if he can feel them instead of hearing them. "If you're suggesting I let you go, I won't."

"You'll have to, or I will hate you." I pull my hands from his. "Smoke."

His eyes taper and deep pain covers his features. "Cecily…"

"Goodbye, Jeremy."

And then I slip back inside with fresh tears in my eyes and resolve tightening my heart.

I won't allow anyone to hurt me again.

Not even the man I'm sure is the love of my life.

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JEREMY

Cecily made it clear that she was done with me.

I made it clear that I wasn't.

So we've been stuck in an empty circle since.

She gives me the cold shoulder, and I continue following her from afar, ensuring she's safe.

It doesn't matter if she doesn't want my protection, I'm providing it anyway.

And yes, that might seem clingy, but I don't give a fuck.

After exams, she went back to London for the summer. I apologized to my parents in advance because I planned to be wherever Cecily was, and if that meant spending the summer in fucking England, so be it.

My father told me to go for it, and Mom said she'd miss me, but as long as I showed her my face during the summer, she was fine with it.

I don't think that will be possible.

It's been almost two months and Cecily isn't budging.

Kim, my favorite person on earth right now, made sure to invite me over for dinner and outings almost every night. I met Cecily's grandfathers, played fucking board games with them, and had to endure their questioning. I was also cornered by her uncle, who, like her father, said he'd be keeping an eye on me.

As luck would have it, I landed a girl who's surrounded by overprotective men who spoiled her rotten but still didn't manage to transform her into a spoiled princess.

If anything, she makes it a point to volunteer at a gazillion organizations that I can't keep track of. Instead of using her time to chill like most college students do, she's more interested in helping others.

Ava and Glyn did fly her to Ava's family vacation house in the South of France. My disregard for Ava might have lowered because I got to watch Cecily in a bathing suit for a week.

I still had to put up with Kill's annoying company for it. The difference is that he got to join them when they went swimming and for meals.

Me? I remained in the sun with a grouchy Ilya, who absolutely hates the heat and kept grumbling about his burned skin.

Cecily came over, gave him her sunscreen, then turned around and left.

I was so close to killing him.

I hate the way she smiles and talks to everyone, Ilya included, but when she meets my eyes, her joy disappears, and she looks away.

In fact, she's been trying to kick me out ever since I landed in London—one day after her arrival. At first, she used her dad's animosity toward me, but after the first few weeks, Xander got me drunk so I'd spill my secrets.

I told him I wouldn't leave his daughter even if I died, and he smacked me upside the head.

Ilya, the idiot, told him that I got rid of Zayn and he personally did the cleanup. And while I'd planned to keep that information to myself, I'm thankful for the newfound respect Xander has for me ever since that night.

In fact, he thanked me for protecting Cecily when he wasn't there. Little does he know that I wish I could revive that motherfucker Zayn and kill him all over again.

And again.

When I saw him sitting on her back while she was panting, I didn't think about it as I pulled my knife and sliced his throat. He only saw me when the blood was exploding from his wound like a fountain.

If I'd been thinking straight, I wouldn't have dirtied her with his blood. But I wasn't. The only thing I was thinking about at the time was her safety and the crippling feeling at the possibility of losing her.

I only regret not having the chance to torture the fucker, but I can make up for that with Jonah. For the rest of his miserable life.

Anyway, despite Xander's gratitude and the absence of an edge to his animosity, he still believes I should leave, per his daughter's demands.

However, the genius way Kim handles him whenever she feels like he's gone too far has saved me more times than I can count.

My day starts by waking up early in the penthouse of a building owned by my father, then I fix some breakfast for Ilya and me and we drive to Cecily's house.

Usually, she has breakfast with her parents, her grandfathers, her uncle, and Ava. Sometimes, her mother's friends join them. Other times, her father's friends do. Upon meeting them a few times, I can absolutely see where the kids get their personalities from. Especially Remington. He's a younger version of his father, Ronan, Xander's closest and most chill friend.

Then I follow from afar as she goes to whatever organizations she volunteers at. Once, she pushed Ilya and me to give out food and shit because they were short on staff. Or more like, she pushed Ilya and told him to tell me to help instead of being a stalker with no purpose.

That's what she does. She tells Ilya to tell me things when I'm right there, but she doesn't speak to me.

I still follow her around anyway and make sure she gets home safe before I leave with the promise of seeing her again the next morning.

Some days, she stays home all day, reading, watching shit, and being Ava's subject of torment. On other days, Ava convinces her to go out, and that usually ends up with them at the cinema, shopping, and fooling around. In classic Ava style, a documentary of each of their days is posted all over social media. One more thing to appreciate about the social butterfly.

Ilya and I try to remain as out of sight as possible so as not to disturb Cecily, but she sometimes looks at our hideout as if she always knows exactly where we are.

I guess being the subject of my 'stalking' for months has given her a pointer or two.

The other day, she was a bit drunk, stumbled to where I hid behind a corner, and said in a slur, "Why can't you leave?"

"I just can't," I replied and held her so she wouldn't fall.

She looked up at me with her big eyes, so lively and enchanting and fucking mine, pursed her lips, then murmured, "What if I don't love you anymore?"

"Then I'll make you love me again."

"Prick," she whispered, then fell asleep against my chest.

I stayed like that for far too long, enjoying the feeling of her body against mine until she started shivering from a cold breeze.

That's when I drove her home and got a whole questionnaire from Xander about if I'd done something to his daughter.

I fucking wish, future father-in-law.

He'd be happy to know that drunken hug was the only time I've touched her so intimately in fucking months.

My hand and cock have a vendetta against her and will carry it out in full the moment I have her again.

But I have to put that on hold.

For now.

I watch her from my hideout behind the tree opposite the window of Glyndon's house. I've come to know all their houses and their security, which are okay, I guess. They could use some improvement, but then again, they don't share the lifestyle I have back at home.

Today is apparently Glyndon's birthday and everyone is there—Killian included. He's about to be punched by Landon and will eventually punch him back, and I'm here for the show.

Now, if only Kill will get rid of him for good, I'll die a happy man.

As if knowing I'm outside, Landon leans in to tell Cecily something that she smiles at.

I tighten my grip on the bike's handles, but I force myself to remain calm.

There's nothing between them. He's just getting on my last fucking nerve because of everything I did to ruin his fun right before school ended.

I slashed his tires, too, the other day, just to be a dick. Looks like I'll have to bust the windows of his car next. While he's inside it.

Can't stand the fucking asshole.

I engrave every detail of Cecily to memory. The laughter, the beautiful flowery summer dresses she doesn't shy away from wearing lately.

She doesn't go into that paralyzed state either.

My Cecily has learned to move past her trauma and grow into this… ethereal being that I want to hide from the world.

But I can't. And I won't.

I just want to have her because I simply can't imagine life without her.

After one last look at her, I slam down the shield of my helmet and rev my bike before I speed down the road.

Half an hour later, I'm at the airport. One of my father's guards nods at me, and I nod back. I stare behind me in search of Ilya since he's supposed to bring the car and follow after.

A few minutes later, the car stops by the plane's stairwell.

The passenger door flies open, and Cecily nearly throws herself outside. She runs to me, panting, her breath caught, and her face so pale, I can see the veins.

She grabs my hand in hers, tears gathering in her big green eyes. And while I'm over the moon that she's touching me, I don't like the tears.

"Why haven't you told me?" Her voice is brittle and so fucking sad, it cuts me open.

"Told you what?"

"That you're sick. You're dying?" She all but bursts out crying, her tiny frame shaking, her choked breathing filling the air.

Ilya steps out of the car next, looking absolutely calm.

"I'm dying?" I mouth.

"I had to do something. It's boring to watch whatever foreplay this is." Then he takes the stairs and gets on the plane.

"You could've told me." She wraps her arms around me, her body molding to mine as she cries her eyes out. "I wouldn't have been so cruel. I would've spent as much time with you as possible."

I wrap my hand around her back, relishing the feeling of her pliant body against me.

Fuck.

It's been so long that I wish time would stop at this moment.

"Does that mean you forgive me?" I go with Ilya's stupid plan.

"I think I forgave you a long time ago." She digs her nails into my back.

"Then why were you giving me the cold shoulder?"

"Because I was scared of getting hurt again, because you're the only one who's able to hurt me."

"I won't hurt you, Cecily." I tug her away so that I'm staring at her tear-streaked face. "You're the fire to my icy heart, and while I loathed that at the beginning, I soon came to the realization that I can't survive without that fire. My feelings for you are nowhere near conventional. They're neither proportional nor measurable, and that heart you melted and the emotions you provoked belong to you. I'd rather be smashed and broken to

pieces with you than be whole without you. I'd rather remain a beast for you than become a man who has to survive without you."

"Oh, Jeremy…" Her hand strokes my cheek. "Why haven't you said any of this before?"

"You never gave me a chance."

"I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I let my fear keep us apart."

"Does that mean you'll love me again?"

"I never stopped, idiot."

"Even if I'm dying?"

She cries harder. "Don't say that! Medicine is so advanced these days, and there's surely a solution."

"You'd love a man with a few months to live?"

"I wouldn't have any other man." More tears. More sniffles.

I grab her face and kiss her mouth deeply, and she grabs onto me as she welcomes me home. Her body falls into mine, and everything in her melts.

I kiss her for all the times I couldn't kiss her. I kiss her until we're breathing each other in.

When I pull back, I whisper against her mouth, "I'm not dying, Lisichka"

She blinks a few times. "But Ilya said—"

"He lied to make us get back together."

"What about the plane? Aren't you going to a private clinic in Switzerland?"

"I'm flying home to visit my parents, then I was planning to come back."

Her cheeks turn a deep shade of red as she steps back. "Oh."

Before she can escape, I grab her by an arm around her waist. "Are you taking back everything you said now that I'm not dying?"

She meets my eyes and shakes her head. "I meant every word."

"Really?"

"Really. I've wanted to talk to you for some time, but every time I get close, I get scared and retreat. I'm glad Ilya gave me this push, even if he is a damn liar."

"Me, too." I kiss the top of her head. "Want to come home with me? My parents have wanted to meet you for some time."

"They…they have?"

I nod.

She grins and tucks a stray silver strand behind her ear. “I would love to.”

My lips find hers again, and she squeals as I pick her up and carry her in my arms.

Cecily Knight is officially mine.

Now.

In the future.

Forever.

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EPILOGUE 1 — CECILY

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TWO WEEKS LATER

I might have come in a bit of haste to Jeremy's house.

Not only did I not pack anything and then had to buy all my necessities here, but I also had to call Mum and Papa while I was on the plane, to which there was some drama, from Papa's end, of course. He accused Jeremy of kidnapping me, and when I assured him that wasn't the case, he said that he was keeping his eyes on him, then added, "One day, I'll get some dirt on you, boy."

I couldn't help but laugh. I've been doing that a lot since Jeremy kissed me and carried me onto the plane.

These past two weeks have been no different than a honeymoon. His parents welcomed me to their home and were heartwarmingly accepting. His father still appears a little scary, though. But when Lia, Jeremy's mother, is around, the edge lessens a bit.

The other day, Anni and Creigh came over after spending a few weeks with Creigh's parents and we went to the beach together.

Jeremy nearly drowned some guy for daring to touch my arse, though. I thought Creigh would help stop him, but he was picking his own fight with a man who was looking at Anni, and then he basically covered her up with a towel.

Good times.

I think Creigh is jealous of me because Adrian likes me while he's still struggling for his approval.

"You took his precious little daughter," Jeremy told him as he hugged me to his side. "Cecily is joining his family. It's different."

“I can join his family.”

“Wouldn’t work. Still different.”

That’s when it dawned on me—I’m really going to join the Volkov family. I mean, not in marriage or anything. It’s still too soon to think about that.

But as long as I’m with Jeremy, I’m part of all the security, the scary guards dressed in black—seriously, I have a deep appreciation for Ilya now—and everything in between.

I fell in love with a mafia prince.

And I’m still coming to terms with the fact that killing without remorse is part of who he is.

That, in a few years, he’ll be like his dad.

Like Ilya once told me, either I accept him the way he is, or I let him go. Since I can’t physically be without him, I’ll have to get used to this part of him.

Seriously, during Glyn’s birthday, when I looked out the window and didn’t see him lurking under the tree like the usual stalker, my heart squeezed so harshly, I thought I would certainly have an attack.

For a moment, I believed he saw me talking to Lan and went back to his earlier convictions about how I’m cheating on him, but mostly, what really hurt was thinking he’d left for good.

I was so used to him shadowing my movements, being everywhere, and even making friends with my grandfathers. No kidding. Grandpa Calvin was asking about him whenever I went to visit until I acted butt-hurt and asked who the grandchild was between us.

Point is, Jeremy was a constant, and when I lost him, just for a few minutes, I realized how futile my fight was. That it didn’t matter how scared I was of being hurt. Losing him terrified me more.

As if well aware of my phobia, Jeremy spends as much time as he possibly can with me. It helps that he has a separate house built a bit far from his parents. That way, I don’t have to worry about people hearing us when he fucks my brains out.

He's been nothing short of an insatiable beast ever since we came here together. Something about payback for all the time I didn’t let him touch his favorite thing. Me.

“Seriously, stop it.” I try and fail to wiggle free from his hold.

He just finished fucking me, and I can barely move, but his cock is hard and ready for another round.

“No can do.” Jeremy wraps his arms around me from behind, his erection poking at my arse cheeks. He nibbles on my earlobe, my throat, the side of my breast, everywhere. And I can’t help tilting my head to the side to allow him more access.

We’re standing in the middle of his house, in the living room, after he chased me from the bedroom to here.

“I’m sore.” I whimper when he bites a sensitive spot on my throat.

“I’ll take care of that, but first…” His cock nudges against my back hole.

“Didn’t you hear the part about how I’m sore?”

“Not here.” He makes shallow thrusts against my back hole, and I shiver.

“Jeremy…”

“I love it when you moan my name.” His voice roughens, his touch turns more passionate, desperate, like he can’t get inside me fast enough or own me hard enough.

“Jeremy,” I whisper and kiss his lips. “Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy.”

“Fuck, Cecily. You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Just like you’re going to be mine.”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you, Jeremy,” I murmur.

“Am I the only one you love?”

“Only you.” I touch his cheek, melting when he leans into my touch. “Do you love me?”

“I’m fucking crazy about you, Lisichka. I love you more than words can express.”

“What do you love about me?”

“Your melodic voice and the elegant way you speak.” He kisses my throat where my vocal cords are. “Your addictive taste.” He nibbles on my pulse point. “Your fucking water lilies scent that if I don’t smell, I get a headache.” He sniffs my neck and then behind my ears before he kisses my nose, my cheek, and my eyes. “Your face, the way you look at me, the way you look when you see me, the way you look when I’m touching you.”

I’m floating so high at the impact of his words that I’m surprised I don’t crash and burn from the heights I reach. “How are the ways I look at you

different?”

“You look at me like you love me. Your lips part, and your eyes widen the slightest bit when you see me. As for when I’m touching you? You look like you love being owned by me, chased, possessed. You love being mine.”

“I do. So, so much.”

“And I love it when you’re mine, Cecily.”

“Me, too.”

“Only mine?”

“Yes.” I chuckle. “Stop being so jealous.”

His arms tighten around me. “I’m a jealous man. I’ll always think about the years you crushed on that fucker Landon.”

I reach a hand out and stroke his cheek. “You can have the rest of my years, Jeremy.”

He starts to spin me around when the sound of the door opening reaches my ears. Jeremy pushes me behind him and throws a thin blanket over my nakedness.

Scrambling, I wrap it around me as Jeremy stares at the hall.

“Who the fuck—” His words cut off when a petite woman comes inside with a smile on her face. “Mom!”

It’s his turn to cover himself with a bit of the blanket that I’m wrapped in.

“Who are you hiding from? I’m your mother,” she says with a soft smile, placing a takeout basket on the coffee table.

“What are you doing here?” he asks in a more composed voice after sharing the blanket with me.

“Checking in on you since you haven’t left the guest house in…two days. You’ve been barely eating the meals I’ve been sending you either.”

I wince and glare at Jeremy.

It’s been that long, and he made me lose track of time.

“The poor girl looks dehydrated.”

“I’ve been making her drink just fine.”

My cheeks heat, and I step on his foot, but I might as well not have touched him, considering the smile on his face.

Lia shakes her head. “Your father wants to see you. Get changed and come to the main house. We’ll have dinner together.”

“Okay. You leave first, Mom. We’ll catch up.”

“No. You’ll just continue locking up Cecily here. I’ll wait until you come down.”

He grunts after his mum ruins his plan to do just that, then we awkwardly stumble upstairs. We take a quick shower, and he stays in the bathroom to shave, but I throw on the first pair of jeans and top I come across and go ahead downstairs.

One, I don’t want to keep her waiting.

Two, I really don’t want her to think we’re fucking up there.

I find Lia tidying up the living room even though it’s kind of spotless. I’m thankful the actual fucking happened on the stairs earlier, so there’s no evidence of it on the sofa.

“Cecily, you’re here.” She beams at me. “How did you escape him?”

I touch my neck, my ear, and my hair. “I…um…”

“I’m kidding.” She grabs my hand and makes me sit down beside her on the sofa. “We haven’t talked much since you got here, for obvious reasons, but I wanted to thank you, Cecily.”

“For…what?”

“For seeing the man inside Jeremy, not the cold exterior he showcases to the world. It takes a brave soul to dig deeper and see him for what he truly is and not be repulsed by it.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to thank me. He dug inside me, too. He’s way more than what his reputation claims.”

“Right? He’s like his father. Only a select few see what he hides on the inside.” A nostalgic look covers her eyes. “He had a tough childhood, my angel, partly because I wasn’t always there for him, and I hate myself for that every day. I’m beyond grateful he grew up so well.”

“Please don’t hate yourself.” I stroke her hand. “Jeremy understands.”

A soft light covers her features. “He does?”

I nod frantically. “More than you’d ever know.”

She smiles again with a contagious joy that I can’t help but mirror.

“I know you’re new to this life, but I hope you’ll get used to it. God knows it took me years, but I got there, and I’ll help you adjust… That is, if you’d like, of course.”

“Yes, please. I’d be forever grateful.”

“We girls need to stick together. I’m so happy you and Jeremy chose each other.”

“Me, too.”

Jeremy appears at the top of the stairs and comes down, narrowing his eyes on us. “I heard my name. What were you talking about?”

“It’s our secret.” Lia winks at me, and I smile.

Then I hug Jeremy as the three of us go to have a family dinner with Adrian.

Looks like I found myself a new family.

And it’s all thanks to the man I love.

The beast I can’t live without.

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EPILOGUE 2 — JEREMY

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ONE MONTH LATER

A new college year means one thing.

The initiation.

This semester, we're doing it differently. It's not about the hunt like the last one.

It's not about who gets to strike as many participants as possible. No.

This year's initiation theme is much more interesting.

What's better than hunting? Hunting a specific target.

I came up with this plan, and Killian agreed right away because it gives him a chance to go after Glyndon.

Nikolai was all in for the fun. White, too.

The only reluctant one was Gareth, but we beat him four to one.

The rules are simple. All participants need to run, but only we know who the targets are. Sadly for them, there will be no winners and no new admissions to the club, but the participants don't know that.

Then again, we never did initiations to have new members. It was a mere showcase of power.

Aside from our designated *X*, we don't have to eliminate the others unless we want to. Nikolai and White certainly will.

I won't.

I came up with this whole game so I can hunt *her.*

My target.

My prey.

My steps are inaudible as I stalk her from behind the bushes. My Cecily is wearing a denim dress and tennis shoes today. Her silver hair is gathered

in a ponytail, and her white mask is strapped tightly around her face.

She knows she's my prey.

She's walking carefully, like any prey would.

But what she doesn't know is that no matter how careful she is, she'll fall straight into my trap.

I mirror her movements and she pauses, probably having sensed me. She's become so good at that lately. So fucking perfect at taking my depravity and enjoying it.

She even asks for it now, like a good little girl.

My cock hardens as I stalk behind her. I can see the exact moment she feels me on her.

Her scent, water lilies and damnation, floods my nostrils.

I'm so close to touching her, but she darts out of reach, and usually, I'd let her run. I'd play with her, give her hope, only to snatch it, but I'm too hungry for her today.

Too impatient.

I grab her by the back of the neck, and she squeals when I all but lift her off the ground and push her front against the tree.

Cecily tries to fight me, scratching and clawing. Her struggles intensify when she stares back at my mask, but it's useless.

I yank her dress up to her waist and groan when I find her naked underneath. My fingers slide over her slick heat, and my groan turns into a feral grunt. "I love it when you're wet for me."

She bucks against my hand, but I'm not in the mood for foreplay. After a few savage strokes, I pull out my hard cock and thrust into her cunt from behind. My groin hits the pillowy soft skin of her ass and I grab her by the hip to keep her in place.

Cecily moans, goes on her tiptoes, and slaps both her palms on the tree for balance. I pull away her mask so I can see her features and how she looks at me.

How her breathing falls in synch with my thrusts. How her lips part the more I own her.

So I go deeper, fucking her harder, hitting her sweet spot until she's bouncing off my cock.

"Say my name," I order when I feel her close and remove my mask, throwing it on the ground.

“Jeremy,” she moans as she milks my cock and comes undone around me. “Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

I become a madman as I pull out, spit on her back hole, and drive into her ass. The sound of her shriek of pleasure does me in.

Everything about her does.

I fuck her like I’m indeed dying, and she’s my only cure. I fuck her like I can’t live without her anymore.

“You make me an animal for you, Cecily.”

“I’m animal for you, too.”

“I’m a feral beast when it comes to you.”

“That’s okay.” She grabs my hand that’s on her jaw and kisses it like she can’t stop touching me. “You’re *my* beast.”

That’s enough to make me come inside her the longest I ever have, with spurts of my cum covering her inner thighs and messing up her dress.

I’ll need to miss the initiation ceremony or at least be late, because I need to take her again. Properly this time and slower like she likes it.

She winces when I pull out of her, and I steady her as I turn her to face me.

“Fuck. Did I hurt you?” I watch her face.

She snorts. “A bit late for that, don’t you think?”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Cecily. Not that type of pain, at least.”

“I’m fine.” She throws up a dismissive hand. “Besides, I love it when you hurt me.”

I gather her in my arms and kiss the top of her head, her cheeks, her eyes, and I finish with a slow kiss on her lips.

When I finally pull away, she sighs contentedly. “Have I told you how much I love your care after the roughness? It makes all the difference.”

“It does, huh?”

“It’s how I know you love me.” She leans against me. “Thank you for helping me in my self-recovery journey.”

“You helped with mine, too.” I kiss the top of her head. “I never liked to keep anyone close because I loathed and dreaded the idea of being left behind. But I’d fall for you over and over again if I had the chance for a redo.”

“Oh, Jeremy.” She strokes my jaw. “I’m lucky to have you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m the one who’s lucky to have you, Lisichka.”

One day, and I mean *soon*, I’m going to make this woman my wife. My partner.

My everything.

She’ll be my always, and I’ll be hers.

Forever.

THE END

Next up is *Blood of My Monster* & *God of Ruin*.

You can check out the books of the couples that appeared in this story:

Xander & Kimberly Knight: *Black Knight*.

Adrian & Lia Volkov: *Deception Trilogy.*

Killian Carson & Glyndon King: *God of Malice*.

Annika Volkov & Creighton King: *God of Pain*.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *God of Wrath*! If you liked it, please leave a review.

Your support means the world to me.

If you're thirsty for more discussions with other readers of the series, you can join the Facebook group, *Rina Kent's Spoilers Room*.

Next up is the first book of a new dark mafia romance trilogy, *Blood of My Monster*.

The next standalone book in Legacy of Gods series, *God of Ruin*, that's about Landon King will be released in late summer 2023.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rina Kent is a USA Today and an international bestselling author of everything enemies to lovers romance.

Darkness is her playground, suspense is her best friend, and twists are her brain's food. However, she likes to think she's a romantic at heart in some way, so don't kill her hopes just yet.

Her heroes are anti-heroes and villains because she was always the weirdo who fell in love with the guys no one roots for. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a pinch of violence, and lots of intense passion.

Rina spends her private days in London, daydreaming about the next plot idea or laughing like an evil mastermind when those ideas come together.

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